

Wyll's Gate

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Wyll's Gate

by [Rowan_of_Waterdeep](#)

Summary

“Thank you for sharing this moment with me,” Wyll said. “It’s bittersweet, but I sometimes think the best moments are. It makes them feel more... immediate. But you’ve also taken a sad, lonely night and made it intensely memorable. I owe you for that.”

I looked up at him and opened my mouth to reply, but froze. Words stuck in my throat.

“What is it?” he asked, dropping to his knees in front of me, eyes on mine.

I reached out and traced a finger, ever so lightly, down the side of his face. He closed his eyes, a slight shiver running through his body.

“I was just thinking,” I said, my voice hoarse, “how much I wanted to kiss you.”

Notes

You’ll notice I’ve taken a few liberties with the canon, to provide what I think is a more satisfying story:

- Wyll is older. As I played Baldur’s Gate 3, I was surprised to discover that he was supposed to be 24. While some of his behaviour is definitely on the young side, his pragmatism and worldview felt older to me. So I kept him on the frontier for a few more years, which puts him in his early- to mid-30s.
- Wyll has some of his EA goblin hatred. It’s more subtle in-game now, but he still makes it pretty clear that he really dislikes goblins and devils, so I thought it was a fair inclusion.
- Larian removed Wyll’s line about having claws and a forked tongue, instead of fixing his character design, in patch 4. FFS. But I was already 200 pages into writing this, and I refuse to believe Mizora wouldn’t have gone to the extra trouble to screw Wyll over as much as possible. So he’s more devil-like, physically speaking, in this than in-game. Also, he mentioned (somewhere in-game, possibly pre-patch-4 only) having bumps and protrusions in odd places. It *was* canon, dammit.
- Dialogue is mostly different to that offered in-game. This was deliberate – I have most of the dialogue captured (yes, I am THAT sort of nerd) but I wanted to provide more nuance than the game can allow. I also found that fanfic which sticks too closely to the script was boring for me. There are some outliers, where frankly the game dialogue was too damn iconic and needed to stay. IYKYK.

- I've reordered some events a little. Basically, if I had a choice between sticking carefully to what happens in-game and writing something I thought was a better progression... I went with my version. Obviously, YMMV.
I also skip over a lot of the canon gameplay events. I know a lot of people enjoy reading descriptions of battles etc, but that's not what I was going for with this fic. So I'll allude to recent events to help establish a timeline, or take the characters quickly through them to give you an idea of how they're reacting to them, but that's usually all.

Dash

“Hey!” a shrill voice yelled to my left.

I turned to see a child – maybe ten years old? – running towards me through the paddock.

“Are you the healer gnome?” she asked, panting. “My mum. She said you were on your way, and I should keep a lookout.”

“Is someone sick?” I asked. “What’s happened?”

“Mum gave birth last night. Said something’s not right. Will you come? She doesn’t look so good.”

I nodded. “I’ll come now,” I said. “Lead the way.”

As I followed the girl, I thought about the herbs stashed in my pack. I had a few rogue’s morsels – they’d suffice for a general remedy if nothing too terrible was wrong. I had feverfew if an infection was brewing. Yarrow to slow bleeding. But so much could go wrong in childbirth, and fast. Herbs often couldn’t work quickly or efficiently enough to help. I sighed and quickened my pace. Best to find out soonest if I could do something useful.

The small hut was dark compared to the bright sun shining outside. As my eyes adjusted, I saw a woman lying on a pallet on the floor. I sniffed – no scent of disease or decay, at least. A crude crib sat nearby, a small bundle inside it.

“Hi,” I said to the woman. “I’m Dash. Tell me what happened.”

“Something feels wrong,” she said. “Like... the afterbirth didn’t come out properly. I know that’s a bad sign. Can you help?”

“Probably,” I said. “Sometimes not as much as I’d like, though. Can I touch your belly? I’ll need to press down. It might hurt – a lot.”

She nodded, and I pressed down on her womb. Sure enough, it felt more substantial than it should by now. She was right. If we didn’t get the afterbirth out, she was heading for infection and a slow, painful death.

“Alright,” I said. “Girl – sorry, what’s your name?”

“Lianna,” she said. “Is my mum going to be alright?”

“I hope so,” I said gently. “I need boiling water. Lots of it. Some clean cloths, if you have some. A teapot and a mug. Can you organise those for me? Be very careful not to scald yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “Easy peasy.” She ran away to the hearth, and I smiled.

“What’s your name?” I asked the woman. Rude of me to not have asked until now, but I had a bad habit of being drawn in by the problem and forgetting the person.

“Leyella,” she said. “Pleasure.”

“Here’s what I need to do, Leyella,” I said. “I need to massage your womb, hopefully break up the afterbirth and encourage contractions. It will hurt. But also, I’ll make a tea for you that will make your womb contract. Hopefully the combination will be enough.”

“And if it isn’t?” she asked.

“We… have other options,” I said. “But they’re invasive and even less pleasant; and they can cause other problems. This is fairly safe, at least. If it doesn’t work, it just doesn’t work.”

Lianna lugged over a steaming kettle full of boiling water faster than I’d expected. Perhaps her mother had seen enough midwives at work to know what was generally required.

“Where’s your midwife?” I asked as I made a tea with raspberry leaves and cohosh. “Not that I mind at all, being called in for this, but I’d have expected her to have you well in hand.”

“She fell into the creek and sprained her ankle two days ago,” Leyella said, snorting. “Lovely woman, and she knows her stuff, but as woolly-headed as a sheep when she gets to daydreaming.”

I laughed. “I’m glad she’s in decent health, ankle notwithstanding. Being without a regular healer is bad enough; losing your midwife would be devastating.”

“Tell me about it. I damn near got my husband to go pick her up, sling her over his shoulder, and carry her to my door.”

I chuckled. “Let’s keep that option in our back pocket, hmm? If my treatment doesn’t help, we might need her.”

I waited for the tea to brew, then poured a mugful. “Here,” I told Leyella. “It’s hot. Small sips. But I need you to finish that as quickly as you can, without burning your mouth.”

She obeyed, grimacing. “Why do medications never taste good?” she asked.

“To stop us foolishly eating them all for pleasure, I assume,” I said, smiling. “We mortals aren’t the smartest of creatures.”

“Ha! The gods must find us irritating,” she said, sipping.

“Mmm. A feeling that’s often mutual,” I said. I had my own opinions on the gods. Few of them were complimentary.

When she’d finished the tea, I asked Leyella to lie down. “This will hurt,” I said. “I need to put a lot of weight on your womb. Hopefully, it will work with the tea to set off contractions, and your womb will push out the rest of the afterbirth on its own.”

She nodded, mouth tight. “What’s a bit more pain, after what I just went through?” she asked.

I nodded. “That’s the attitude,” I told her. “OK. One, two, and…” I pushed down on her womb with every bit of my weight that I could leverage, and she screamed.

“Holy hells,” she swore when I let up. “I knew it would hurt, but that was… *shit*.” She doubled over. I felt her belly and grinned. Muscles were contracting in a tight band around her womb.

“It’s working,” I told her. “Give it an hour or two.”

“Mum?” Lianna asked, sounding scared.

I jumped – I’d forgotten about the girl being in the house.

“She’s alright,” I said. “Sorry, I should have warned you.”

“Mum?”

“I’m alright, sweetheart,” Leyella said, gasping. “Hurts, but it might be a good hurt.”

The girl nodded. “I brought rags,” she said.

“Thanks. Do you have any chores to do?” I asked. “Your mum will need some rest.”

That reminded me – I really should check on the baby, too. I walked over to the crib and picked up the quiet bundle of rags and tightly-wrapped blankets. The baby opened big, dark blue eyes to stare at me.

“Hello, darling,” I said, smiling. “Boy or girl?” I asked the mother.

“Boy,” she said, wincing. “We don’t have a name yet.”

I unwrapped the baby enough to free an arm, and stroked my little finger down his palm. He grabbed my finger reflexively, holding on tight. I waved my hand in front of his face, and he tracked the movement. Lips weren’t blue, which was a good sign. His skin was perhaps slightly yellow, though.

“He seems fairly healthy,” I said. “Make sure he gets some sun over the next few days, though. There’s bile in his blood. The sunlight will cleanse it. Too much and he might get heatstroke. Be careful.”

“Ahh. Lianna had the same problem,” she said. “Less concerning in summer, though, yes?”

I nodded.

Leyella groaned and doubled over again.

When I was sure she was stable, I gathered my supplies and repacked my backpack. “I’m heading for the village,” I told her. “Send Lianna if you need me again, but you’d be best

served with the midwife now. Maybe someone would lend you a mule for her to ride out here?”

She nodded to Lianna, who offered me a small purse. “Thanks, Dash,” she said. “You’re short, but you’re really smart!”

I laughed and took the purse. “Thank you,” I said to them both. “Best of luck to you, and may the light shine bright all your days.”

“So where are you headed next?” the village head asked, scratching her arm. “Someone said you’re giving up the itinerant-monk thing? It’s a shame if it’s true – you’ve been a godsend every time you appeared.”

“I wish I could have done more,” I said, thinking of the soldier whose wounds were festering and eyes turning yellow by the time I saw him. All I’d been able to do was numb his pain as he slipped away – I had no healing potions that could handle that sort of systemic damage.

“We can only do what we can,” the headwoman said, shrugging.

“I’m going west,” I said, going back to the previous question. “To Baldur’s Gate. I want to open a healing booth. Something a little less volatile; hopefully put down some roots.”

“Oof. The city’s not for the faint of heart,” she said, shaking her head. “Den of thieves and cutthroats, way I hear it, and that’s just the palace.”

I laughed. “True enough. But I grew up there,” I said. “I know how to survive.”

“Well! A rock gnome from the city?” she asked. “Unusual. Don’t you all usually live in caves?”

“And eat mushrooms?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Hmm. Fair point,” she allowed. “Well. May the gods look after you, and keep you safe in your new venture.”

“My thanks,” I said, biting back a snarky rejoinder. *People don’t need their heads bitten off just because they believe the gods*, I thought. “Light to your path.”

I don’t remember much of the capture. I was walking towards the forest, skirting what used to be Elturel. I saw a meteoroid stream across the sky, whistling. Then something hit me in the back, and my next fuzzy memory was of a mindflayer, up close. In retrospect, it seems fairly clear it was checking my pod, making sure I was properly restrained, before it lifted something to my face and... *slurp* ... in it went, through my eye socket, behind my eye, into my brain. I must have screamed. Surely.

It moved around for a while, which I felt like a migraine moving slowly and randomly through my head, then settled in. And suddenly everything was crystal clear again. I could see and hear what was going on around me – well, in the case of vision, *above* me. It sounded

as though someone else was getting the same slurpy eye-brain treatment, and judging from the sounds, I probably *had* screamed. A lot.

This person sounded like a man. He wasn't having a good time. I pulled at my restraints, and my right arm moved a little. Left... nothing. This might take a while. And I had no idea how much time I had. How much time any of us might have. Presumably the mindflayers would want to keep us alive if they'd gone to the trouble of inserting something – spawn? – into our heads. Right? I thought back, muzzily, to what I'd learnt about mindflayers. Not much. They ate brains, hence the name. They reproduced by inserting their spawn into other sentient species. Who then transformed into mindflayers just days later.

... SHIT.

The good news was that I probably wouldn't be killed by mindflayers in the next few hours.

The bad news was that I was most likely hatching a mindflayer baby in my brain, and would sprout tentacles before the tenday was out.

Gather your party

A sudden jolt, and I was awake. Trapped in something that felt unnervingly like a coffin. A thrill of pure panic ran through me, and I hammered at the transparent lid. It opened.

Thank all the good gods.

I breathed in, shaky, and clambered out of the pod. Other pods stood around the eerily fleshy room, but they all seemed to be empty. Had their inhabitants escaped? Turned into mindflayers? I shuddered.

The floor under me shook, and I stumbled. What the hells was going on, and where was I?

I looked around. One door. Best get out of here, then – single-exit rooms could turn into death traps too fast. Especially given the earthquakes or whatever was happening.

The fleshy sphincter of a door irised open as I approached. Ew. Efficient, perhaps, but the sense of being inside a living, breathing creature was unnerving, to put it mildly. I went through, keeping my knees bent to absorb some of the shaking that ran through the place. If it was going to blow up or collapse, I *really* needed to get out.

For what? To live as a mindflayer? I wondered, then shook my head. I couldn't do anything about that right now. Focus on what I could change: where I was, what I had.

Another pod lay in front of me. Faint sounds came from it – it was occupied. I started towards it, and a figure dropped from the ceiling to hold a sword to my throat.

I stopped. A gith woman. What were *gith* doing here? Then again, I didn't even know where *here* was. Maybe it was perfectly reasonable for gith to be wherever I was. Maybe a gnome was actually the anomaly.

“Hi,” I said, careful not to move, but concerned about the irregular shaking of the room around us. If one of those quakes sent me stumbling into that sharp blade, I was done for.

“Ghaik,” she hissed.

I shrugged. Her face twisted, and she pulled back the sword to strike. I started to duck, and the world went dark. Then I was... somewhere else. *A passenger on the back of a dragon, the rider in front of me, arrayed in bright silver armour. I jumped from the dragon in mid-air, dropping weightlessly towards a nautiloid. I landed and rolled, springing to my feet, to be hit from behind.*

I shook my head and pulled out of the connection with a push of will. What had the gith seen about me, I wondered – or had we shared the same vision? Memories started to return: the abduction, something going into my eye... I shuddered.

The gith lowered her sword. “You're no thrall,” she said. “Thank Vlaakith herself.”

“Not yet,” I said grimly, realising that we were probably still on the nautiloid I'd seen in her memories. “I don't intend to turn into one, either, if I can avoid it. Let's get this person out, and see if we can find a way off this thing.”

“Chk! Waste of time. We need to move.”

“Yes, but an extra person might make the difference between survival and death,” I pointed out. I would have tried to free them anyway, but I'd found giving pragmatic reasons to those less altruistic tended to work better than appealing to their better natures. Sometimes there wasn't a better nature to appeal to.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Hurry.”

I approached the pod. The person inside looked human through the thick glass. Not mindflayer, at least. A potential ally.

“Let me out!” she shouted.

I looked around for a release catch of some sort, but nothing caught my eye. There was a console nearby; perhaps that controlled the pod? I put a hand on it, and felt a mental connection. The thing in my brain, again? “Open,” I urged, and the pod clicked ajar.

The woman clambered out, and I reconsidered the *human* judgement I'd made earlier. She was at least half an elf, judging from her face and ears. She and the gith glared at each other.

“Thank you,” she said pointedly to me. “We need to find a way out of here.”

I nodded. “My thoughts exactly.” The floor jolted underneath us again. “Faster might be better,” I added.

The room shook *hard*, and one wall caved in. A red dragon – like the one from the gith's vision – screamed at us from the new opening. Then everything went dark.

I woke on a beach. I frowned, trying to remember what I was doing here. Vacation? No, that didn't feel right. A bad camping choice? I was wet and cold and aching all over. I moved my limbs gingerly. Everything seemed to be working, so I sat up. I was surrounded by chunks of fleshy, cartilaginous wreckage. Bit by bit, memories surfaced like flotsam in my head. The nautiloid. The thing in my head. The gith and half-elf. The dragon. *Shit*. The dragon! I looked up and around wildly. No sign of dragons. Nothing red, except the dark red of blood on bodies nearby. I might have survived whatever happened, but others clearly hadn't been so lucky.

Well. Time to gather what wits I had left, and figure out where I was. I stood carefully and stretched; nothing felt broken or even sprained, just sore and strained.

I found the half-elf unconscious on the beach, and paused to check her over. A person in a hurry would have leant over her to check if she was breathing; I'd had experience with waking traumatised people, so instead placed two fingers on her ankle to check for a pulse.

She roused and kicked out at my face, but I tumbled backwards. You'd think those reflexes come from the combat training; but no. Nurse enough unconscious people, and you learn to dodge sudden blows.

“I'll take that as an *I'm fine*,” I said, bouncing to my feet. I was still a little surprised at being able to move this easily, frankly. Brainwormed and ejected from midair with nary a feather fall spell in sight? We should have been masses of broken bones and pulp.

She rose gingerly and patted herself down, relaxing visibly when she reached her bulging back pocket. Whatever was in there, it was important to her.

“Hmm. We should find a healer,” she said. “These things in our brains? We might want to get them out sooner rather than later.”

“Fair point. You want to stay together, then?”

She shrugged. “We're both infected, and you seem a decent fighter. Remember other people will try to kill us if they find out. Safety in numbers seems a smart option.”

I nodded. “Fine.”

“I'm Shadowheart.”

“Dash.”

“I take it that's a name, not a recommendation to run.”

I snorted, mildly amused. “Yes. Although feel free to run around if it makes you happy.”

Just a little way along our path stood a pale, thin elf calling for help.

“Well. This doesn't look suspicious at all,” Shadowheart said as we walked towards him. “He seems perfectly healthy – why's he just standing around?”

“I guess not everyone is a doer,” I said, grinning up at her. “What's wrong?” I asked the elf.

“I have one of those... brain things... cornered. You seem tough; can you kill it?”

I frowned. Killing an intellect devourer seemed well within the man's capacities. But maybe he was unwell, or was artistically inclined, or something. Spending a few minutes helping him out would be unlikely to hurt.

Moments later, I lay on the ground with a very sharp knife at my throat, rethinking my earlier impressions.

“You were on the mindflayer ship, weren't you?” he asked. “Yes or no.”

I stayed still, and he eased up so that the blade was no longer cutting into my flesh. I watched his face, and realised that this man was *terrified*. He'd been on the ship. He was infected, like Shadowheart and I. And he had no idea what on Toril to do next.

He pressed his face close to mine. “Weren’t you? You’re one of *them* .”

I gave in to temptation and licked his cheek. He threw himself backwards, spluttering and wiping his face, while Shadowheart laughed.

“Why, you mangy little rockmunching *cur* !” he yelled as I bounced to my feet and jumped out of stabbing range.

“Can we have a slightly less stabby conversation?” I asked, trying not to laugh. He seemed to take himself a little too seriously to be openly laughing at him.

He scowled at me.

“You’re infected,” I said gently. “Aren’t you? Us too. We’re trying to find a healer.”

My vision blurred. The elf grabbed his head.

Night in Baldur’s Gate. The air smelt of jasmine, and faintly of fish. Somewhere in the upper city, then, or the better areas of the lower city. I was walking down a dimly-lit street, a man in cheap, antiquated clothing stumbling a little as he walked a few paces in front. I craved... something. And he was everything that would sate my desire.

I’d shared in the elf’s memories of the past. Hmm. He seemed an overly intense type.

“Oh,” he said, suddenly calm and debonair. “And to think I was ready to decorate the ground with your innards. My apologies.”

I eyed him suspiciously. I think I preferred the rage-filled, scared version. This one was unnerving in comparison.

“I was tempted to do the same,” I said. “And honestly, you’re not the first person to hear a word out of my mouth and want to stab me.”

He snorted and laughed. “Alright, fine. I’m Astarion, and it’s not entirely unpleasant to meet you.”

I relaxed a little. “Dash,” I said. “I haven’t come to a decision on how nice it is to meet you.” I wiped at my neck, and my fingers came away bloody. “I think I’d prefer a bard. Cutting words, not cutting knives at my throat.”

“First florist we come to, I’ll buy you an apology posy,” he said. “Now, I assume we’re sticking together, yes? Stay away from the angry mobs with torches and pitchforks?”

“Are we done with the violence?” I asked. “If you slice me every time I talk to you, this acquaintance could get messy fast.”

“I can see how that might be tempting,” he said, raising an elegant eyebrow. “But yes. You have my word. No more stabbing. Unless you deserve it.”

“Hmm. Not as reassuring as I’d hoped,” I muttered.

The gate hummed and crackled. I put out a hand to feel its energy; it swirled and pulsed oddly.

“What in the hells?” I asked.

“I think we might want to use a different gate,” Shadowheart said. “This one looks... unstable, to put it mildly.”

“A hand?” a voice echoed from the gate, and an arm reached for me.

I jumped back, staring at the disembodied hand.

“Kill it,” hissed Astarion. “Nothing good ever came from random body parts poking out of weird portals.”

“One hell of a glory hole,” Shadowheart muttered.

“I *heard* that!” the voice said. “Please?”

I sighed, grasped the hand, and pulled.

“Remind me never to take him to Sharess’ Caress,” Shadowheart said to Astarion. “We’d be there all day, what with the body parts on display.”

Astarion snickered as a man tumbled out of the gate to land at my feet.

“Hmm. Having men falling at your feet is usually my purview,” Astarion drawled.

“I’m just entertainment to you two, aren’t I?” I asked, offering the man a hand. He was wearing a purple robe that screamed *hello, I’m a wizard; ask me how!* I shuddered. I was reminded of the old joke: *How do you know if someone’s a wizard? Don’t worry; they’ll tell you.*

“Hello!” the man said, standing and dusting himself off. “I’m Gale. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sorry, I’m usually better at this.”

“At falling out of gates?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“At introductions?” Shadowheart asked.

“*At using gates*,” he said firmly. “Hmm. I recognise you from the nautiloid, don’t I? Were you also recipients of an unwelcome ocular insertion?”

I nodded. “Tadpole team reporting for service,” I said.

“I don’t suppose anyone here is a healer? A cleric? Uncannily adroit with a knitting needle, perhaps?”

I winced at the mental image of a knitting needle pushing behind my eye. Ew.

“Healer, yes. Willing to poke at people’s brains? Not so much,” I said.

“Hmm. No surprise there. Not many would be. However, perhaps we should make finding someone a top priority. I don’t know how much you know about ceremorphosis...”

“Enough to know you’re right,” I said firmly. “Come on. Let’s go.”

I led the little group towards the water, hoping to find a decent place to camp with fresh water. We found the gith instead, trapped in a hanging cage, with two tieflings debating what to do with their catch.

“Hi,” I said. “Interesting game you're hunting there.”

The tieflings turned to me, surprised. They'd been too busy talking to hear us come up behind them. Not practised hunters, then.

“It's a gith, isn't it?” the man asked. “Zorru said he ran into a squad nearby. Killed his whole group, apart from him. We should kill it. It's dangerous.”

“*It is a person,*” I pointed out mildly. “And she can speak for herself. Why not ask her if she's planning to kill us all?”

He blinked. “They're all mindless killers!”

“Are you a mindless killer?” I called out to the gith.

“Killer, perhaps. Mindless, far from it,” she said.

“See? We can reason with her,” I said.

“It said it's a killer!” the tiefling woman said.

I shrugged. “Aren't we all, at heart? I say we let her down and see what she has to say for herself. If she wants a fight, she's outnumbered.”

The tieflings frowned at me, but I stood firm. The man rolled his eyes eventually, and turned to leave. “Come on,” he says to his companion. “This isn't our concern. Let them die if they're so inclined.”

They left, and I eyed the cage that the gith was in. “Easiest way for me to release you is to shoot down the cage. That alright with you?” I called out.

“Just get it done,” she said, glowering.

I motioned to Gale. “Wizard up,” I said, and he shot a fireball at the rope holding up the cage. It burnt, the cage fell to the ground and broke, and the gith fought to her feet through the wreckage.

“I'm Dash,” I said to her, and introduced the others.

“Lae’zel,” she said. “We must find a creche. These things in our heads pollute us. Within a tenday, we shall be mindflayers, if we do not get assistance.”

“And a gith creche would help us?” I asked, sceptical.

She nodded. “With me to talk for you? They will help.”

“Well. That seems a good plan, if we can find that creche,” Gale said. “Where to next?”

“I’d say find where those tieflings came from,” I said. “They should at least have supplies and a change of clothes. Maybe we can work for a day to pay for the basics.”

What do you mean by "Blade" ...

Our group wasn't the only one to stumble across the druid grove. A group of human adventurers, with a squad of goblins hot on their tails, arrived just as we walked up the trail from the crash site.

Shadowheart, Gale, Astarion, and I watched as the group demanded entrance and safety, and were rebuffed. Then the goblins were on them – and they had brought worgs. Damn. Those humans were about to be sliced to pieces... and it looked like the druids couldn't or wouldn't help them.

"Let's go," I said, unclipping my staff from my back, and the others shook themselves loose and ranged out.

Just before we hit engagement range, a lone figure jumped down from the grove walls. "Provoke the Blade; suffer its sting!" he yelled, and threw an eldritch blast at a worg. It tumbled backwards.

"Hmm. Theatrical *and* pretty," Astarion muttered. "I rather like this show."

"Show- *off*, you mean," Shadowheart grumbled. "Come on, let's help out before he takes them all down himself. We could do with earning some druid goodwill." She ran towards the goblins and blasted one that was about to hit the Blade in the back.

The rest of the squad were pretty easy to mop up, with the Blade – I assumed that was a title, not just a reference to his... sword? Surely if anything, it was a reference to the rapier. Ahem.

"I'm Wyll," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "You four turned up in the nick of time! Aradin and his men were no match for those goblin bastards."

"Looked as though you had everything rather in hand," Gale observed. "I feel as though we merely assisted, rather than turning the tide. Though a stout wall between Aradin and the squad might have made more difference still."

"Zevlor had his reasons," the Blade said, shaking his head. "Come inside. Let's make some introductions."

I wasn't a fan of the loud theatrics and odd name, but he seemed nice enough. So I smiled at him and started to walk away, when my vision darkened and my knees buckled.

I was... somewhere else. Somewhere with dark skies, but filled with fire. A literal hellscape. I ran through a blood-soaked plain, chasing a fiery figure with a single curved horn. Her skin was bright red and ran with flames. She was my quarry. She needed to die. She was a threat to everything I held dear.

Wyll held his head.

“By all the hounds of the hells,” he swore. “I know you. I saw you. The nautiloid.”

I nodded. “We both have illithid parasites, it would seem.”

“Hmm. Then it appears we might have a common purpose. Unless you’ve sprouted tentacles you’re uncommonly adept at hiding?”

“Not yet,” I said, smiling wryly.

“About all we can hope for in these dark days. Very well. Let me finish up my work here – then, if you’ll have me...”

“The Blade of Frontiers?” Gale asked. “We’d have to be mad to decline your joining us.”

Oh. *That* Blade. “I’ve heard of you,” I said. “Gale’s right. You’d be very welcome in our camp. Please - join us at your leisure.”

Thorny, thorny grove

As we walked through the grove, we saw what Wyll's important work was – he was teaching tiefling children to fight.

“That seems pointless,” Astarion said. “One whack from a goblin, and all of those little morsels are going to end up spitted over a fire.”

“It's alright, Umi,” Wyll said to a frustrated child, kneeling to get on his level and meet his eyes. “I don't need you to be *me* – I just need you to be able to hold someone off long enough to run. That's all. Besides. Do you think I just picked up a sword and magically knew how to wield it? It took me a lot of sweat – and a lot of bruises – to get any good!”

“Ugh,” Astarion said. “This is nauseating. Can we go find someone *interesting*?”

“I do like his technique,” Shadowheart said, watching Wyll spar with the youngster. “But he's far too soft on them. The world outside will destroy them.”

“I don't know,” Gale said, watching thoughtfully. “They look frail, don't they? But they escaped Elturel, in the middle of Avernus. I suspect the weaklings have already been weeded from this crop.”

“A fair point,” Shadowheart granted. “Are you feeling any urges to pass on fatherly advice or teachings?”

Gale shuddered. “Talking with children is not my favourite pastime,” he admitted. “There are reasons I fell in love with a goddess. Lack of offspring might just have been one of them.”

“I think you'd make an excellent parent,” Astarion said, a gleam in his eyes. “You could tell them all the stories you're always trying to bore us with.”

“Ha! And if children could be handled with talking alone, I dare say I should be a master in no time,” Gale said, laughing. “As, you so rightly point out, I'm prone to pointing out the obvious.”

Shadowheart just looked at him.

Now seemed like a good time to press on. We headed down towards the heart of the grove... but my attention was taken by more tiefling children. These ones had a stall. I slowed, and a child spotted a likely mark.

“Mister! Here – try one of my lucky rings,” he said.

I took the ring, dubious, and examined it. Astarion guffawed.

“Why, you adorable little scamps!” he said. “Go on; what's the game of chance?”

“I... don’t know what you mean, sir. I’m just trying to sell my special lucky rings. So we have food to last us to Baldur’s Gate,” he said, eyes wide and guileless.

Astarion took the ring from my fingers and grinned at the child. If you didn’t know he was a vampire, he probably looked jovial. With the knowledge... he looked hungry. “Well, show me the rest,” he said.

The child asked him to call a coin toss, and at a side angle, I caught the faint flicker of movement that betrayed a substitution. “You win! See! The ring really *is* magic!”

“Not bad! A little clumsy, but – you’re young. You’ll learn. Keep practising, and keep your elbows in, so –” he reached behind himself and grabbed a child who’d snuck up while they were talking. “And don’t continue a scam once it’s clear that an adult knows it – you’ll end up knifed if you try *that* in the city.”

“Thanks, mister!” the boy said, and they all ran.

“Well!” Gale said. “You think I’d make a good parent? Now I’m picturing *you* with a horde of scruffy urchins, reading to them in bed at night about how to break into people’s homes.”

“Hmm. Having my own gang of tiny thieves *is* somewhat appealing.”

We continued down to the heart of the grove, and found a fight trying to happen.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“They have our daughter,” the tiefling woman yelled. “And they won’t tell us what they’re doing to her. I heard someone say she’d be locked up. She’s only 12! She’s a *child* !”

“Can I come through and help?” I asked the guard.

She looked me up and down and sneered. “We don’t need *more* outsiders here – we need fewer. Get gone.”

“Wait,” another said. “Kagha asked to speak with these adventurers.”

The guard woman rolled her eyes. “Fine. Go through. Don’t touch anything.”

We walked through and into a cave to find another loud discussion happening. This time, around a small tiefling child and a large snake.

“Oh. You. Hang on. I just have to deal with this... parasite,” a woman said to us. She had red hair, twisted into a crown on top of her head, and an odd mark on her cheek. A druid thing, I guessed. It seemed a safe bet to assume this was Kagha.

“Parasite?” I asked. “She looks like a child, to me.”

“She eats our food, drinks our water, and steals our idol of the grove,” Kagha spat. “Parasite.”

“Then all children are parasites,” I said, trying to understand what was motivating her rage. “We raise them regardless, knowing they will contribute in time, as they’re able.”

“These *children* will never contribute! Steal, swindle, thief, and lie. That’s all they know.”

“And if your wolf bites you when you heal its paw,” I asked, “Do you dismiss it as a savage beast who knows nothing but violence? Or do you think, *this wolf is afraid and in pain, and lashed out at me barely knowing I was there, leave alone trying to help?*”

Kagha sighed. “Will you take her under your wing, then? I need no distractions. I must close off the grove.”

“And lock the tiefling refugees out, with a goblin horde on the march?”

“Lest it level us too? Yes.”

I held out a hand to the child, and she hesitantly came to me, carefully skirting the snake.

Kagha massaged her forehead. “Get the tieflings out,” she said. “Offer them help. Take them to Baldur’s Gate. With an escort, they’ll be fine. And without them here, *we’ll* be fine.”

I sighed. “I’ll see what I can do. Maybe we can find a way to resolve this.”

“The Rite of Thorns *will* go ahead. And we *will* close off the grove. Best to be out of here before that happens, adventurer.”

As we walked out of the cave, the child still holding my hand, Wyll came bounding down the stairs. “I just heard,” he said. “Arabella – are you alright!”

“Wyll!” she yelled, and ran to him. He knelt, and she buried her face in his shoulder. “She had a *snake* and it was going to bite me.”

He hugged her, face gentle. “That sounds scary.”

“I’m fine. Nice man saved me from the snake. I need to report back to Mol.”

She ran off, and he stood, sighing. “Mol and her gang of troublemakers,” he said. “They think they’re immortal. I hope this will convince them otherwise. At least for a few weeks.”

“Weeks they might not have, if Kagha has her way,” I said, grim.

“Hmm. I heard about the Rite of Thorns. I have an idea, though – I’ll meet you at your camp after I talk to Zevlor.”

Later, at camp, Wyll sat by me at the campfire.

“I talked to Zevlor,” he said. “He thinks as I do – that we might be able to settle this amicably if we think... a little different.”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked, curious.

“Goblins are renowned for their lack of discipline,” he said. “They wouldn’t band together and march as they have been unless they were forced into it. Someone is leading them. We caught a goblin alive in that raid – Zevlor’s organising her interrogation as we speak. Hopefully she can tell us who the leaders are. If we can figure that out...”

“... we can sneak in and take out the leaders?” I finished, thoughtful. “It could work. It sounds risky, though. So much could go wrong.”

“So much could go wrong for a group of peaceful refugees out on the roads, too,” Wyll said. “We... well, we have worms in our heads, don’t we? Are our lives really that valuable if we might turn into mindflayers at any point? Shouldn’t we try to do some good while we still can?”

“That sort of logic is hard to argue with,” I said, nodding. “You’re right, I think. It’s worth a try, at least. If we succeed, the tieflings get a clearer run to Baldur’s Gate. If we don’t...”

“They’re unlikely to be worse off,” Wyll said with a shrug.

“You’re very philosophical about dying,” I noted.

“Well. It’s easier to face in talk than in deed, I usually find.”

Nightmares everywhere you look

We awoke to a scream.

“Noooo! Leave her – don't...” the rest was intelligible, but it was coming from Wyll's bedroll.

I stood and looked around. No threats in sight. Astarion must have been off hunting. Gale sat up and blinked owlishly at me.

Wyll screamed again.

“Shit,” I muttered, and crawled around to his bedroll. I crouched at the foot end of his area and placed a hand on his leg, pushing up his trouser leg to get a skin-to-skin connection.

“Wyll?” I said, quietly. A gentle waking was recommended in our books for people having nightmares, because –

Wyll sat up, clearly perceiving a threat and not quite awake yet, and kicked out at me. Lucky for me, I'd had the sense to stay out of full-extension range, so he couldn't reach me without moving more, and that should snap him out of the dream. I let go of his leg, though.

“Wyll!” I said, still softly, and he shook his head as though trying to dislodge something. In the low firelight, I could see his eye clear and sharpen. “Just a nightmare,” I told him.

“Oh. Was I shouting?” he asked. “I'm sorry. Maybe I should sleep further away from the fire.”

I shook my head. “It's fine. Are you OK? Do you need to talk?”

“Just sleep, I think. Thank you, though.”

He rolled himself back up in his bedroll, and seemed to go straight back to sleep. I laid down but stayed awake, staring at his motionless form with troubled eyes. Maybe this newest group member would be a little more trouble than I'd expected. But then, Astarion bit me on the first night. In comparison, Wyll was still ahead.

So far.

When it came to camp, I had a morning ritual that I liked to follow. Wake at sunrise, or a little before. Check the perimeter for visitors, wanted or otherwise. We rarely bothered setting an official watch, because usually someone was awake regardless, and protections around the camp were usually rock-solid – but it didn't hurt to look. Prepare something for breakfast that I could leave in coals or next to the fire to heat itself slowly. Then find a quiet, conducive place to meditate.

Today was damper, since the bandits who (ambitiously) ambushed us the previous day had had multiple bags of flour with them, and I had doubts about how long it would last. Butter and jam would have been a perfect addition, but I *had* managed to find a beehive and scavenged some honeycomb. That and a few berries would be almost as good. Certainly better than the hardtack and cheese we were reduced to last week. Ugh. If you have no idea what that combination will do to your bowels in time, thank all the gods and the stars themselves.

I felt... heartsick. The conflicts and despair throughout the druids grove tore at me. So many in the grove had turned on each other in fear and anger and lack of viable enemies they could actually have a chance of fighting. Children were trying to learn how to defend themselves against goblins – the sheer idea was so appalling, so terrifying, and so *wrong*, that those children should have to face life-or-death fights just to maybe survive until adulthood. The tieflings were so scared, and they had no one strong to stand up and look after them. Frightened rabbits. I couldn't fight well, feeling like this.

While the damper baked under coals, I walked away to find somewhere to meditate. I found a cliffside perch under a tree and sat down, letting the events of the past few days wash back over me. The blood. The pain. The fear of the tieflings and druids in the grove at the inexorable march of the Absolute about to raze their refuge. The in-fighting. Wyll, doing his best to help with the younglings. His face, determined but with a touch of despair. "Just disengage and *run* ..."

Through it all, I breathed. I invited in the sunlight with every inhale, and with every exhale I returned all my hopelessness and grief over what I was witnessing. My faith in my god might have gone – no, that's not quite right. My faith in the gods to be *any better or more worthy than mortals* might be gone, but light and truth were still constants that I could call on. I could still utilise them to bring more good into the world. I didn't need a god's ineffable guidance for that. The darkness wasn't inevitable. Nothing was.

When I felt more relaxed and less conflicted, I opened my eyes and sighed. I started. Wyll was kneeling nearby, sitting on his heels, eyes closed, breathing slowly. *How in all the gods' names did he get there without me hearing him?* I shrugged, thought about getting up, and decided that I'd rather not attempt the silent stalk that Wyll had apparently mastered. I'd rather not disturb him, no one else would be awake yet, and the damper wouldn't be ready. There was no pressing reason to leave, except for an odd discomfort that I'd been sharing my meditation space all unawares. So I stayed.

A few minutes later, Wyll opened his eyes and met my gaze. "I hope you don't mind," he said, looking uncertain. "I came out here looking for some quiet, and inspiration on what to do next. It seems the same place called to us both, and I thought... meditation seems to bring you such calm and certainty."

I quirked a half-smile. "I suppose... it helps me review how I feel about things, and gain some perspective. Sometimes that's the closest I can come."

Wyll nodded thoughtfully. "I always heard it was about emptying your mind and connecting to the gods."

“Mmm... some doubtless do. I was trained more as a way to be a more effective person and fighter. There are prayer meditations as well, but I rarely use those.”

“Because you don’t need to?”

“Because I don’t really trust the gods.”

Wyll looked... surprised but not shocked. “From personal experience?”

“Mmm.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “I want tea, and food. Hungry?” I stood, and offered him a hand up. He took it, and used me more as an anchor to push himself upright than something to pull against. Lucky, because he was a lot taller than I.

We went back to camp, and I busied myself making an energising tea with herbs I found by the road, and digging the damper out of the coals. It was black on the outside and soft and fragrant hot inside, so I broke it open, suspended the honeycomb over it to drip sweetness over it while it cooled, and washed berries in a bowl.

“Why do you make breakfast yourself?” Wyll asked. “Aren’t you the leader of this group? Is delegation not a strong point?”

Oof. I laughed. “I think the most important part of being a leader is serving and looking after those I lead. They’re a responsibility; not servants or slaves. I like to make sure everyone gets a nourishing breakfast, from whatever we can scrounge together. Someone else handles dinner, and I think Gale might have devised a magic latrine – he was complaining about the smell, and then suddenly it smelt like roses and never seemed to need re-digging if we stayed in one place too long.”

Wyll looked down, his face sombre. “You sound like my father,” he said quietly.

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“Best man I’ve ever known. I just wish I could live up to him.”

“Mmm. Parental expectations are hard. So I hear.”

“Not a problem for you?”

“Not so much, no. Are you feeling better?”

He looked confused, then his face cleared. “Oh. Last night. Yes, thanks. I don’t know what I dreamt about. I don’t think I want to. I’m happy enough for my dreams to stay in the night-time.”

“Mmm. Can I offer a bit of advice?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Sure. Say the word and I’ll stop talking,” I said and smiled. If there was one thing I’d learnt the hard way, it was that I actually didn’t have all the answers. Just occasionally a signpost

that helped someone grope the way through the darkness to their own answer.

“Hmm. I actually believe you. Very well – what’s your advice?”

“Dreams often come to us when we’re worried or afraid. It’s like... our heart is trying to tell us something. When we ignore them, things often get worse; not better. Our bad dreams chase us harder.”

Wyll’s mouth twisted. “And if we can’t fix what we dream about?”

“Then perhaps we need to accept that they exist and cannot be changed.”

His shoulders slumped. “I’m a monster-slayer. Not a monster... negotiator.”

I nodded, neutral. He could take the learning or leave it; the only way it would affect me would be a few sleepless hours. In these dark times, though, a few nightmares didn't seem too unreasonable. After all, they were all around us.

We went back to the grove to stock up on supplies before hitting the road. The trader was friendly, at least, and gave us decent prices on the food we needed.

“We could check out Mattis, too?” Wyll suggested. “Everything they have is probably stolen, but I find myself admiring their entrepreneurial attitude regardless.”

“Hmm. I thought you’d be rather anti-theft,” I said. “You have a reputation for being rather...”

“... goodie two-shoes?” Wyll finished, smiling. “I’m sure I do. Maybe I’m just a sucker for cute kids with wild hearts.”

Astarion snorted. “*Sucker* I’d believe, at least.”

Wyll eyed him. “Ditto, fangs,” he said. “Or does *bloodsucker* not count?”

Astarion’s eyes narrowed, then he laughed. “Fine, I deserved that. Shall we continue?”

I sighed, watching the two of them. Their conversation seemed friendly enough, but there was a darker undercurrent. Monster hunter and vampire spawn – hardly a combination to build confidence. Would I need to kick one of them out sometime soon?

As Astarion bargained with Mattis, I walked away a little, and heard music. It kept starting and stopping, as though its player couldn’t get the notes quite right. When Astarion was done, I led the group through the grove inner circle and out towards the cliffs.

Sure enough, someone was sitting on a bench on an outlook, playing, singing, and occasionally swearing. A tiefling. I walked up slowly, prepared to back off. I knew creative types – they were a lot like cats. Approach them the wrong way, they’ll hiss and fluff up.

“Hi,” she said, laying down her lute. “I’m sorry for the noise. Ugh. This song...”

“Are you alright?” I asked. This felt like more than the usual creative angst when something just won’t come out right.

“No! I’m moments from a grisly death... at the hands of this song!”

I laughed, and heard Wyll chuckle behind me.

“Can I help?” I asked. “I’m no bard, but I can play a little.”

“Yes!” she said, handing me a lute. “Here. Just play along. Help me figure out why this song is limping along like I trod on its foot.”

I strummed the lute gently. Its tone was lovely – rich and inviting. This was a lovely instrument. She counted me in, and I tried to keep up with her chord changes while playing a harmony to her melody. It was difficult, and I was horrendously out of practice – but her eyes lit up as her lyrics started to flow smoothly.

“YES!” she yelled. “That’s it. That’s what I needed. *Words of mine will turn to ash, When you call the last light down* . Oh, thank the gods. That was painful.”

She started to play the song, and I put down my borrowed lute; a little regretful at letting go of such a fine instrument. I watched, smiling, as she got right into the song, belting it out. I glanced at Wyll, to find him entranced by the song, a soft smile on his face. It was the most emotion I’d seen him betray in waking hours, and I had the sudden urge to kiss that smile.

Oof. Kissing group members seemed like a terrible idea. I put it firmly out of my mind and focused on Alfira’s song.

“Thank you,” she said when she finished her run-through of the song. “It’s nowhere near complete, but it’s so much better now. Here – take the lute. It should go to someone who loves music.”

“You’re sure?” I asked. There was more to the lute than a simple spare instrument; this had been precious to someone.

She nodded, already focusing back on her song, so we left - lute on my back for the first time in many years.

Disobedient pup

I learned long ago that leading a group requires more than just ordering people about. Everyone will join with a different purpose, different needs... and usually, something that they need help with. Even if they don't know it. People who truly don't need anyone's help aren't out wandering the wilderness joining up with roving gangs of adventurers. You know? Keeping group members happy and fulfilled, helping them grow and become better people – that's all part of being a good leader.

So, on joining us, Wyll had a pretty straight-up request. He was hunting a devil who'd escaped from Avernus, one with a reputation for viciousness. She'd kill without regret or even much thought, like many lower-level devils. They might be cunning, but devils usually grow up so brutalised that even if they could be capable of the gentler emotions, they're not. On the Sword Coast, amongst regular mortals, she'd cut a swathe of dead bodies to rival the Absolute cult. We were fairly close to where the devil had last been sighted, and the location was on the way to the goblin camp we needed to infiltrate – why not see if we could take her out on the way?

We tracked down the devil, and that's where things started to go sideways. Because... she wasn't a devil. She was a tiefling. With a weird mechanical heart that made her *hot*. Not sexy hot, although Shadowheart's reaction to her might prove otherwise. No, you could literally *feel* the heat coming off her from a metre away. Any normal person's flesh would be cooking. I guess having devilish ancestry helps in that regard, though – Karlach didn't smell like BBQ at least.

"I'm trying to *escape*," she said. "I know, you saw me on the Blood Plains fighting, but I had to – I was a slave. I ran away. Zariel forced me to become her champion. Stuck this damned clockwork ticker inside me. I had *no choice*. The first chance I got, I took off. Came out here. I just want to disappear."

"And the killings?" Wyll asked, his face cold. He didn't believe her. I had a feeling that demons had tried lying to him before when he hunted them down.

"Not me. Mercs that Zariel sent after me. They're posing as Paladins of Tyr. Bastards. Murdered a bunch of people as they followed me so it looked like I'd left a trail of bloodshed behind me. Now I understand why."

The illithid parasite stirred within my head, and I winced. It didn't really *hurt*, but it felt as though it should. Things squirming inside your head should not be a thing. Then I was – someone else. Karlach. Fleeting glimpses. Being given to a demon by a human I trusted. Servitude. Misery. Loneliness. Fighting. A chance at freedom. Fleeing. Being pursued through the Hells and Faerun alike.

"Wyll..." I said, laying a gentle hand on his arm. By the look on his face, he'd shared our joining.

“SHIT,” he said. He looked Karlach in the face, looking angry and... scared? “You’re not a devil. You’re not the bad guy here, are you? You’re the victim. SHIT.”

“I really am, big guy,” she said softly, eyes on his, her face a little puzzled. She’d seen that flash of fear too. “Can we be friends? Or at least, not mortal enemies?”

“Shit. Yes. Of course. Except you still have Zariel’s mercs on your tail, right?”

“We should probably do something about that,” I added.

“What is this?” asked Astarion. “The amazing nesting doll quest? I’m all for not killing people just because they look like monsters, mind you. But really, can’t she handle her own damned drama?”

“Sure can, buddy, on a normal day. This day? I’m feeling a bit under the weather. But on a regular day, I could protect your arse from whatever bogey monster might come your way. What would terrify *you* ? A dirt monster? A bad taste owlbear?”

Astarion guffawed. “I take it back – I like her! Can we keep her?”

So we cleared out the nest of false priests, and Karlach joined our raggedy band. But the *drama* , as Astarion so blithely called it, didn’t stop there.

The first surprise was a devil lounging in our camp, smirking, as though we were amusing little rats brought out to entertain her.

“Well, Wyll,” she purred, “So these are your new friends! Have you told them about me yet?”

Wyll’s jaw clenched. “You know I haven’t, Mizora.”

“Tsk,” she said, shaking her finger playfully at him. “You’ve been a bad boy, Wyll – in more ways than one!”

“Uh, Wyll?” I asked. “Who’s this?”

Wyll turned to the devil and opened his hands in entreaty. Odd.

“Come on, Wyll – introduce me to your friends. Don’t be a bore.”

Wyll sighed. “This is my *patron* , Mizora. She’s the one who set me hunting Karlach.”

“Ah yes, Karlach!” Mizora’s voice turned playful. “You didn’t do the job I sent you to do, Wyll! Quite the breach of your contract, wasn’t it?”

I narrow my eyes. Did she... *want* him to refuse that kill? Why? What was going on in the world of Avernus politics?

“She’s not a devil!” Wyll snapped. “She’s not acceptable prey! You sent me out after a *tiefling* !”

“The contracted shall hunt and destroy devils, demons, the heartless, and the soulless,” Mizora said, obviously quoting from a contract. “This one,” pointing at Karlach, “has no heart, making her technically correct prey for you. You, therefore, are in breach of your contract.”

Wyll’s eyes widened, then shut. His face turned suddenly peaceful. I looked on in puzzlement. What happened to his anger? What did a breach of contract mean in Avernus?

“You didn’t do as ordered,” Mizora said, “and therefore, by the terms of your contract, I have the right to punish you. I *could* legally kill you... but you’re far too useful. Instead...”

She flicked a finger and Wyll fell to the ground, writhing.

“Let this be a lesson,” she said, standing over him. “Every time you look in a mirror or catch a glimpse of yourself in a windowpane. Remember that the punishment for breaching your contract terms is harsh – and **I was merciful!** And don’t try to fix it, pup. This is permanent.”

She disappeared, and Wyll let out a single yell of pain and humiliation. I stared. This was... I’d never realised such a thing was even possible. How could magic turn a human into a devil? And from what Mizora had said, not a seeming or illusion. This was... a bone-deep change. I couldn’t even imagine what that would feel like. Let alone how I’d feel about it afterwards. His skin was a dark red. His single eye, once brown and full of good humour, glowed fiery red. His hair was the same, but two massive, back-swept horns curled out of his forehead. His fingers had claws on the ends instead of fingernails.

It was incredibly disconcerting to see someone I knew changed in an instant. But I could stand around gawping, or I could help him right now.

“SHIT that hurt!” he said. “What the hells did she do?”

He sat up, and I knelt beside him. I took his hand in mine, and let him see his new clawed appendage for himself.

“She didn’t.”

“She turned you into a devil,” I said softly.

“Huh. Turned me into the thing I most hate. Poetic, I’ll give her that.”

“You’re taking this more calmly than I expected,” I observe. Delayed reaction, perhaps? I was expecting a lot of shock and dismay. Screaming, maybe.

“I thought she’d kill me and take my soul straight to Avernus,” he confessed. “Would have been within her rights. Shit,” he swore as he moved. “That *really* hurt.”

“Seriously, big guy?” Karlach yelled. “You thought you were gonna *die* and you still spared my sad miserable life? What the fuck is wrong with you, you big galumphing hero idiot?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed, and Wyll chuckled with me.

He looked down at me, and at my hand still in his. “You’re not afraid to touch me? I must be hideous.”

I smiled wryly. I wasn’t in the habit of putting my hands on group members uninvited, but I had a feeling that mortal touch was exactly what he needed right now. Gods, if I’d just been turned into an object of fear and loathing, I think I’d welcome a hug or two.

I touched his cheek lightly with my other hand. “I don’t think you could ever be hideous, Wyll. I’ve known you for a week, and already your kind, protective spirit has shone bright. That means more than what you look like.” I felt a tingle run through me – highly inappropriately, given the circumstances. Touching him felt... good. Was it the parasites connecting us?

He leaned into my palm for a moment, eyes closing, then shook off the mood and stood up. “Thank you,” he said, quiet. “But... I think I’d like to be alone for a while.”

I stood up, looking up at him, registering again just how much difference there was between us. Rock gnomes are not the tallest of creatures, and I was never very big for my race. In contrast, Wyll had been a tallish human, and I swear he’d just grown a few more centimetres thanks to his transformation. He towered over me regardless. Just one more gap between us, I supposed. With my other group members, that rarely bothered me. As long as they accepted me as a companion and a leader, who cared what separated us as long as we could find meaningful common ground?

I shook myself out of my reverie. “Is being alone such a good idea? I’d think you’d want company right now.”

“No, I’m used to being by myself,” he said, a twist of bitterness in his words. “Thank you. For caring. For worrying about this pathetic creature. But I need to wallow in my misery for a while, not converse and play at being sociable.”

I pressed my lips together. That those were his options... this was a man who’d forgotten how to reach out to others. But I was the leader of the group, not their parent – and now I needed to allow him his choices. No matter how terrible I might think them.

Adjustments are hard

The goblin camp was... quieter than I expected. Guards were on duty. Soldiers were about, in small groups. But no one was really doing anything. No laundry. No latrine digging. No one bustling back and forth organising drills or running weapons practice.

“Pretty typical goblins,” Wyll whispered, worming his way up beside me where I lay overlooking the camp. “Vicious fighters. Disciplined enough in battle if they’re scared of their leaders. Anywhere else – no hope. Ask a goblin to do something for the common good and they’ll laugh in your face.”

“Remind me never to pick a goblin for a roommate,” I whispered, and Wyll chuckled quietly.

“I think we can get in over that cliff,” he said, pointing a finger without moving the rest of himself. I leaned into his shoulder to follow his line of sight. “Pretty sure there’s a road nearby,” he said. “Do we have rope?”

“Yes,” I breathed. “I think you’re right – looks like a fairly simple climb down. Think they’ll have it trapped?”

“Benefits of lack of discipline,” he whispered. “I don’t think it’ll occur to them. But Astarion is good at spotting those, right?”

“Sure is.”

“Want to get back?”

“Let’s.”

Back at the camp, Wyll seemed oddly thoughtful.

“How do you do that?” he asked suddenly.

“Do what?” I asked, startled and confused. I’d been making stew, and I was fairly sure that’s not what he meant.

“You made me laugh earlier. For the first time since... this... happened. How... how are you making me feel so much better about this? I thought I’d be... devastated. And I am, when I think that people will recoil from me and hate me wherever I go. When I think about seeing my father, and seeing the revulsion on his face when he beholds what his son has become. But... you’re not revolted. You don’t draw away. You touch me. You make me laugh. How are you just alright with having a devil in your midst?”

I took a breath. I had the distinct feeling that Wyll wasn’t looking for a quick, simple answer here. Not like last night. He wanted something deeper, more real.

“I was a monk,” I said, slowly. “The religion, the god? Never really meant much to me. But the teachings were... they were the world to me. For a long time, at least. And while I turned my back on much of that life, it did teach me a lot of useful lessons. I kept a lot of that.”

Wyll nodded, his shoulders relaxing. I hadn't realised until now just how tense his body language was. “I've seen you fight,” he said drily. “You clearly kept a lot of what you learnt.”

I smiled. “One of the lessons,” I continued, “Was to look at a person's spirit and soul, not just their face. A person's face and body will tell you a lot – but their spirit will tell you a lot more. So. Why am I accepting of having a devil in our midst? Because that devil has the exact same spirit and soul as the human I welcomed into our camp.”

I gave the soup a last stir and put the lid back on, then walked over to sit on a log next to Wyll. He was sitting on the ground, so our faces were at similar heights for once. This next bit would be a little more difficult to put into words successfully.

“I think we're all outcasts and misfits,” I said slowly, “And I think perhaps you're feeling better than you thought you would exactly because none of us particularly care for our own sakes what shape you wear. And you can accept that from people like us, where it would feel like pity from others.”

Tears swam in Wyll's red devil eye.

“Another thing I learnt,” I said, “was to accept each day similarly. It would bring sadness, joy, loss, triumph, death, life – whatever it would. Some of that I could influence. Most I could not. My challenge is to take from each day that which I want, and leave behind that which does not serve me.”

“To take the joy, and leave the sadness?” Wyll asked, frowning.

“Mmm... I don't think life is that simple. Sometimes sadness serves me. I can't grieve a loss without sadness, and I can't come to acceptance of a loss without grieving. But even if I'm grieving a loss, that doesn't mean I can't take some joy as well, to leaven the sorrow and give me hope for the future.”

“So you're telling me I'm wise, because I can take both joy and sorrow from my day.”

I chuckled. “Now you're getting it.”

We sat in silence for a while, watching the fire.

“Can I ask,” I said, hesitantly, “How you came to make a deal with a creature like Mizora? You hardly seem the type to –”

Wyll barked a laugh. “I hardly do, do I? Unfortunately, that's a tale which will need to wait till another day.” He opened his mouth to say something more, but... nothing came out. Not as though he changed his mind about what he was going to say – more as though his throat simply stopped working.

I frowned. “Would you like me to stop asking difficult questions now?”

He nodded, a touch frantically, and his face eased as I nodded. Weird. Almost as if he was – ugh. Of course. Bound by a geas not to talk about the contract. Stupid of me. I should have realised that a devil like Mizora would add a clause like that.

“Would you teach me to meditate?” he asked a while later. “I think I’d like to learn. And you seem good at it.”

“Of course I will,” I said, drinking the last of my tea. “I don’t know if I’ll be a very good teacher, but I’m happy to try.”

“That’s fine. I don’t know if I’ll be a very good student. I don’t think devils and meditation usually go together.”

I chuckled. “True.”

Next morning, I watched Wyll thoughtfully. He was going through what looked like basic swordplay forms, attack and countermeasure, his blade weaving as his feet moved and stepped. But behind the habitual grace of his movements, something wasn’t quite right. He was holding his head oddly, and his shoulders weren’t straight – they slumped a little. I didn’t know him well, but this seemed unusual for him.

Eventually he threw down the practice blade, looked as though he was cursing it and everything around, and stomped back to the campfire I was cooking on.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Hmm? Nothing. I’m fine,” he said, taking up a handaxe to break the chunks of wood into small pieces.

“You’re not,” I said, turning away to get the smaller billy. “Something’s wrong. Is it your neck?”

He sighed. “You won’t let this go, will you?”

“I’m a healer,” I said, smiling at him. “Plus, I like to have the team at full strength.”

He shrugged, discomfort flitting across his face as he moved.

“Shit,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m a fool. It’s the horns, isn’t it?”

He closed his eyes, looking utterly mortified. “I’ll be fine. I’ll get used to it.”

I took the pot I’d been stirring off the heat, took the kettle, and poured water into the small billy, adding a few pain-relieving herbs. “You won’t, you know. The way you’re going is the perfect method for ending up with twisted muscles that won’t straighten. Your stance will be off, and you’ll be at a disadvantage in every fight.”

“So? Maybe that’s my business, not yours.”

At his sullen tone, I wanted to snap back that everyone needed to be at the top of their form, not deliberately injuring themselves to prove their independence. One look at his face changed my mind.

“Hey,” I said, kneeling on the log he sat on, so we were close to the same height. “You’re not alone, Wyll. You don’t have to be the perfect hero every second of the day. I’m here to help. *Let me.*”

He grimaced. “You’re busy. You have so many things to do. I’ll be alright.”

“You won’t, you stubborn rothe of a man. Will you let me do my job already?”

“You’re going to keep harassing me if I don’t, aren’t you?”

“You bet your arse on it, Mr Blade of Frontiers.”

He snorted, a slight smile flitting over his face. “Fine. Physic me, then. I submit.”

“*Thank* you,” I said, grinning at him. “First, a tea.”

“Why is it always teas with you?”

“The gods gave us plants to feed us, clothe us, and heal us,” I said. “It would be foolish not to make use of them.”

“Hmm.”

I turned away to pour out the tea into a mug, and handed it over.

“This won’t make me sleepy?”

I tsked. “What about me says that I know nothing about warfare?” I demanded.

He coughed, but I suspected from the quirk of his lips that he was hiding a laugh.

“Drink!” I said. I strode over to my tent and rummaged in a chest – there. A pot of muscle balm. I made a lot of this stuff whenever I had the materials and the time. Sore muscles made people tetchy. Tetchy people created fights where they didn’t need to be.

I came back to Wyll, to find his mug half-empty. “Good man,” I said. “Now, I think you’ll dislike this more than the tea, but will you trust me when I say it’s important?”

Karlach wandered over to the campfire, yawning. “What’s up?” she asked, blinking sleepily.

“Breakfast, if you’ll finish cooking it,” I said, pointing to the abandoned pot. “Just porridge, sorry. Slim pickings this week.”

“Porridge is fine. I could go for some bacon and eggs, though,” she said, turning to the task.

“Well. What now?” Wyll asked.

“Take your shirt off,” I said. “You need those muscles unkinked.”

“Ahh... it’s fine...” he said, shifting uncomfortably, eyes on the ground.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Come on, you agreed to let me treat you. Why the sudden reversal?”

He pulled in a breath, and blew it out. His face darkened slightly, and I realised with a start that he was blushing. Was he that shy? He’d struck me as more of a performer than a shrinking violet.

“Wyll,” I said softly, putting a hand on his arm. “I know it’s hard to trust me – I’m just some random person met by chance. But I *am* a healer, and I *do* have your best interests at heart. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

He closed his eyes, and I could have sworn I saw the glint of tears in one. “I can’t get my shirt off properly,” he confessed in a quiet voice. “These horns... I can’t see what I’m doing.”

Ugh. What a twit I’d been to miss that. He’d sacrificed himself for Karlach, and we had all missed the fact that he’d be struggling with some very practical sides of his sudden transformation.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, tears stinging my eyes. “I should have realised. I shouldn’t have had to torture that out of you.”

He looked up and smiled. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not. My job is looking after all of you, and I’ve been doing a terrible job.” I turned my head to see Karlach walking away towards the forest, cooked porridge sitting near the fire where it would keep warm. Bless her for her discretion. “Will you let me help?”

“I’ve already humbled myself this far,” he said, looking rueful. “I might as well jump in with both feet.”

“Not sure feet will help this particular problem,” I said, and got a huff of almost-laughter in response. “Right. Arms out of the shirt. Unlace it as far as it will go.”

He did so, and I carefully manoeuvred the shirt over his head, and around the horns.

“There,” I said, satisfied. “Astarion’s a rather good tailor. I’ll ask him to modify your shirts for you. A bit more depth to the neck, and you should be fine, once you get used to it.”

“Do we have to tell him why?” he said, wincing.

“Just that your new horns require new shirts,” I said, soothing. The monster hunter didn’t want the vampire to know his weaknesses, hmm? “I’m going to massage some balm into your muscles. We need to get them loosened up, or you’re going to lose a lot of your range of motion. It’s possible to get back, of course... it just takes a lot more time and effort later on than a massage will right now.”

“I already agreed,” he said. “You don’t have to convince me again.”

“True, but I thought you’d like to know what I’m doing before I start,” I said. “You strike me as the type who isn’t very touchy-feely.”

“Hmm.”

I breathed deep, letting my hands hover a few millimetres away from his skin, moving them along his neck and shoulders. I could feel patches of heat, where the muscles had knotted together. Those were the places I needed to focus on.

I started with a glob of balm on my fingers, rubbing my fingers together to warm it. I pressed gently at the base of Wyll’s skull, and he groaned.

“Hells. I didn’t even realise I had a headache,” he said.

“Drink your tea,” I chided. “Yes, your body’s in a bit of shock, I think. I should have realised.” I moved my thumbs slowly down his neck, rubbing in circles, gently convincing the muscles to let go and relax.

“In shock?”

“You went through a traumatic experience, physically and emotionally. Your body was fundamentally altered. I’m not surprised it’s struggling to adjust.”

“I’m just weak from this damned tadpole.”

“No, anyone would have the same sort of problems,” I said. “You’re not weak.”

“Weaker than I was.”

“In body, perhaps,” I said, moving on to his shoulders. “Your spirit seems fine.”

“Why are you always so kind?” he asked. “You don’t have to sugarcoat things for me, you know. I can handle the truth.”

“Kind? For making observations?”

He sighed.

“Ah,” I said, a flash of understanding hitting me. “You’re used to being a disappointment, aren’t you? The Blade of Frontiers has quite the reputation. Any mortal would struggle to live up to some of the stories I’ve heard.”

“Hmm.”

I pressed lightly on a particularly recalcitrant knot, and he twitched. “Sorry, Wyll. I’ll try energy.”

“You can go harder. It’s fine.”

I shook my head, realising belatedly that he was facing away from me and couldn't see me. "No. Many healers do, but I think it can cause a lot of muscle stress and tension. Two things you do not need any more of. A bit like the difference between gently cracking an egg and throwing it at a tree. You get a similar result, but in one the egg's next to useless."

I closed my eyes, steadied my breathing, and focused on my centre. *Find your centre. Invite the light in. Work with the light.* The old mantra rose to my mind, and I shook my head. *Focus.* I inhaled, pulling in light with the air, sending it to my hands, exhaling the darkness within me, returning it to the universe. I repeated the exercise until I could see my hands glowing with energy.

"What in Toril are you doing back there?" Wyll asked, sounding more intrigued than irritated. "I thought you'd stopped, but I can feel you doing... something."

"Energy work," I said shortly, keeping my focus on my hands. I brought them together, left on top of my right, and laid my palm against the knot in Wyll's shoulder. I pushed light out of my hands, into his shoulder.

He gasped, then shuddered. "Oh, hells."

"Most people can't feel much except warmth," I told him. "You're getting more?"

"Quite a bit more," he said, his voice oddly strained. "I felt that all through me. Like your essence moved through me."

"Sorry," I said, going back to the massage. "I didn't think to warn you. I usually work on people without a touch of magic talent or ability. Are you alright?"

"Fine."

I frowned a little, but continued. If he wanted to be stoic, so be it. Finally, all the muscles were relaxed, and I couldn't find any more knots or hot spots when I felt over his skin.

"How does that feel?" I asked. "Better?"

"Worlds," he said. "Would you... umm..."

"Help you into a new shirt?" I guessed. "Not a problem."

He stood, a little awkwardly, and I eyed him, worried. Had I missed a problem further down? Then I saw very clear evidence of arousal, and bit my tongue. Damn. That was a pretty common initial reaction to energy work in practitioners. I hadn't thought to warn him, because I hadn't realised warlocks would be sensitive to such things. And now if I explained, he'd only be more embarrassed. Instead, I smiled, meeting his gaze, and turned away to the campfire, as if I hadn't noticed, as if the sight hadn't sent a thrill through me. *Get it together, I told myself. Professional behaviour! He's a patient.*

Newly attired, and clearly feeling better for it, Wyll joined the group for porridge and tea.

“How’s your neck?” I asked, ladling out a large bowl for myself. Energy work required extra fuel.

“Much better, thanks,” he said, face softening into a true smile for once. He moved his head around, showing off the new range of motion.

“Good. It’ll probably need a few more treatments. Don’t go all stoic on me, please.”

“Listen to him,” Gale added. “Healers get very grouchy if you disregard their advice.”

“Just what we don’t need,” Astarion muttered. “Another reason for our glorious leader to get uppity.”

I grinned at him. “Just for that, you’re on dishwashing duty today.”

“I was on your side! ... marginally.”

Too many goblins

We'd decided on a simple strategy to deal with the goblins – take out their leaders, and they should fall into disarray. Either wander off, or mill about helplessly for a while... at least until someone came in to fill the void. The trick was to get to the leaders without wading through hordes of goblins trying to kill us.

Sneaking down the rock wall went well. What didn't go so well was the goblin patrol that was in the wrong place at the wrong time – in other words, at the exact right time and place to run straight into us. The problem with an army with no discipline is that predictability is low.

“Oo the hells are you lot?” the squad leader asked, squinting suspiciously at us.

My illithid parasite squirmed, and I connected... with the goblin? What the hells was going on?

She was annoyed. Most of the army was in camp now, celebrating their burning of a tavern to the north. *Hmm – must check that out*. They were going to miss out on all the best drinking, just because the True Souls had ordered proper patrols. Ahh.

“Which True Souls are in camp?” I snapped out, trying my best to look tired, arrogant, and annoyed to be talking to such an insignificant worm.

“‘Ere, ‘oo are you to be askin’?” she asked.

“Ugh. A True Soul, obviously. Here to report, and check on how things are going on this side. Now. Which. True. Souls?”

“Priestess Gut, Ragzlin, and Minthara, True Soul, sir,” she said, grovelling. “Please, sir, I was just –”

“Doing your job, I know,” I snapped, rolling my eyes. “Come, people. You, continue your patrol.” We strode away into the camp.

“Did you just...” Gale started.

“Claim to be something I've never heard of? Yes. And now we're walking into the heart of the goblin camp to do the same thing. Questions?”

“Are you insane or a genius?”

“The former, I suspect. But come on. We're all living on borrowed time. Four of us attacking a camp of hundreds is ridiculous. But if we can convince them we're leaders of their

Absolute cult – we might be able to assassinate their leaders and walk out without anyone being the wiser.”

“Got to give the man credit,” Gale observed. “He has a point.”

“Ooh, a choice of suicidal missions! Or, and just an idea: we could leave the people in the grove to sort out their own issues and stop babysitting them,” pointed out Astarion.

“Come on, Astarion! Killing goblins, fresh air, a nice walk – what’s not to love?” Gale giped.

Much to my surprise, it actually worked. The goblins were clearly used to random bigwigs shoving their way inside the camp with little consideration or protocol. Gut and Minthara went down quietly, without alerting anyone. And then we hit a couple of snags.

Snag number one: a numb-witted human bard had wandered into the goblin camp to *ask them questions* and seemed quite perplexed that they’d immediately taken him prisoner. Frankly, even I was tempted to leave the twittering twerp in his cage to perform terrible improvised verse about horrible goblin battles.

Snag number two: there was a cave bear in the cells, and I had a funny feeling it was actually a druid. This one, I probably needed to rescue. Luckily, the prison area was nicely soundproofed, to stop the screaming interfering with anyone’s sleep, so a quick surprise attack on the guards and we were done. Except for the children we ended tying up and leaving in a cell.

“They’re *goblins*,” Wyll said. “You saw them tormenting that bear. They’re not going to grow up to be nice law-abiding citizens of Faerun, you know.”

I nodded and sighed. “I know you’re probably right. But the adults made a choice to be here, and to fight. They didn’t. They’re kids. Wyll – I can’t judge someone by their outsides, and those kids are too young to be judged by their insides yet. That’s it. They’ll be fine in there for a few hours; someone will find one of the leaders tomorrow morning when they sober up, and come down to check the place out.”

“They’ll be able to tell them exactly who did it,” he objected.

“And?”

Wyll scowled, but subsided.

“Ugh. Now we’re tucking in goblins for the night,” Astarion grumbled. “You know, I expected to be doing a lot more killing, and a lot less childcare.”

I placed my hands flat on the bars of the cave bear’s cell. It had been leaping at the door, trying to break it, during the fight – but now it just stood quietly. “Are you from the grove?” I asked.

“And now he’s going to be literally disarmed by a bear. Clever man. Why did we make him leader? Was it so he’d alert us to danger with his screams?” drawled Astarion.

“Maybe a smidge less snarky commentary,” Gale advised.

The cave bear exploded. “Told you so,” Astarion said.

A large, brown-haired man stood in the middle of the remains of the cave bear.

“That looked painful,” I said.

“You’re not easily rattled,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Nor are you easily confused by outward appearances, it seems. How did you know I was no ordinary bear?”

I started counting off reasons on my fingers. “You didn’t smell right – I mean no offence, but cave bears are usually quite rank at this point in the season. You didn’t act right – you were angry, but not confused or particularly afraid. You *looked* great – which means you didn’t look right, either. No mange, no weird lumps, no old injuries that hadn’t healed correctly. And... we knew there was a druid named Halsin here somewhere whose animal form was a bear, and I was hoping you were he.”

He laughed. “Ahh, you kept the pertinent detail until last! I like you. Yes, I am Halsin. And once you get a key from a guard and let me out, I will be most particularly in your debt.”

We let him out, and he joined us in a quick run through the remaining goblin leader and outside to freedom.

“I can’t believe you let those gobbo shits *live*,” Wyll seethed. He’d clearly been ruminating on it while we walked back to the camp, and getting more and more angry about my high-handed decision.

I looked at him with wide eyes. This vicious anger was a side to the legendary fighter I hadn’t seen before – and I didn’t like it. At all.

“Wyll, they were *innocents*,” I said. “You can’t... you can’t just go around slaughtering *children*.”

“Goblin children aren’t innocents,” he said, jaw outthrust. “They’re rotten, through and through.”

“Oh yeah? How about Moll? Should we kill her, since she’s clearly headed for a life of unrepentant crime?”

“That’s different!”

“Why?”

“Because goblins never change!”

“You sound like every person I spent my childhood trying to escape from.”

“You’re not a fucking goblin!”

“And you’re missing the fucking point!” I snapped the words out. Loudly.

He recoiled, looking shocked. Come to think of it, possibly no one in camp had heard me lose my temper before.

“You know what happened before I was born? Ironhand gnomes helped Sarevok try to take over the city. He was crushed. *They* were crushed. And from then on, gnomes were... scum. All of us were painted with the same traitorous brush. I couldn’t hold my head high – gods, I could barely let myself be seen on the streets. I’d be spat on. Abused. Hit. Stolen from. Because *we were all the same* and *we were no good* .”

Wyll’s eye was wide.

“Strangers treated me like nothing. *Less* than nothing. Because of what I was. What I am,” I yelled at him, stalking into his personal space. “Dammit, Wyll, *I was a child too!* It wasn’t acceptable to do it to me, and it wasn’t acceptable for you to do it to those children, no matter what terrible lessons they’ve learnt in life. They’ve been brutalised, and *you wanted to brutalise them more* . What in the hells is wrong with you?”

He stepped backwards, but stayed silent.

“I knew a goblin,” I said, quieter. “He was part of the monastery when I joined. He’d been there forever. Just... wandered in out of the forest one day and never left. I don’t think he ever took orders. He just gardened and potted around doing odd jobs. But... he was nothing like those goblins we just faced. *Nothing* . He chose a different path. I’ve seen it myself; people often show surprising depth of character, if you give them a chance to display it.”

Wyll’s mouth twisted.

“Hells, you’re making me feel like a monster,” he muttered.

“Good! Because if our deeds are monstrous, someone needs to shove it in our faces until we realise what we’re becoming. And what you were saying? What you wanted to do? That was monstrous. So if you feel like a monster because someone *stopped* you from doing it, by all the hellbeasts, **think how you’d feel once you realised what you’d done.**”

He huffed.

I was angry still, and I wanted badly to hit something. But... I’d committed to leading this ragtag bunch, so I’d better show some leadership instead.

“You’re better than this,” I said. “I know you are. *You* know you are. That’s why you’re reacting so strongly to being challenged on it. But please think about it and learn from it. I don’t want to see you twisted by hate.”

Wyll turned and strode into the forest.

I walked in the opposite direction for a few minutes, then took a long, deep breath, centred myself, and started punching a tree.

“Yikes,” Shadowheart said, her voice dry. “That poor tree really shouldn’t get on your bad side.”

I stopped, sweat pouring down my face, and turned to her. “Hi. Need something?”

“No, I just heard you yelling at Wyll and thought you might want to talk.”

“I don’t know that there’s much to talk about. I think everyone heard most of what I wanted to say.”

“Did they ever! I’ve got to admit, I’m impressed. I knew there was a strong will under that soft exterior, but the way you ripped him to shreds was quite sexy.”

“Ha! I wasn’t exactly trying for sexy.”

“Regardless,” she said. “I am curious, though. You’ve never shouted at anyone else. Is it because he wanted to do something morally bad, or because he challenged your leadership?”

I sat down, back to the tree I’d been hitting, and took off my gloves to examine my hands. They’d need some healing if I was going to fight the next day. “A bit of both, I suppose,” I said, thoughtful. “It’s a complex question. He wanted to do something I thought was very bad, that couldn’t be remedied once done, and he argued against my decision multiple times. If all three hadn’t been true, I probably wouldn’t have seen a need to challenge him about it. And the yelling? That was purely personal reaction mixed in. Not very good leadership at all, I fear.”

“Are you serious? You gave the Blade of Frontiers a well-deserved shove off his self-satisfied moral high ground. Not that I wouldn’t have killed the children in a heartbeat. But I’m content enough to let you be all soft and gooey and save the kiddies if it gets us closer to where we need to be.”

“So did you follow me out here to make sure I was OK, or to check whether there would be yelling in your near future too?”

“Why can’t two things be true at once?”

A pact of their own

“You were right, you know,” Wyll said.

“Mmm?” I was cooking breakfast – sausages and eggs, a rare treat out here in the forest, but the goblin camp had reprovisioned us nicely. Except for the... less appealing meat options. Ick. These sausages had at least clearly been raided from someone else – they were stamped with a mark that looked like the Baldur’s Gate crest. Not dwarf meat, then. Probably.

“I was behaving appallingly, and you were right to tell me so. At length,” he said.

I looked up and met his eyes. “Thank you. I know it’s not easy to admit.”

He sat down next to the fire. “And I’m sorry. For reminding you of how things were. It sounded... bad.”

I nodded and turned a sausage. “I certainly don’t miss that time in my life.”

“Weren’t you heading back to Baldur’s Gate when you were picked up, though?”

“Mmm. I wanted to start a little healing booth. Mind, body, soul. In the Heapside, probably.”

“Why the Heapside?”

““Go where need is greatest; help where the helpers are few.””

“That sounds like a quote.”

“From another life.”

“Anyway. Thank you for bringing me to my senses. Honestly, I’m surprised you didn’t kick me out on the spot.”

“There’s always another dawn. Another chance to prove ourselves better than we were yesterday,” I said, shrugging. “You didn’t do anything unforgivable. And here you are, mending bridges.”

“Hmm. I like that idea.”

“I realise this might be a little out of the shadows, but – can I ask a favour?” I asked.

Wyll raised an eyebrow. “A favour? You’re right, this is a bit of a surprise. But of course.”

“This sort of quest we’re on. It lends itself to a lot of... moral grey areas,” I said slowly. “I’ve been thinking that it’s going to be very easy for me to lose my path at some point too.”

Wyll tilted his head. “You don’t exactly seem the sort,” he observed.

“I don’t exactly seem the sort to lose my temper and damn near come to blows with a group member, either, do I?” I said, a wry twist to my mouth. “My reaction to this shook me, and it... worried me. I didn’t realise I had that sort of anger still stored away inside.”

“Hmm. So what’s the favour?”

“Would you do the same for me?” I asked. “Just... if you see me about to do something utterly reprehensible, and there’s time to talk about it, will you stop me?”

“You’re putting your honour in my hands?”

“Mmm. I hadn’t thought of it like that, but I suppose it’s sort of right,” I said, thoughtful. “I don’t want leadership to feel split. I don’t want you questioning my every decision. But... of this group so far, there isn’t anyone I’d trust more to turn me aside if I start to feed the darkness inside me.”

“You have no idea how much your trust means to me,” he said, eyes on the fire. “Especially after my behaviour yesterday. You’ve hardly known me long. And you’ve stopped me from murdering innocents twice now. That can hardly inspire confidence.”

I took the sausages off the fire and moved them onto a plate with two sticks, held between my fingers. I slid the mess of eggs onto another plate.

“You might be surprised,” I said, thoughtful. “I wouldn’t have expected it, the way you describe it. But... I saw you realise what could happen to you if you spared Karlach. You thought saving her would be your instant, eternal damnation – and as soon as you decided it was the right thing to do, you had no hesitation. Then you took your punishment without trying to curry favour by killing her after the fact.”

He snorted.

“And when I ripped into you about the goblin children... you listened. I don’t blame you for not enjoying the experience, especially given my volatility – but most would have laid me out with a few punches, not taken it and come back to apologise.” I thought back to just how confrontational I’d been. “Honestly, if you’d decked me, I’d be annoyed, but understanding.”

“If only I’d known that yesterday,” he muttered, and I laughed.

“You know – if you’d been someone else, and you hadn’t been yelling at me in camp, I probably wouldn’t have challenged you at all. I know we’re just a bunch of misfits brought together by circumstance. Astarion would have happily killed those children without a thought, but he’s agreed not to feed on innocents. That, and me saying otherwise – that’s all that kept them safe. I suppose I expect more from a famed hero, though. I’m not sure if that’s fair or not.”

“Trust me, I’m well used to being held to high standards,” he said, smiling a little. Then the smile twisted. “And being found wanting, too.”

“I find *that* hard to believe,” I said, nudging him gently with my shoulder. “Sure, you’ve had a rough start with the group. Tried to kill one of us, left out important information, got turned into a devil, tried to kill some children. But hey, you’re the newest member, bar Karlach. You didn’t get to see Astarion try to kill me on meeting, or sucking my blood in the middle of the night. Or Gale getting stuck in a rock and needing rescue, then admitting he could explode any second. Or Shadowheart being appallingly cagey about being a secret Shar worshipper and trying to kill Lae’zel. Or Lae’zel wanting to kill all of us because she thought we were transforming. In fact, come to think of it, only the devil thing makes you at all unique, and even there Karlach’s more impressive, what with the flames.”

“So I’m... the boring one. The boring, homicidal, loose-with-the-truth, warlock devil one.”

I nodded. “Sure are.”

He chuckled. “How does that make me feel better?”

I shrugged. “Mysteries of the gods.”

“I need some herbs,” I told the group.

“Ugh. Can’t we just buy them, like normal people?” Astarion grumbled.

“And pay with what?” Shadowheart asked. “Our bodies?”

Astarion looked her up and down, speculative. Shadowheart looked him up and down, similarly. He sneered at her, then laughed. “Point taken, I suppose. Alright, let’s go frolic in a meadow somewhere and pick flowers or whatever you alchemists do. Lead on.”

We walked south and west, downhill, into an area that looked like it might feature a swamp or two. Tough going, and home to some nasty surprises like redhats, but swamps and wetlands were also great places to find rarer healing herbs and funguses. The moist environment seemed to breed disease and cures both.

Straight away, I started finding herbs to pick. The others tried to help, but I waved them away. “If you take too much, the plant won’t survive to seed and propagate,” I said. “Better you just enjoy the day.”

Astarion tilted his head. “Does anyone else hear arguing? Let’s walk *away* from the angry shouty people for once.”

I headed in the direction he indicated the noise was coming from, and he sighed. “I knew I shouldn’t have said anything. Never have I met someone more fond of sticking our noses in everyone else’s business.”

Two men were arguing with a woman I recognised from the druid grove. They wanted to know where their sister was; she was sweetly and a smidge dementedly confused. My eyes found Astarion’s, and I raised an eyebrow. He rolled his eyes, but grimaced. Something was off here, and I didn’t think it was with the men.

Sure enough, when I didn't immediately fold, Auntie Ethel vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Hag,” Shadowheart said, voice grim. “You mean the druids were harbouring a hag in their grove, all unknowing?”

“Either that, or she wandered off into the swamp and the hag stole her face,” Astarion pointed out. It might have been a helpful point, but I really wished he hadn't given me that mental picture.

“Regardless,” Wyll said, “it sounds as though we have a hag to take down.”

“Oh, for the love of...” Astarion spluttered. “Can't we go one blissful day without some wretch pulling us into their so-sad little lives to fix all their stupid mistakes?”

“No, Astarion,” Shadowheart spoke slowly, like she was talking to a child struggling to grasp a simple concept. “We're travelling with hero types. It's what they do. It's annoying, but they just won't do the expedient thing when they can do the complex thing that gives them happy feelings. We can't even get that mad at them, because we know full well they'd go haring off on exactly this sort of quest for us too.”

“Can't get mad?” Astarion muttered. “Just watch me.”

The hag was... unimpressed to be tracked to her lair, and still less impressed to be followed down to the cave underneath, which seemed to be her source of power. There we found the woman, Mayrina, in a wicker cage suspended over a deep chasm... and multiple hags.

“Blast each in turn,” Wyll yelled. “The fakes will burst; the real one won't.”

I took his advice. Astarion, on the other hand, paused to cast Mage Hand first, then attacked. I lost track of who was doing what until the cage lowered and Mayrina stumbled out, falling to the cave floor in tears. I'd have rathered she ran away from the fight, but... at least she was close to the ground.

We mopped up the fake and real hags, then turned to the distraught Mayrina.

“You DICKHEADS!” she yelled. “What have you done? Why did you have to come here? Why couldn't you leave well enough alone?”

“Ahh, it's the gratitude that makes it *all* worthwhile,” Astarion said.

“I... don't understand. Tell me what we've done,” I said, utterly confused.

“You think I needed *saving*? I was fine. I had a plan. My husband Connor – gods, she was going to give him back to me. And we were so close. The baby would have been born soon, and then...”

I closed my eyes as I joined the puzzle pieces into one very unattractive picture.

“You were going to sell your baby to the hag,” I said. I was distantly surprised that it came out so evenly.

“Oh, it's alright for the likes of you to judge, isn't it? Bet *you've* got more than two coins to rub together in those fancy clothes of yours. Connor and me? We didn't. And now Connor's dead and without him, his baby's going to starve anyway. You wouldn't know the first thing about what that's like.”

“More than you might think. Besides – she's a hag! It's your baby! What the hells were you *thinking*?”

“I was *thinking* the hag could give her a good home, that's what. She said she'd teach them magic. Magic! You have any idea how valuable that is?”

“You can't trust a hag, you twittering twerp! She'd brutalise a child! Just like she was brutalising you! You know what we found out there? The corpses of your brothers – they were looking for you. And now they're dead!” I shouted.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and Wyll's presence, warm and reassuring, beside me.

“I'm not sure Mayrina knows how hags reproduce,” he said.

“What?” Mayrina asked, sounding utterly nonplussed.

“They swallow a mortal child,” Wyll said gently. “Keep it inside them for weeks. The child comes out... much changed. And not for the good. Their time inside... they're awake, aware. And it drives them insane. Which only better suits them for their new form.”

She stared at Wyll.

“You can't be serious,” she said.

“Deadly, I'm afraid.”

“But she said she'd teach them magic!”

“Because they'd be a hag. They'd be a magical creature, with inherent magic of their own. She didn't lie as such. She just left out an extensive portion of the truth.”

“Oh *gods* .”

I took a slow, deliberate breath. “You didn't know?”

She shook her head.

“Gods. Please, be more careful making deals in future. Please. I'm sorry about your brothers. They were so worried about you.”

She broke down, then. We left her with a wand we found in the hag's lair, which she'd noted was intended for use in resurrecting Connor, and went back to camp.

In camp, Gale started cooking, and I walked out into the forest to brood. Wyll followed me.

“Hells, is she going to bring him back and have a zombie following her about for the rest of her life?” Wyll asked. “That seems almost a worse fate than being a single mother out here in the wilds.”

I shuddered. “It’s not a nice thought either way, is it? I feel like I mangled that girl’s life even more than she managed to do by herself.”

“We can’t win them all.”

“But we need to do better. *I* need to do better. Gods, I was about to savage her for sacrificing her baby. After all my posturing and yelling at you. Shit,” I said, sinking down onto a fallen log and wiping my face. “You must think me such an appalling hypocrite.”

Wyll sat down next to me and put a tentative hand over mine. “You asked me to step in if I thought you were doing the wrong thing,” he said. “That hardly feels hypocritical. In fact, when I thought about it, I wondered if it was your way of keeping me honest.”

I frowned, confused.

“Because,” he clarified. “If I’m busy looking out for you feeding your dark side... am I likely to feed my own in the process?”

“Hmm. You’re right; that would have been smart.”

“Ha!”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve been remarkably gracious.”

He shrugged. “You offered me support when my world caved in. You shored me up when my moral fibre weakened. I’m... not one to take such things lightly. If you have need of my blade, simply ask – it’s yours.”

“To be honest, this...” I waved a hand around at us and the surrounding forest, “seems more valuable than even your legendary skills, Wyll. I get so caught up in being the leader sometimes, I forget that I’m a mortal who needs help and comfort, too.”

Wyll’s eye softened. “I don’t know much about such things,” he said. “My expertise lies in weapons and arcane spells. And devils, truth be told. But... hells, if you need a hand on yours, just ask.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Romancing the Blade

Chapter Summary

The tieflings are partying at camp, celebrating their freedom to travel onwards to Baldur's Gate.

Dash has some offers of companionship, but his thoughts turn to someone who hasn't offered... and seems oddly absent.

After taking out the goblin leaders, we took the good news back to the druid grove where I'd first met Wyll.

"You just... walked into their camp. And killed their three top people?" Zevlor seemed just a little stunned. He turned to Wyll. Understandable. Me, he'd known for a couple of weeks. Wyll, he'd known a lot longer. If Wyll said it was true, then maybe they were really safe from the goblin threat – at least for now.

"We really did," Wyll confirmed. "Dash was amazing. Just stuck his nose in the air, told them all he was a True Soul, and to get on with their jobs in the name of the Absolute. And they did."

"Well, thank all the hells for goblins not being the sharpest axes in the woodpile, eh? We have some breathing room to get out of here and through to Baldur's Gate now. This calls for a celebration. And you four will be the guests of honour."

Somehow, the celebration party ended up being at our campsite, with druids and tieflings alike drinking and eating with happy abandon. While it was nice to see people happy, it also felt odd to have people thanking *me* for the survival of the druid grove – and the tieflings. Whenever I pointed out that it was a team effort, people shrugged it off.

"Who cares?" asked Astarion, when I expressed my frustration to him. "Darling, we all know you appreciate our efforts. They know you didn't do all this alone. But people are simple creatures. They want a single hero to lionise and toast to. A group just confuses things."

"So I'm... like a figurehead?"

"Exactly! An adorable figurehead of heroic bravery and stupidity in the face of overwhelming odds!"

"Hmmmph."

"Stop sulking and get out there and have some fun, already! This celebration is all about you! Enjoy it, for gods' sakes. Unless of course you'd like to celebrate a bit more... privately?"

Astarion raised an eyebrow enquiringly, looking me up and down boldly. And while usually I'd happily go off with a happy-go-lucky adventurer like Astarion, certain that in the morning he'd ask nothing more than perhaps a breakfast neck nibble... my thoughts turned to a different companion.

"A very attractive offer, Astarion, but... I think I must decline," I said. I winced internally at the flash of hurt feelings on his face – this handsome beast was *not* used to being turned down. More used to being chased obsessively, I suspected.

"Well, we can't all have excellent taste," he said dismissively. "Off you go. I'm sure there are lots of people looking to celebrate with you. And me, for that matter!" He slid away into the darkness.

I sighed, and walked down to the beach. There weren't many torches down here, or musicians, so people had mostly congregated elsewhere. Here it was relatively quiet and dark, with... hmm. Just a single silhouette in the night, walking down the slope towards the water.

"Dash? Why aren't you partying up a storm? You've definitely earned a chance to celebrate," Wyll said.

"I needed a bit of quiet," I said. "It was all a bit... overwhelming."

"Oh. Well, I'll leave you to your... your thoughts."

"I'd like your company, if you feel like staying," I said, quietly. "Why aren't you up there enjoying being a hero?"

"Look at me," he said, spreading his arms theatrically to invite a look. "I'm a devil. Red skin. Forked tongue. *Horns*. How can anyone have fun with me anywhere nearby?"

"I don't know," I said, looking him up and down. I was trying for a combination of bold and kind, but I couldn't tell how well it was coming across. "I always find I have more fun when you're nearby."

"You're kind to say so, but a devil is deeply unsettling – to everyone."

"Hey," I said, reaching out to touch his hand, inviting him to put his hand in mine. "You don't unsettle me. You know that, right?"

Wyll nodded and took my hand, squeezing it gently.

"You have such a large heart," he said. "Whenever I feel untouchable, you reach out to me. That means more to me than you could ever imagine."

"Mmm. You might be surprised."

"So why aren't *you* enjoying your own party?" he asked.

I sighed. “They still have so much to face,” I said. “I know that this is worth celebrating, but – we have so far to go. Those tieflings could die on the way to Baldur’s Gate. We could die on the way to the Towers. Baldur’s Gate itself is under threat. It’s a mammoth task ahead of us. I needed a moment to come to terms with it before celebrating this small win. Not that it isn’t wonderful and worth celebrating. But...”

“Mmm. Rather dwarfed by the challenges that lie ahead of us. And the odds of success.”

“Exactly. I felt like being morose for a few minutes.”

We stood in silence, looking out over the water.

“That’s not the only reason I came down here, though, in honesty,” I confessed.

“Oh?” he said, looking down at me with an arch smile. “What possible other reason could you have for coming out to this remote, dark, lonely spot?”

“You can’t guess?” I said, smiling back. It was nice to hear the flirty tone in his voice. Maybe I hadn’t imagined the sparks between us.

“Let me think. Perhaps you’re really Volo disguised, here to pump me for stories of fighting on the frontiers. Monsters and devils and rapiers! You’ve got to admit, it almost writes itself. Such a cruel disguise, Volo. My heart was pounding to think that Dash was looking for me.”

Mmm. I hadn’t imagined the sparks.

“I saw a very attractive man come down here, and thought I’d prefer his company to that of all the others in the camp.”

“Oh dear. All our talking has probably scared him off by now. You should go hunt him down before it’s too late, and you miss your chance!”

I laughed and leant against him, feeling oddly companionable amidst the flirting. “I’m right where I want to be,” I said, suddenly serious, looking up at him.

The flirtatiousness dropped away, and he smiled, sweet and happy for a second. Then shadows slowly drew back over his eyes. “An honour, but one I hardly feel I’ve earned,” he said. “I feel... powerless with this thing in my head. Useless. You have the Blade of Frontiers, but his claws and teeth have been taken.”

I shook my head. “I’d always honour you as the Blade,” I said. “But that has very little to do with how I feel about you. You don’t have to be the Blade of Frontiers for me.”

“But that’s – hmm. How you feel?”

“Mmm. I followed a kind, thoughtful, exceptionally handsome man out onto a beach to talk about his... sword skills.”

Wyll burst into laughter. “Well, I asked for that one, didn’t I?” He took a long breath and slowly sobered. “Hells, you know how to brighten a dark mood. Dash – I’ve grown fond of

you. Are you... fond of me, or are you looking for a celebration tussle?"

I chuckled. "I hope you take this the way I intend it, Wyll, but – if I were seeking a simple roll in the grass with any willing body, I'd already be rolling."

"Ha! No shortage of offers?"

"Ouch. Short jokes."

He looked down at me, then, reassured by my smile, laughed.

"Thank you for sharing this moment with me," he said. "It's bittersweet, but I sometimes think the best moments are. It makes them feel more – immediate. But you've also taken a sad, lonely night and made it intensely memorable. I owe you for that."

I looked up at him and opened my mouth to reply, and froze. Words stuck in my throat.

"What is it?" he asked, dropping to his knees in front of me, eyes on mine.

I reached out and traced a finger, ever so lightly, down the side of his face. He closed his eyes, a slight shiver running through his body.

"I was just thinking," I said, my voice hoarse, "how much I wanted to kiss you."

Wyll's eyes opened, and he stared at me in something close to shock. Then he leaned forward in clear invitation. "Far be it from me to refuse the hero of the grove..." he said, smiling.

I paused. "Wyll..."

He drew back, looking as though I'd slapped him.

"I want to kiss you if you want to kiss *me*. Not the hero of the grove. Not because you feel obliged. Only... if you want to?" I closed my eyes, frustrated that I was somehow making a hash out of this when he had only made a lighthearted joke. But somehow it was very important to me that he come to me wholeheartedly, not just following a whim. I hoped he somehow understood that from my halting words.

His lips touching mine answered that hope, as his arms slid around my shoulders. They felt gentle, warm, slightly dry, but soft. Then a lick of heat as his lips parted and his forked tongue touched my lips. I gasped at the unusual sensation, and Wyll took it as an invitation to slip his tongue into my mouth, slowly caressing. My mouth filled with heat, and it travelled straight down my spine to waken burning desire all through me.

Wyll drew away, and gazed into my eyes.

"Now that," he murmured, "Was a far better celebration than any I could have devised up there."

"Mmm. We *could* combine the two, if you like. You could join me in my bedroll," I said. Wyll didn't strike me as a shorty-chaser, though, so I suspected the answer was going to be

no. When would I learn?

“I’d... like to do this the old-fashioned way,” Wyll said, looking a little embarrassed. I probably looked confused. “Like the old stories,” he explained. “The courtship. The romance. The poetry. The falling in love. Betrothal and marriage.”

I think I froze as I tried to process what I was hearing. Was Wyll telling me he’d like to maybe marry *me* someday? What?

“But I understand if you’re not interested in...” Wyll continued, turning away. I realised that my shock could be taken entirely differently – as affront that he’d consider marriage to a devil an acceptable idea for me. I needed to rescue this and show him that I didn’t mean anything of the sort... but I had the feeling words were only going to spoil things further.

“May I kiss you again?” I asked.

This kiss wasn’t a roaring bonfire of attraction; more a warm hearthfire.

“I’m looking forward to romancing you, Wyll,” I said, hand on his cheek.

“Oh...” he said, standing and ducking his head. “Umm... mmm. I...” he shook himself. “I wasn’t expecting – you’ve taken away all my composure.”

I grinned. I’d never seen him utterly flustered, and it was oddly adorable. “I’d better go back,” I said. “Otherwise I’ll just keep asking you for kisses... and I think I want to remember you like this.”

“Hey, soldier,” Karlach said. “What’s up?”

“Got time to talk?” I asked, handing over a pint of beer.

She grinned. “For you? For beer? Always.”

“I need some help understanding something,” I said. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but I couldn’t think of anyone better situated to explain.”

She nodded.

“I thought Wyll was being a little melodramatic about the tieflings and their response to his transformation, but I watched them, and he’s right – they’re deeply uncomfortable even talking about him. I don’t grasp why. He just looks more like them now, surely? Like you?”

“Ahh,” she said. “That is a complicated question. Umm... hmm. Lemme think. OK, imagine you’re walking into a party, right? And one of the guests of honour is an Ironhand who served Sarevok.”

I frowned as I tried to connect this back to Wyll and the tieflings.

“The tieflings got kicked out of Elturel because the rest of the citizens blamed them for the whole Avernus debacle, right?” Karlach said. “Because they’re clearly touched by the infernal, hence they must be to blame for the city getting sucked into the hells.”

I nodded. “Alright. With you so far.”

“But they did *nothing wrong*. Their ancestors might have had dealings with the infernal, but most of them lived perfectly normal lives. Those tieflings aren’t warlocks or devil worshippers. They’re just... people.”

I was starting to grasp the parallels. “So you’re saying it’s a bit like me dealing with the fallout from the deep gnomes and Sarevok.”

“And Wyll is someone who *did* have dealings with devils. He’s been branded as someone who had an infernal pact and broke faith into the bargain. He’s like... a symbol of everything they’re accused of being but innocent of.”

“He’s the Ironhand gnome,” I said, nodding. “I think I get it. Thank you.”

“For what it’s worth, they’re almost as uncomfortable around me,” she said, looking slightly downcast. “*The stink of Avernus* ... Wyll wasn’t being all metaphorical, you know. They smell it on me. It doesn’t make them happy.”

“I’d offer a hug, if you wouldn’t scorch my skin off,” I said, sighing.

“Man, I’d be so up for that,” she said. “Let’s hope Dammon comes through with the goods in Baldur’s Gate. I want to touch people again.”

Asking too much

The next night, Wyll and I reclined by the campfire, watching the stars. Everyone else had retired to their bedrolls – it had been a tough day. But neither of us seemed in the mood for sleep.

“You seem very happy to take things slowly,” Wyll said out of the blue. “But you also invited me into your bedroll at the first opportunity. I – am confused.”

I stared thoughtfully up at the stars. “Well,” I said, “I found you very attractive. I’d have happily engaged in – just the physical act of love – with you, you know. And maybe it would grow into something more, and maybe it wouldn’t.”

“But I pushed you into something different.”

I frowned. “I don’t quite see it that way.”

He rolled to face me. “Tell me.”

“You... told me what you wanted from a courtship. Wait. Hang on. Can I show you something? Because I want to ask you something, and this all fits in together.”

Wyll’s eyes narrowed in curiosity.

I sat up and pulled a stick from the kindling pile. I drew three circles in the dirt. Two on the bottom; one on top. “Think of these like types of bond,” I said. “Like friends or acquaintances or lovers. This one is physical,” I said, pointing with the stick to one of the bottom ones. “Touch, lovemaking, hugging, kissing. Holding hands. All physical manifestations of a bond.”

Wyll nodded slowly. “Like you offered me. And I rejected, I suppose. Is this... lore from your order?”

I nodded and continued. “This one is emotional,” I said, pointing to the other lower circle. “Romance. A look across a crowded room. A poem. A flower. A declaration of feelings. Offering support in a difficult time.”

“What I offered you, I suppose. And... the third?”

“Mental,” I said, pointing to the top one. “Honesty and truth. Sharing thoughts. Exploring motivations. Giving opinions. Discussing childhood pain and joy. Delving deep to share the reaches of the mind.”

“Hmm.”

“I offered a physical bond because...” I sighed. “I didn’t expect you to want anything else. There’s the truth of it. To be honest, I didn’t expect you to want that, either. I thought you

kissed me because I was being lauded as the hero of the hour and everything went to your head.”

Wyll drew away, his mouth turning down into an offended frown.

“I’m sorry, that was a nasty way to explain my own – ha! – shortcomings. I... I didn’t think that about *you*. I thought that about *me*.”

His face smoothed back out. “Forgiven, I suppose.”

“What I wanted to say – before I insulted you – was that... you told me what you wanted from a life bond. I didn’t tell you what *I* wanted.”

“Oh.”

I drew a large circle around the three circles. “I want all of these. I want someone that I can romance; someone who’ll romance me, too. I want to be able to share my deepest thoughts and find a compassionate, thoughtful listener who desires to understand me better. I want touch, and kisses, and to be held and to hold.”

Wyll was silent for a few minutes, and my heart sank.

“You’re saying you want more than what I asked for,” he said slowly.

“Not... in the sense of demanding your presence in my bedroll,” I clarified. I reached out my hand, and he took it almost absent-mindedly. “This,” I said, lifting his hand, “means the world to me too.”

“I thought I was asking the world, only to discover there are worlds far greater that you’re willing to offer, if I only dare to reach out for them,” he said, shaking his head. “I need to think about this – I feel in turmoil, and I don’t understand why.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. Had I exploded our fledgling romance before it had a chance to really begin? But just as Wyll had been willing to turn down a single encounter in hopes of something greater... I supposed I was willing to turn down a passion-filled but ultimately empty bond in striving for my ideal.

“Can I ask a favour, though?” I asked, my voice annoyingly unsteady. What was the point of all that monastic training if I still couldn’t keep an iron self-control?

Wyll nodded. “Of course.”

“Come back and talk to me when you’ve finished thinking. Don’t just...”

“Let you swing in the wind? Alright. You have my word.”

He walked away into the night, and I crawled into my bedroll, heart heavy.

With the goblins handled – for now, at least – and the tieflings on their way to Baldur’s Gate, we could take a breath and focus on the next part of our own journey.

“Aradin’s group was exploring an old temple,” Halsin explained. “There was supposed to be a way into the Underdark from it.”

“Hmm. That temple where we met Withers?” Shadowheart asked. “Then why were you all in the goblin camp?”

“Near the grove?” Halsin asked. “No. According to his sources, there was an entrance to it somewhere in the goblin camp.”

“Seems we have an overabundance of old, ruined temples,” Gale observed.

“Not an uncommon problem,” Wyll said. “So. Back to the goblin camp?”

That sparked a memory.

“We could,” I said, thoughtful. “But – does anyone else remember the goblins talking about hitting a tavern to the north-west? That that was why they were celebrating?”

“You think they might need help?”

“Probably too late for that. But it might be worth checking out, just in case there are any clues to what this Absolute cult is up to,” I said. “And... we can circle back to the goblin camp. Shouldn’t add much time to our journey.”

“Maybe the goblins left some decent wine,” Astarion pointed out. “Gods know they have all the taste of a rotten shoe.”

“So we head to the north-west and see if we can pick up anything?” I asked, and got either nods or shrugs in reply.

That night, the camp seemed flat and uninviting. Gale cooked a stew from meat that Astarion took down – *Why waste the meat, when all I need is the blood?* – and I ate, but barely tasted it. Now that we were sitting still again, I had time for my thoughts to return to Wyll. To that arousing kiss on the beach. To his flustered face when I told him I wanted to romance him. But mostly, to the fact that he still seemed friendly, but was most definitely avoiding time alone with me.

“Hey,” Shadowheart said, poking me in the arm. “You seem lost in thought tonight.”

“Mmm. That I am.”

“Would you like some company? I have a few bottles of wine that I’ve been hiding from Astarion. Join me after the rest go to sleep?”

Well, I could definitely do with some distraction. “Thanks. I’d like that.”

I finished my meal and took the empty bowl over the washing area. Then, at a loss for anything else to do for a time, I sat back down by the fire.

“I... need help,” Gale said, sitting down next to me. “I’m sorry to be a burden, but...”

Well. It seemed like distraction was going to be abundant tonight. I sent a quiet thanks out into the universe.

I touched his arm. “Gale. You’re a valued team member. You’re not a burden.”

He exhaled a gust of air, tears glistening in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t think anyone has ever said that to me before.”

I looked up at him and frowned. “Gale – you look in desperate need of a hug.”

“Well, actually, I happen to be in desperate need of another magical item.”

Ahh. “Easy fixed. I set up a Gale box over there.” I pointed across the campsite. “Things we don’t need that might be useful to you. I thought it might be easier on you than feeling like you had to ask every time.”

“I have been feeling a little like a charity case,” he confessed. “That was thoughtful. Thank you.”

“Feed your orb, Gale. Then we can talk.”

He walked over to the box I’d indicated, and pulled out a pair of boots. He hugged them to his chest, and... the best I can describe it is that they shimmered and swirled into his chest, as the tattoo on it glowed brightly.

I patted the log next to me, and he came back to sit next to me. “You don’t look as better as you usually do,” I said.

“That’s true. It feels... hungry... even now. I don’t know what’s wrong. Maybe entropy is catching up with me. Perhaps I will need more and more power to feed it, until it’s too powerful for me to contain.”

“Oh, Gale,” I said, quiet.

“I won’t put you all at risk, I promise,” he said, sober. “I’ll go somewhere utterly isolated. The depths of the Underdark, perhaps. I’ll wait my end there alone, if I must, rather than endanger you all.”

“Gale... I don’t want you to explode because I *like* you. Not because you might take everyone with you.” I thought about him going deep into the Underdark to die alone in a blaze of unclean magic, and my eyes filled with tears. “Gods, Gale, how can you talk so calmly about dying alone? I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, let alone a friend.”

“A friend?” he asked. “You’d think of me as a friend?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling at him. “But Gale, I’m worried. This orb behaviour – it doesn’t sound good. Is there anyone we can talk to?”

“Well. Perhaps Elminster, if we could find him. But he could be anywhere. He probably wouldn’t speak to me anyway.”

“We’ll find something,” I said.

“I wish I could share your optimistic view,” Gale said, staring into the fire. “Well. Might I take you up on that offer of a hug? I find myself in dire need of comfort tonight.”

I knelt on the log to get a bit of height and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. After a moment, he buried his face in my shoulder, arms clutching my waist, and shuddered. I rested my cheek on his hair and tried to simply be there, a warm, comforting presence for him.

“Thank you so much,” he eventually said, raising his head. “It’s... been a long time since I’ve felt a mortal touch. I...” he trailed off.

“The offer’s always there,” I said, drawing away a bit, but keeping hands on his shoulders. “Gale, don’t shut yourself off from people who care about you. We need you; but you need us, too. Let us be here for you when your heart is hurting.”

He smiled a little. “Thank you, Dash. I’ll... keep that in mind. Perhaps I do retreat to my magic a little too often, rather than seeking out my fellow mortals.”

I nodded, and he walked away to his bedroll. Right. One problem dealt with – for tonight, at least. One problem I was very carefully ignoring for now. Next – see what Shadowheart wanted.

I found Shadowheart drinking a cup of wine up on the cliffs.

“I wasn’t sure you’d make it,” she said. “I know I said after everyone went to sleep, but...”

“Gale’s orb is playing up,” I said. “I needed to talk to him about it.”

“Mmm. I’ve noticed you do a lot of that. Talking with people, I mean.”

I nodded, thoughtful. “I suppose I do. It’s one of the tenets of leadership, to me. Making sure everyone is coping well enough with the challenges that our life is throwing at us.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Well, I suppose there are altruistic and practical reasons,” I said, thinking as I spoke. “I could simply say it’s a responsibility of leadership to care for and serve those I lead, but that’s not much of an explanation, is it?”

“Quite a terrible one, in fact.”

“Try this, then. If people are cared for, and helped through their distress or heartaches when they occur, they’re less likely to be distracted in a fight. They’re more likely to be loyal to the group as a whole. And,” I added, “less prone to fly off the handle and do something ridiculous in the heat of the moment because it sparked a terrible memory.”

“Hmm. A problem I might not suffer as much.”

“True.”

“That does make sense, though,” she said, sounding thoughtful. “It’s very different to the ways I’m used to, though. I don’t quite understand your methods of leadership.”

“Is there anything in particular that bothers you?”

“No, you’re generally quite easy to get along with, you know. Which is different to how I’m used to things working, that’s for sure. In my experience, leaders tell you what to do, and you obey, or you suffer.”

“The harsh approach.”

“Appropriate for Shar, though.”

“Mmm.”

“So... you’re with Wyll, now?”

I shrugged. “Honestly? I’m not sure. I don’t think so.”

“What happened?”

“I asked too much.”

“Hmm. You don’t seem the demanding type. In fact, I find you refreshingly nonjudgmental.”

I glanced over at her. “Are you interested in this, or just making idle conversation?”

“I’m intrigued. Did you ask our hero for a threesome?” she winced and massaged the back of her hand.

I laughed and drained my cup. “No, I – hmm. I can’t explain without drawing.”

“Oh. I assure you, I’m quite familiar with the... drawings.”

“Wrong sort of drawings,” I said, chuckling still. “Here...” I found a stick and showed her the four circles of bonding.

“Hmm. And you asked for all that? I’m starting to feel some sympathy for Wyll.”

“Mmm. With your penchant for secrets, I thought you might.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“You seem to see everyone’s side of every argument. It must be exhausting.”

I shrugged. “Part of being a leader, I suppose.”

“It’s ridiculous. Tell people what to do. Hit them if they say no. Problem solved. All this talking just complicates everything.”

“Well, that’s... one leadership approach. Would you *like* me to hit you if you say no?”

Shadowheart’s smile turned dangerous. “That feels like a question you shouldn’t be asking me,” she said, eyebrow raised.

I reached for another bottle of wine and pried the cork out. “Fair call,” I said. “So. I’m baring all and telling you about my sad, abortive romance attempts. Tell me something about yourself in return.”

“Hmm. I don’t think there’s much to share. I literally don’t have many memories to share.”

“See, I don’t understand the depths of devotion you’d require to do that.”

“Well, you did abandon your god, didn’t you?”

I felt a stab of pain. “True,” I said softly, and took a swig from the bottle. I looked out over the camp, remembering the day I left. The looks of betrayal on my closest friends. The ones I had left, anyway. The anger. The sadness and understanding from my superior – that, oddly, had struck me the hardest.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was a harsh blow. Something about me? Well, I know I don’t know how to swim.”

“Oh,” I said, dragging myself back into the present. “Gods, really? You’re missing out. Swimming is so much fun.”

“Hmm. I don’t like sand *or* seaweed. Let alone jellyfish.”

“We must take you swimming sometime. Karlach loves it; she’ll be up for it.”

Shadowheart’s cheek coloured. I grinned. “She is amazing, isn’t she?” I said idly. “Strong, attractive, and I swear she could charm a rock into giving her anything she wanted.”

“Hmm.”

“You should tell her how you feel, you know. Life is short. We could all die or turn into mindflayers at any moment.”

“Oh really?” Shadowheart’s face shut down. I’d been too forward. “Well, thank you for the unsolicited advice, I suppose. It seems worth every piece of copper I paid for it.”

I handed her the bottle.

Finally, an answer

Chapter Notes

Australian terminology for the terminally non-Aussie:

Billy: Old term for a pot you boil water in over a campfire. It's typically taller than it is wide, with a handle over the top you can use to suspend it from a tripod or grab it from the coals with a stick. Usually has a lid, and often a pouring lip.

Halfway to Waukeen's Rest. I accepted a plate of roast pig and potatoes from Gale, and sniffed.

"Gale, this smells *amazing*," I said. "What did you do?"

"Just a few herbs," he said, with a modest but pleased smile. "This patch of the forest is rich in culinary herbs. Mushrooms, too – but I'm not very confident with identifying those."

"Mmm. Mushroom mistakes could cause some problems. Thank you. For cooking. For going to extra effort," I said.

"Always welcome," he said happily, and turned away to serve Shadowheart. Gods, it was good to see someone heartened, at least.

I sat down by the fire and started to eat. I didn't have much appetite, but the savoury scent was helping to stir my stomach to hunger.

"Hey," Wyll said, sitting down next to me with his own plate.

I looked over and up at him and smiled a little, uncertain. Well, I knew this conversation would be coming. I stuffed some pork in my mouth, determined to do Gale's cooking credit before I lost my appetite. "Hi," I said, when I'd finished chewing and swallowing. "Gale's outdone himself this time, hasn't he?"

"Hmm," Wyll said, and ate.

When I finished, I laid my plate on the ground, and realised that the area around us was deserted. Our companions had made themselves scarce. Well, good. I didn't want anyone else hearing this. It would be hard enough hearing it myself. But – I could do this, I reminded myself. *Look for the best, not just good enough*.

"I'm sorry for not talking sooner," Wyll said. "I... needed to think."

I nodded and smiled as best I could – a brief flash. “No apology needed. I’d rather you have the time to decide for yourself.” *Even if it feels like heartbreak just now* .

“I remembered something my father once told me about my mother,” Wyll said, staring into the fire. “He said that in her, he found a true meeting of minds and souls. I thought he was being very romantic, and that was it. But that’s what you were talking about, wasn’t it?”

“Mind, soul, heart, body. I’m nothing if not greedy,” I said. There was a thread of bitterness in the words that I immediately wanted to take back. Wyll didn’t deserve my bitterness just because he didn’t want what I wanted.

“Greedy?” Wyll scoffed, then laughed. “Brave, more like. There are so many dark places within all of us – who among us truly seek to have them known, and know others?”

“Mmm. I don’t think it’s an easy path, in truth.”

“But you want that, with me?”

My heart skipped a beat. Maybe I’d misunderstood. “I… I’d like to see if we could build that type of bond, yes.”

“Hmm. Adequately qualified. I suppose it’s a little early for declarations of undying love.”

“Just a smidge.”

Silence, and I breathed through the emotions swirling through my head and heart. Whatever his choices, mine were clear – I knew what I wanted, and even if in this instant it seemed to be embodied in the man sitting next to me, if he didn’t want the same things, it was a false seeming anyway. I told myself that firmly, but my heart yearned towards him regardless.

Wyll inhaled. “I’m in,” he said firmly. “I don’t promise you all of my truth at once. Much of it is not quite mine to share. But I suppose that’s true of your other… circles.”

I didn’t realise how much tension I was holding until I let some of it go. To hear that he *wanted* this, with me…

“I suppose it’s like a fire,” I said, thinking about it. “If I build a bonfire, I want to throw all the fuel on at once. Flames as high as the sky. Huge. But it burns itself out fast. If I build a hearthfire, I build it differently. Bank it. Light it carefully, let it smoulder and grow slowly. Keep the flames low but steady, and it will keep you warm all night.”

“Exactly.”

“But you’re sure?” I asked.

He turned to me, and must have seen the vulnerability on my face, because his mouth softened. “To find someone like you, who asks so little and so much at once, is a wonder, Dash. I’m not sure why you doubt, but… I’d like to try and kiss it away, if I may?”

I melted. He stroked a gentle finger down the beard on my jawline, and set his lips to mine. Thoughts tumbled away. His hand and mouth filled my awareness. He kissed me softly, tenderly, and repeatedly. Then he drew away and I opened my eyes, feeling dazed.

“That’s better,” he said, sounding satisfied. “Good night, dear.”

He stood and walked to his bedroll, and I stayed sitting, staring into the campfire, lost in thought.

We walked into the tavern’s yard to find it smouldering, smoke still curling from the few beams that stood upright in the twisted, black and red mess.

“Wow,” Karlach said softly. “The goblins really did a number on this place.”

“I wonder why,” Shadowheart said. “Just for the alcohol? I mean, it seems like a goblin sort of thing to do... but for the Absolute?”

“Are those... Flaming Fist?” Wyll asked, pointing at a group in red surcoats praying over charred, hacked bodies. “What are they doing here, so far from Baldur’s Gate?”

“Nothing to loot here, people,” a tired and hoarse voice, pitched at command volume, came from the other side of the yard. “I’ll thank you to be—”

“Councillor Florrick?” Wyll asked. He looked shocked to his core. I racked my brain. Wasn’t she the leader of the Flaming Fist? Hmm. I knew our Wyll ran in different circles to mine in the city, but... this was high.

“*Wyll*?” she said, and gasped. “Gods, it feels like we’ve just run through the hells themselves, and now here you are, looking like a literal devil. What the hell happ— no. I don’t have time, I’m sorry. Wyll, drow kidnapped Grand Duke Ravengard.”

She might as well have stabbed him in the heart. His face twisted and he slumped.

“Shit. If those Absolutist freaks have the Grand Duke, they’re definitely going after Baldur’s Gate, aren’t they?” Karlach said, looking grim. “We have to help find him.”

“Wyll, please. I know you can have little love for the man, after everything that’s passed, and... whatever you’ve done afterwards...” Florrick waved a hand to cover his head-to-toe transformation. “But he needs your help now. Will you follow the trail and discover where the drow have taken your father?”

“*Father?*” Shadowheart asked, incredulous. “Wyll, you’ve been holding out on us.”

“You’re one to talk,” Karlach muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Councillor – of course. We’ll leave immediately. Right, Dash?”

“Of course,” I said. “The man’s too important to Baldur’s Gate. Let’s go, folks.”

Back at camp, Wyll sat down beside me next to the campfire. I was waiting for the billy to boil – I thought we could all use a soothing tea. I rummaged in a bag for some chamomile flowers.

“You’re... probably angry at me,” he said, heavily.

I sighed. I put the bag down and turned to him.

“I’m not angry. I’m... confused. Hurt. Upset, perhaps. And, honestly, quite concerned about you. So it’s... a very mixed bag of feelings. And –” I frowned. “I’m not sure how to balance caring for a group member who got some bad news with realising that the person I thought cared for me was lying to me.”

“Well. I appreciate you laying it all out. Dash, I –” tears glistened in his eye. “They’ve got my *father*. The Absolutists. What are they *doing* to him?”

So. Caring for the group member it was. We could hash out our problems later, I supposed.

I took the billy off the heat and sprinkled chamomile flowers into the hot water, then replaced the lid. I sat back down next to Wyll and took his hand. “He’s important, Wyll. I don’t think they’ll hurt him. They’ll want to ensure they can take Baldur’s Gate easily.”

“Gods,” he said with a sob. “Father would rather die.”

I squeezed his hand. “We’ll find him, Wyll.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then we will have failed entirely, and will not care.”

He huffed out a short and bitter laugh. “That almost makes me feel better.” He brooded, staring into the campfire, while I poured out tea into a couple of mugs. He took a mug when I offered it, and sat without drinking it, jaw clenched.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have told you who I’d been. I didn’t think it would ever come up, truth be told.”

“You didn’t think you... being the son of a duke... would ever come up?”

“*Ex*-son of a duke. My father disowned and exiled me when I was 17. We’re flesh and blood, that’s true, but we’re no longer family.”

“Gods. That must have hurt so much.”

“Oh, he had every reason, I suppose. He came home to a son who had gained warlock powers and had a demon always lurking at his shoulder. And I couldn’t tell him what actually happened. I tried to show him, but there was... not a scrap of evidence. I signed a contract with Mizora for good reason – but all he saw was a wayward child who had put the entire city at risk by seeking infernal power for his own benefit.”

“Ouch. No room for the benefit of the doubt, then?”

“In the absence of an explanation? No. We’d... fought a lot in the months before he left. I was young and idealistic. I thought his politicking was verging on evil, the way he would make deals with anyone, compromise on any stance. So...”

“He thought you’d taken the arguments to a very illogical conclusion?”

“Hmm.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell me, though.”

“Because... Wyll Ravengard,” his mouth twisted down, “is someone I don’t like thinking about. I’m not that person anymore. I never can be. Certainly not with Mizora having inflicted her punishment on me. It’s a life and a person that I almost hate. I suppose... I wanted you to see *me* .”

“And you didn’t have faith that I would?”

“Ha. A fair reproach,” he said, glancing at me. “You’re right to be upset. And hurt. But... please. I didn’t lie about anything, including my intentions towards you. I’m the Blade of Frontiers, not the son of the grand duke.”

“And if you *could* go back to that life?” I asked, softly. “Or needed to? What then, for us?”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t,” he said. “It’s impossible. But... Dash. Couldn’t we cross that impossible bridge when we came to it?”

I sighed. We’d only just tentatively agreed to court each other, and this felt like a massive roadblock. Was I really willing to get closer to a man who might leave me one day to become a duke? Then the rest of our situation asserted itself. The parasites in our brains. The danger lurking in the Shadowlands. The Absolutist stronghold. Dozens of ways that we could die before the year was out. Was I really *that* worried about what might happen in five or ten?

“Given the other impossible tasks we need to complete?” I asked. “I suppose that’s a reasonable ask.”

“So... we’re alright?” he asked, turning to face me. He looked uncertain and sad, and despite the blows I’d received, my heart went out to him. Facing the loss of a father and new lover in one day could hardly be easy.

I opened my arms, and he curled around me and sobbed. “Hells,” he said, voice unsteady. “Thank you for being quite ridiculously understanding.” He stilled, his cheek against my hair, but I felt dampness trickling down his face.

“You’re welcome,” I said, squeezing his shoulders. “Come on, let’s find a quiet place to sit and let Gale start cooking dinner before he explodes.”

Leap into the dark

The group was used to me scavenging for herbs and other bits and bobs as we travelled. I liked to make our own potions when I could – why spend gold at an apothecary when we could be buying better armour and weaponry instead? So they didn't notice when I started picking wildflowers along our route.

Wyll did, though, when he went to bed and found a single climbing rose, simple but sweet-smelling, laid on his bedroll.

Our eyes met across the campfire, from where I lay awake but sleepy. His face soft, he mouthed a thank you, and smelled it, smiling.

The next morning, the rose was an incongruous decoration on his battle robe, pinned with a harper's pin.

I smiled at him, my heart warm, as we set out.

Astarion eyed the rose, sneered, then opened his mouth. I lifted a finger to point at him. “Not. A. Word,” I said, quietly but firmly. He subsided, rolling his eyes. Poor Astarion. Out here in the wilds, there were far too few people around to give him the admiration he craved. I made a mental note to bribe Karlach into giving him a few compliments in camp later.

As it turned out, getting to the Underdark was simpler than I'd expected. No ancient rotting temple required, as per Halsin. We wandered into a goblin-infested village that we'd skirted on the way to the goblin camp a tenday earlier. A simple illithid greeting to their squad leader, and they left us alone. Clearly they either hadn't heard what we'd done at the camp, hadn't received descriptions of the perpetrators... or simply didn't care. Whichever; as long as they didn't attack, we could leave them be.

Astarion's nose for loot led him to a locked basement door, under a house with the sign of an anvil outside.

“Blacksmith?” Gale asked.

Wyll nodded. “I'd guess so. We might find something good. Regardless, something to sell. It's a seller's market for weapons at the moment, I'd wager. Even rusty old javelins would sell to someone.”

“Dark days,” Gale said, sighing.

In the basement, we found weapons indeed – and a piece of infernal iron. “Hey, isn't this stuff what Karlach needs?” I asked. “For Dammon, to fix her heart.”

“Yes! Definitely purloin that,” Gale advised.

Through a weak patch in the wall, we found a tunnel down to a cave system far underground. Webs stretched overhead and underfoot. Cave spiders must abound here.

We walked through quietly, looking for loot and other interesting things. The denizens were territorial, but easy enough to take out with our now-practised teamwork. But then we came to the hole. It was wide and deep, and there was a breeze coming up out of it. As though it led to somewhere. An extensive cave system? The Underdark, perhaps? The air smelt of warmth and... mushrooms. Hmm. I knelt and laid a hand on the rock. Limestone for a long way down, by the feel. Could just be another cave system deep underneath this one... but one large enough to have its own airflow?

I threw a stone down, and counted the moments until I heard it hit bottom. "Twenty," I said. "That's... a very deep hole. We know there's a way into the Underdark somewhere here – what do you think the chances are that this is one?"

"With potentially no way out if you're wrong, though," Wyll pointed out.

"Mmm. There's a breeze coming out of it. There's a way out of it. However... I have a misty step spell, and Gale has a floating feather spell. Together... I might be able to scout it safely. Semi-safely."

Wyll scowled. "I don't like this idea."

"It *is* a little more hare-brained than your usual plans," Astarion pointed out. "I like it. Please go jump into the extremely deep, dark hole. I'm sure everything will be fine."

So I had Gale cast his spell on me, and did exactly that. "I was being sarcastic!" Astarion called down after me.

I fell in the dark for some time... long enough to wish for a light and worry that Gale's spell might run out of puff. But I landed safely, then pulled out a lantern to have a look around me. Mushrooms. Cliffs. A minotaur on an adjacent cliff, grazing. This was no hole in the ground. This was the Underdark. It had to be.

"Come on down," I called out, and the other three floated down to meet me. I extinguished the light, and our eyes slowly adjusted to the almost-dark.

"Ohh," Gale's voice was hushed. "It's... frightening. But oddly beautiful. I've read of the Underdark, but I've never been down here. Do you have any idea what to expect?"

"None," I said. "I know the drow and a few other creatures live here by choice. I'm sure others live here by necessity."

"Quite. None inclined towards hospitality and fine dining, I suspect."

I never did figure out what woke me up. Rhythmic footsteps where they didn't belong? A hummed piece of music? A call from parasite to parasite? Regardless, I woke with the feeling that something wasn't quite... as it should be. I walked cautiously down to the shore,

following the faint sounds, and stopped, surprised. I'd been expecting a threat. I found... beauty.

Wyll was dancing. A slow, measured dance, full of grace and elegance. I smiled, watching. It was nice to see him feeling happy enough to dance, and feeling free enough to express himself. I had the impression that he'd been more used to repressing his emotions for lack of anyone to share them with. But I was also enjoying watching him move – his lithe, muscled body moving smoothly through the steps. He had more flexibility than many fighters, I noticed, and his dance teachers must have been expensive. He was *good*.

Wyll moved through a section of his dance that brought him facing my direction, and he stopped dead, surprised.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was beautiful – I didn't want to disturb you, but I didn't want to stop watching, either."

His mouth curved into a shy smile. "I love to dance," he confessed. "I learnt as a child, and I used to attend balls through Baldur's Gate all summer. It was magical. But the mere act of dancing with another person... your movements mirroring each other, then moving apart to come back together... that wasn't just magic. It was pure poetry. I miss dancing with someone."

"I don't know how good a dance partner I'd make," I said, a little sadly. "I think I might be too short for you."

Wyll strode over to me and knelt so that his face was below mine. "Don't be silly," he said gently. "A counterpoint is still part of the tune, is it not? If you don't fit the standard dance steps perfectly, that doesn't make you deficient – it just makes the dance more complex."

I blinked. "I – huh. I never thought of it like that." Years of trying to let go of the height complex I developed growing up in Baldur's Gate, and it was Wyll who added the perspective I needed. *Because you're too short to have seen it* mocked a snarky little voice in my head that sounded oddly like Astarion. Were we starting to share our thoughts accidentally now? That could get very awkward very fast. But... no, there was no connection there. Just a side effect of listening to sarcastic comments galore from the world-weary vampire.

"Dance with me? Please?" he said, holding out a hand.

So we danced, in the old, familiar steps of the dances of our youth. And I added a few quick steps, here and there, to make up for Wyll's over-large stride, and while it was awkward and a little difficult, especially without music, it was also the most fun I'd had in weeks. Whenever we touched, in the clasping of hands and the slow slide of fingers along arms, sparks of lightning ran through me. Judging from the intensity on Wyll's face, I wasn't the only person feeling them.

It might have been hours later – the stars had certainly had time to wheel across a fair bit of the sky – when I stepped on an irregularly-shaped rock as I moved towards Wyll to clasp hands, and stumbled. Wyll, instinctively, pulled me close to keep me from falling, and froze. I

was startled, but the sparks of attraction that I'd felt all night whenever our hands touched roared into a fire, and I wanted nothing more than to stay pressed against him, my head against his heart. But...

"Wyll?" I asked, huskily.

"Mmm?" he said, sounding dazed.

I looked up. He looked like a man facing a firing squad. Did he *still* think I was going to turn him away because he was a devil? Fool.

"May I kiss you?"

His face blossomed into a shy smile, and he let go of me to kneel down. "Please."

I slid a hand through the hair on the back of his head, then lowered my lips onto his. When my lips parted to stroke the tip of my tongue over his lips, he wrapped his arms around me, fingers digging into my back, and opened his mouth to me. His breath had a hint of sulphur in it – at any other time it might have been objectionable, but right now it seemed perfect. I pulled him closer against me, feeling evidence of his arousal firm against my leg, and abandoned myself to the sensation of sliding my tongue over his, his warm, dry lips under mine.

We broke apart, breathing heavily, Wyll a little wild-eyed.

"That... was amazing," he said. "You make a fantastic dance partner."

I touched his face, wishing I could simply ask him to bed... but I knew what that would convey to him, and I wouldn't do that. The softness on his face was a reward in itself; such a change from his usual stoic mask.

"Can we do this again?" I asked, a little wistfully. Many people had asked me to bed... but he was the first to simply ask me to dance all night and kiss. It really *did* feel like living one of the old sagas of love and adventure. Although those never really talked about aching loins and unfulfilled desires, I reflected.

"No invitation to bed?" he asked in a similar tone.

I caressed his cheek slowly, revelling in the way he turned into the caress. "If my Wyll wants romance, then my Wyll shall get romance," I said, smiling into his eyes. "You deserve the best."

His red eye widened, then he smiled. "You stake your claim rather boldly."

"Too boldly?" I asked, suddenly uncertain again.

He shook his head. "Just the right amount," he said, softly. "Hells, Dash. There's so much darkness all around us. To think I almost missed the light."

We parted, and sleep didn't come easily that night. I was far too aware of his form lying on the other side of the fire, tantalisingly out of reach. I could seek spiritual togetherness before the physical, and be happy... but that didn't mean my body would necessarily agree with my choices.

What am I to you

The first denizens of the Underdark who we met and didn't immediately have to kill were the myconids. As seemed traditional for half of the people we came across, they wanted us to do something for them. Well, it beat the approach of the other half, which seemed to be *kill the weirdos now*.

In this case, the issue was a group of duergar who'd set up camp nearby and attacked the myconid tribe for harbouring a fugitive. A deep gnome. I was more interested, right now, in her welfare. She was pale and sweating, lying limply on the soft surface of the mushroom that the myconid ruler used as a platform, and I supposed a defence.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Poison on a blade," she said. "I ran. Duergar came after me, the bastards. Fucking slavers. They'll do anything for money. I should've known better – but I wanted to find help. Now I'm going to die here surrounded by mushrooms." She doubled over. Whatever it was, it was eating at her insides now. She didn't have long.

"Can we help?" Wyll asked.

I rummaged around in my pack and pulled out a bottle of general antidote. "I don't know what poison was used," I told her. "But this should help, at least. It might not cure, though. Duergar poisons can be tricky."

Wyll lifted her head for me, and I tipped the bottle to her lips. She drank most of the potion slowly, making a face. "By Urdlen, that's foul! Ugh." We laid her back down, and she frowned. "Hey, I think it's helping. That gnawing pain is going... gods, it's actually leaving. Thank you. Now we need to get back to my kin, please..." She tried to stand, and fell back down, clutching her stomach.

I put a hand on her arm, trying to dissuade any extra movement. "Take it easy," I said. "It will take you a while to heal. You won't be ready to trek through the Underdark or fight for a tenday at least. Don't push yourself, or you'll just fall down somewhere and not get up."

"They need *help*," she said, eyes pleading. "The duergar – caught a whole group of us and enslaved us. They've got them digging out some ruin across the water. They're going to get everyone killed with whatever cockamamie plan they're cooking up... and in the meantime, my cousins are being beaten to death and flayed whenever someone needs a little light entertainment."

Gale muttered something I didn't catch, but it didn't sound at all happy.

"What's the ruin?" I asked. "Maybe we can help, if we can find it."

"Mate, you help my kin get out of there, and you'll have my gratitude for life. On top of owing you for the treatment. Speaking of which – here. Take these boots. I nicked them off

the overseer when I left. Maybe you can get some leverage with them. Or just wear them. Good boots. She'll be pissed about it, I'll wager. Grym-something. Grymforge? Dunno what they're looking for. But they're looking hard. Bunch of idiots. Whole place looks like something ripped it apart several times, and that something is probably still in there, nesting. Breeding."

Hmm. Grymforge might be worth checking out. "We'll try to help your kin," I told her. "I can't promise. But we'll try."

"Well, there's only four of you. Trying's more than most would even go for. Thank you. That eases my heart."

"Rest up. We'll come back to let you know what happens."

"Why Grymforge?" Gale asked, curious. "It sounds rather unappealing."

"Because it's a ruin, and it's a forge, if she remembered the name correctly. We might find some very interesting information or loot there. Plus, if it's old enough, it might have a way up into the Shadowlands that we can use," I said. "But... I know we can't run and rescue every troubled soul..."

"Do you know that, though?" Shadowheart asked. "It sometimes feels as though *run and rescue every troubled soul* is our leitmotif."

"But these are your kin, in a sense," Wyll said, touching my arm.

I nodded. "I don't think I can ignore this one. But I can ask for volunteers only."

"Count me out," Shadowheart said. "I don't mind taking out these Duergar nearby – should be simple enough – but this Grymforge thing sounds like trouble."

So we went down to the beach and did just that – removed the Duergar threat that had been poised at the entrance to the myconid colony like a knife to its throat. When we returned, the leader was happy... but it had an additional request. The head of Nere, a drow running operations in... Grymforge.

"All paths lead to Grymforge," Gale said, not sounding overly happy about it. "Curious."

Back in camp that night, Wyll and I stole away from the campfire, down to the beach.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked Wyll. "About us."

He inhaled, and smiled. "Mmm, that's a treat in and of itself. Hearing you say *us* that way. Please. Ask, so maybe you'll say *us* again and send another shiver down my spine."

"I think that almost answered my question," I said, feeling heat rush to my face.

“Are you blushing?” Wyll asked, looking almost delighted. He knelt down to lay a gentle hand on my cheek, and I felt a new flush rise. “Oh, you are. I like seeing you like this,” he said, eye intent and focused.

“Mmm. Will it help if I say *us* again?” I asked. I supposed I could handle a few blushes to see Wyll looking so suddenly confident and happy.

“Oh. How do you undo me with your words?” he said, and bit his lip.

“May I kiss you?” I asked, and his mouth was on mine, his hands on the small of my back, pulling me close. I put a hand on the back of his head, stroking his hair, moving into him. We kissed, tongues and lips sliding over each other, heat surging through me.

I broke away, gently, a hand on his cheek. “Now you know what I’m thinking about when I blush,” I told him. “I’m thinking about a pair of lips soft as roses at dawn. A tongue that’s warm and skillful. A voice that raises goosebumps on my skin. And a mind,” I stroked his forehead, “that can raise my desire with a few well-chosen words.”

He closed his eyes and breathed. “Hells, Dash.”

Suddenly, I could see his point. It was rather enjoyable to see someone I cared for so lost in desire just from a kiss and some conversation. This could be fun.

“So,” Wyll said an hour or so of soft kisses later, when the stars had moved noticeably in the sky. “You had a question for me?”

I chuckled. “You took it right out of my head,” I told him.

“Ask me now.”

“It was selfish,” I prevaricated.

“Good. You’re a little too selfless at times. Be selfish this once.”

“How do you feel about me?” I asked. “I mean... that’s what I meant when I said you almost answered it already.”

“Ha!” he said. “No, a kiss, a look, no matter how sweet, could never be an adequate answer for a many-layered question such as that. Hmm. Dash – last night, when we danced, our whole world was in darkness. But I didn’t feel cold or afraid. *You* were my light. You are the red of the sunrise; the yellow of high noon; the orange of sundown. If you were a song, I’d never stop singing. If you were a psalm, I’d never stop praying. You bring warmth and life to a heart that’s laid barren for far too long, and I... hells, Dash, I never want nightfall to come.”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

Wyll rested his cheek against my forehead. “Then you’ve never heard yourself tell me you want to kiss me. Hells, I almost died on the spot.”

“That would have been a disappointing end to the night,” I observed.

He laughed. “Hells, I don’t think I laughed as much in twenty years as I have since meeting you. How do you bring such lightness out of my heart?”

“I’ve no idea – but I’m glad. You deserve some lightness.”

“Hmm. I wish I could believe that.”

The scum in the sewers

We got off the boat in a large, echoing space. I'd been expecting caves, from what the gnome had said. This was no cave – at least, not a natural one. This was a huge, ancient, ruined complex, full of basalt, with enormous statues studded around the outside. A goddess, blind. Ausurriel? Shar? My heart sank. Shar seemed most likely. And that was sure to not bode well.

“What the fuck are you lot doing here?” a duergar asked. He deliberately stepped into my space, and looked at Wyll, talking to him. “You brought us another slavey, did ya? We need more'n one, but. Stupid little creatures. They die like flies, but twice as easy. We need dozens, not one.”

“Too fragile to do your own work, are you?” I asked. Mild on the outside; on the inside, I was seething. Deep gnomes might not be my close kin, but by all the gods, they were still my people. Unlike this slaver.

“Too smart,” he said, glancing briefly at me. “You let him mouth off? Bad habit for slaves to get into. Gets their tongues removed.”

I clenched my jaw. We couldn't just kill him. Not without scouting the place first, understanding how things worked. But by the light, I wanted to lay him out with a punch and then sink my boot into his soft parts.

“Slavers,” I heard Astarion mutter behind me, his voice filled with disgust. “At least they're only targeting gnomes.”

Deep breaths. I needed to be calm and diplomatic, not aggressive. At least until we knew how many duergar were here. We'd be outnumbered, and swarmed if we attacked.

Wyll met my gaze, a question in his eyes. I shook my head a minute amount. “We'll be on our way, then” he said. “We have an appointment with a drow called Nere.”

We walked further into the ruins.

“Charming chap.” Astarion said. “What's the plan? Kill Nere?”

“Drive them all out,” Wyll said, his voice savage. “Slavers deserve no quarter.”

“Oh, come now!” Astarion said. “I agree, slavers don't make the best company, but they're only gnomes. What other use could they be?”

I glared at him.

“Your tiny self excepted, of course,” Astarion said, sketching a bow in my direction. “Seriously, though. What are you thinking? Save all the slaves and kill the duergar? It would be a bloodbath, and we'd be providing the blood! And for what? A bunch of gnomes?”

“Shut. Up,” I said, savage. “Just shut the fuck up, Astarion.”

“What did I say?”

After a quick reconnoitre, we had an idea of the number of duergar and Absolutists in the facility.

“Too many to take head-on,” Gale said. “Unless we’re forced to, that is. It might not be a bloodbath, but it would be a difficult fight.”

Wyll nodded. “We have to do something, though.”

“Perhaps the duergar would join us against the Absolutists.”

“We’re not allying with *slavers*,” I spat. “Come up with a different plan.”

“Who died and made you boss of the group?” Astarion asked.

“You,” I said, glaring at him. “Want to try for a second time lucky?”

He stepped back, eyes wide. “Touchy.”

Our last stop on the exploration was the dock opposite the one we’d come in on. I’d saved it for last because it seemed sparsely populated, but when we got closer, I discovered one very good reason for that. It stank of death and decay. Corpses lay piled on the platform, two duergar desultorily throwing one into the lake now and then.

“What happened here?” Wyll asked.

“Rockfall,” one said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “These little shits didn’t move fast enough. Such a waste of livestock.”

“*Livestock?*” I repeated. The anger I’d stuffed down curled back up, filled me.

“Oh. Another little gnomey-dome to fill the ranks,” he said. “But we need more than one. These things die if you look at ‘em wrong. Can’t hardly stand up to a lick of abuse. Frail little bastards. Stupid, too. Give me a rothe anyday. Get better conversation outta them, and all they do is moo.”

I saw red, ran forward, and punched him hard in the gut, adding a frontal kick when he doubled over. He flew backwards, landing in the water.

“You mangy little cocksucker!” he yelled, swimming awkwardly toward the ladder, only to disappear underwater with a sudden cut-off scream.

Wyll blasted the other duergar into the water, and he too was dragged underneath by... something. I shuddered. Whatever was in that water, we didn’t want to meet it.

But now I could focus on the tragedy. I looked around, and the sheer scale of the slaughter struck me. I fell to my knees, staring at the bodies. Small. Slender. Insignificant. Unimportant. Given less care than the rothe.

Someone knelt beside me, and I leant against them, knowing without knowing how that it was Wyll.

“Hells. What monsters, to treat your kin as nothing more than animals,” he said quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Not monsters,” I said, feeling oddly distant. “Just regular people. Abnormally sadistic, perhaps, but it’s not so different from Baldur’s Gate. People there wanted just this. My people, a big pile of corpses. Gods, they’d have been *more* valued as animals.”

Wyll put an arm around me. Behind us, deathly silence from Astarion and Gale.

“This is what I’m worth,” I said dully. “Just a thing to be discarded. That’s all.”

“No. You know that’s not true. You’re a wonder. And this place of death... none deserve this.”

“History would seem to disagree. Death. Misery. That’s all we get if we venture out of our caves, isn’t it? Too weak. Too small. Too... too vulnerable.”

His arm tightened around me.

“And no one cares. You heard it. The duergar think we’re less intelligent than the rothe. Hells, my own friends say we’re not worth the effort of saving.” The grief washed over me again, and this time I simply let it take me, my face in my hands, sobs wracking me.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that. You know I’d come to rescue you if they took –”

“I don’t think you’re helping, Astarion,” Gale interjected. “Come on. Let’s give them a moment.”

“But I –”

“It’s not about you just now,” Gale said firmly. I heard footsteps receding.

“It’s not fair,” Wyll said. “What do you need?”

I wiped my eyes. “All of these slavers in a broken, bloody heap,” I said, and paused – shocked by the savagery in my own voice.

“We can do that,” he said, with an edge to his voice.

I looked up at him – his face was set, mouth hard. “You’re not going to tell me caution is warranted?”

Wyll shook his head. “These people don’t deserve to live to see the next moon. I’m with you on this.”

I stood face to face with Nere in Grymforge, his mouth twisted with arrogance and revulsion.

“A gnome,” he said. “And a True Soul. It’s not enough to be allied with goblins and hiring duergar. Now I have to work with *gnomes*. Rockmunchers. Ugh. The Absolute is scraping the bottom of the barrel with you.”

“You *can’t* kill these people,” I insisted, well aware that I was blowing our cover wide apart, but unable to sit by and watch while people just like me died. *Sit by and watch again, you mean*, a niggling voice inside said, and I shoved it down hard. Now wasn’t the time.

“What,” Astarion hissed, “in the names of all the gods do you think you’re doing? A few paltry slaves versus our precious hides? I know which I’d rather save, thank you very much!”

Pulling rank wasn’t going to work with Nere. He was far too convinced of his own superiority to listen to the likes of me. But arrogance also had its flaws...

I stunned him with a well-aimed and lucky blow, then directed my companions to the nearest high points.

“Grease. Fire. Explosives. They have to come through this square to get to us, so let’s make it expensive to hit us. But watch the slaves – we don’t want to hit them with the crossfire if we can avoid it.”

“Ugh,” Astarion muttered quietly, but obeyed.

Two hours, a lot of explosives, and a few ogres later, we stood victorious over a smoking, battered, blood-stained hellscape.

“Well that sucked,” Astarion said. “But hey, your precious slaves are OK, even if I can barely walk.”

He was bleeding profusely from multiple deep gashes down his side, and blood sheeted over his face from a lucky slash over his eye.

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. “Gale... Wyll... thank you for backing me up here. I know I was asking a lot.”

“You asked the right thing,” Wyll said, looking solemn. He wasn’t in much better shape than Astarion, although he’d been hit by at least one explosion and was looking more burnt and bruised than bleeding. He was cradling his shield arm in a way that made me wonder if it was broken. Damn. “These people had no one to stand for them but us. Who else could help?”

“I’m all for helping the helpless,” Gale put in, “but I’m not such a fan of desperate causes. If we’d failed here today, there would have been a lot of people dead, and no good to come out of it.”

“Oh, thank the gods not everyone I’m traveling with is a suicidal do-gooder,” Astarion drawled. “Now can we get back to camp? I want to kill something and get very drunk.”

“Hang on,” I said, and went to talk to the gnomes who’d survived the chaos of the pitched battle. I accepted their thanks with embarrassment, and wished them luck in Baldur’s Gate.

Back at the camp, we got everyone healed up, and thanked our lucky stars again for the magic and resources that could heal even Wyll’s broken arm to good as new.

Then... reaction set in. I sat watching the fire, feeling... very unsure of what I was feeling. All I knew was that it felt like a black hole had opened in my chest, a great yawning emptiness. It wasn’t quite pain, but it definitely felt bad. I could patch up my outsides with potions and bandages, but the insides? They took time, and meditation, and a lot of honesty. No easy fixes.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to drop into a meditative trance, but stopped to reconsider. Maybe... maybe this time I didn’t have to work through it alone. Maybe I could ask for help, like others had asked for *my* help over the last few weeks. I walked over to one particular tent.

“Wyll?” I asked tentatively. “I... could do with company. And maybe comfort, if you have some to offer. Would you...”

I don’t know what I expected from him. Brusque dismissal, I suppose. Maybe laughter at the thought that I had feelings worth exploring. Annoyance that I’d asked for backup in such a precarious situation today, and now I was asking still *more*. Frustration that he’d been so injured and *I* wanted *his* help again. Instead...

“Wait there a minute,” he said, touching me gently on the arm as he walked away. To Gale?

But he came back in a few minutes with an armful of pillows, stacked high above his head, and led me to a secluded corner of the ruins where the crumbling walls formed a sort of alcove. He dumped the pillows, and returned with our bedrolls, an extra blanket, a pile of handkerchiefs, and water flasks. He laid out the bedrolls in the alcove, piled pillows behind them, and dumped the sundries to one side. Then he reclined on the cosy nest he’d built and held out an arm to me.

“Come here,” he said. “Come be comfortable, and rest, and be with me. And talk to me, if you want. Or we can just lie here quietly and take strength from each other’s presence. Whatever you need.”

My nose tingled as my eyes started to tear up. I’d never had someone respond like this to a request for comfort. I thought he might offer a hug; instead he was offering his entire night, without a single thought. As though *of course* I was worthy of his time and energy. I laid down next to him, and he pulled me close, then arranged the blanket over us. The night air was still chilly, but he radiated more heat than the average person – unsurprising for a devil, I supposed. I rested my head in the hollow between his arm and chest, and sighed.

“Nere seems to have upset you more than most of the arseholes we meet,” Wyll observed.

I laughed, shakily. “I thought I was over it. But seeing gnomes in slavery... hearing the disdain and revulsion in his voice at having to speak to me...” I sighed. “You and I grew up in the same city. But we didn’t. I... saw more of the dark side of Faerûn. The slaves. The prejudice.”

“I can’t imagine the strength required to survive and flourish as you have,” Wyll said.

“I told you a little,” I said. “That people hated gnomes. Sarevek... the Ironhands... they left a legacy of fear that strangers... every time they saw *me*, they didn’t see me. They saw an Ironhand deep gnome. A traitor to the city. Someone who would harm them. I was a child. I didn’t understand. All I knew was that I was like the scum in the sewers. Unwanted. Making everything worse wherever I went.”

“Hells,” Wyll said softly.

“My mother was a whore,” I said, steeling myself for him to leave. “It was one of the few ways a gnome could earn a fair living in Baldur’s Gate. She was actually a skilled artificer – but no one wanted a gnome building gadgets in case they went boom. Didn’t matter that we were a whole different *race* to the deep gnomes.”

Wyll just stroked my hair gently.

“When I was a young man, I thought I could just ignore it, and it wouldn’t matter. You know how youth can be?” I felt Wyll nod. “I ran with a group of... humans, tieflings, gnomes... all sorts. We drank, we danced, we had sex. I thought we were all equal. Until it became very clear that we gnomes were there as fetish objects, nothing more. We could be hurt, lied to, toyed with, and it was all just part of the game. But if we dreamt of doing the same to the others... hells to pay.”

Wyll’s arm tightened around me. “They hurt you?”

I frowned. “It was more that... I let them, even when it became clear that it was the price of their friendship.”

“A lapse in your judgement of your self-worth?”

“That’s a very charitable description of a whore.”

Wyll barked a bitter laugh. “Oh, my dear – come back to me when you’ve sold your services and very soul to a devil, and we can discuss who might be a whore.”

I squirmed around to look up at him, to see him looking down at me, eyes soft and sympathetic.

“Tell me how it felt,” he said, “Standing up to Nere today, facing his disgust.”

“I felt like... nothing,” I said. “No one. Like a pathetic failure desperate for attention, desperate to be better than I am, but always trash.”

Wyll's breath hitched, and I saw tears spring in his eye, glistening in the fitful light from the distant campfire.

"Why tears?" I asked, confused. Had I offended him with my self-absorption?

"That you could ever think yourself trash," he whispered, and kissed my forehead.

Something about his sympathetic tears undid me, and years of knotted pain and regret loosened. I buried my face in his chest, and he held me as I sobbed for the young person I'd been and always would carry inside me. Wyll just held me, and stroked my hair, until we fell asleep there in our little comfort-nest.

We woke the next morning, together. I was embarrassed by my oversharing of the night before, but Wyll just smiled the smile he gave only to me, and started clearing the nest.

"If I don't get these back to Gale, he'll be distraught," he said, "Poor man can't live without his creature comforts. I think he'd almost rather I'd borrowed all of his books."

"To sleep on?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. I couldn't imagine Gale putting up with such an outrage to his precious books.

"Ha! You make a fair point," Wyll allowed, and walked away with armfuls of pillows. I was sad to see the nest broken up, although it logically had to go. Damn logic to all the hells.

Love letters at dawn

Chapter Notes

I moved the poem from the previous chapter to this one. It seemed to fit better all in the one chapter. Apologies for any confusion if you've been reading along as I post!

*When I asked you
How you felt
You said I gave
Colour to the sky
In the day*

*First in my heart
Stars in the dark
Torch to the shadow*

*Hope when I'm lost
Joy when I sorrow
Comfort in pain*

*If you were a book
I would read you
Over and again
Fingers stroking your pages
Seeking meaning in every word
Looking for the spaces
Between your lines*

I left the poem next to Wyll and stole away from the fire, breathing a sigh of relief when I got far enough away and he still hadn't moved. Would he like it? The scansion was terrible. I clearly was *not* going to have a career as a famous poet. Vollo would likely be in stitches if he read it. In fact, *Wyll* might be in stitches when he read it. He'd been educated by the finest tutors. The poem would just read as clumsy, like something a child would write. In fact, maybe I should just take it back before he woke up and it was too late...

"Love letters at dawn? My my, aren't we all getting so... mushy." Astarion materialised from the trees, a smear of blood and a smirk on his face.

I sighed. "It was a terrible idea, and I feel like an idiot."

“What?” he said, genuinely seeming taken aback. “My darling boy, are you out of your mind? I’ll grant I have no idea why you and Wyll are all moony over each other and refuse to just hop into bed like any normal people,” – I flushed to realise just *how* little privacy we had in this camp – “but he’s clearly smitten by your tiny self. Unless you wrote something utterly terrible, he’ll have stars in his eyes and a song in his damned do-gooder heart for days.”

“It was... poetry,” I admitted unwillingly.

“Oh, this is rich,” he said, cackling. “What saccharine depths we’re descended to, indeed! But don’t fret. Even the worst poetry is just fuel to the fire.”

“You have blood on your cheek,” I snapped, and turned away. And then relented, because while Astarion had made fun of me, he’d also been oddly reassuring. “But... thanks.”

“Always the vampire, never the vamped,” Astarion grumbled, walking into his tent to freshen up.

Wyll was unusually quiet as we rode out. No quips. No comments on the woods we rode through. No trading friendly insults with Astarion. Just a sullen, depressed silence, like a cloud hanging around him.

At midday, I sat next to him, determined to find out what was wrong.

“I read your poem,” he said abruptly.

My heart sank. “You hated it.”

“Oh no, it was lovely, I suppose – I just hadn’t realised I needed to take your words with such... lightness.”

I blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, no doubt,” he said, a thread of bitterness through his words.

“Come on, let’s move out already!” Karlach yelled, shouldering her greataxe. “Baldur’s Gate isn’t going to save itself, is it?”

Wyll rose, turned away, and picked up his pack. Conversation over, I supposed.

Later, in camp, I tried again. He watched me approach in silence. He wasn’t going to tell me to leave – but I wasn’t welcome, either.

“I’m sorry,” I said, helplessly. “I don’t know what I wrote in that poem that offended you, but I’m sorry for it. I was trying to express how I felt and...”

“And when would you have told *me* ? That you felt that way about someone else? When I expressed those very feelings to *you* so recently. You’re under no obligation to return my feelings, of course, but I thought... I thought you respected me, at the least.”

I stared at him in shock, then did the worst thing possible. I laughed.

Wyll's face turned cold with embarrassment and hurt pride, and he stood to leave.

“Wait – I’m sorry – please don’t go. Will you let me explain?”

His jaw clenched, and he didn’t sit back down, but he didn’t walk away, either.

“I wrote that poem for *you*. Wyll – surely you know I could never write that poem for anyone but you.”

He took a breath. His jaw unclenched a bit, but he was far from relaxed. “Then why,” he asked in clipped tones, “did Astarion show it to me instead of you?”

The pieces fell into place. “That interfering, pain in the arse little blaggard,” I swore. “He saw me leave it next to you. The ridiculous *peacock* of a vampire. Turn him down once, and apparently he’ll be messing up my lovemaking for life.”

Wyll sat down and took my hand. “You’re not in love with Astarion?”

I couldn’t help myself – laughter bubbled up again. This time, Wyll joined me. “Oh gods,” he said, howling with laughter, “that bastard didn’t even lie to me. He just told me you were a rather disappointing poet and showed me the poem, and my own jealousy did the rest.”

“Do you think he meant you to get the wrong idea?”

“I think he didn’t *not* want me to get the wrong idea. Oh. Hells. I’ve been played like a fiddle, and I have only myself to blame. All I had to do was trust you and ask.”

“Trust is hard when you think it’s been betrayed, though.”

“Mmm. A truer word is rarely spoken. But – you turned down Astarion? I’ll admit to being surprised. You two seem to get along well, and he *is* very pretty.”

“He is, but someone else caught my eye,” I said, nudging him gently. “And I haven’t been able to look away since.”

“Even though I’m a jealous fool?”

“Even though. Pretty sure I have my own flaws, though I haven’t been able to find them.”

Wyll laughed. “May a jealous fool kiss you?” he asked.

“That depends,” I flirted. “Are there any other jealous fools in camp? Because I don’t want them to kiss me.”

“Only me,” he said, eyes crinkling with renewed good humour as he laid a palm on my cheek. I rubbed against it, cat-like, and lifted my mouth to his. The kiss was soft and light, but when he drew away, I felt that our balance had been restored.

Shades of grey

Grymforge, it turned out, was worth the detour – if perhaps not the pain. With a bit of exploration – more carefully than Nere had – we found the ancient forge, designed hundreds or thousands of years ago to create mithril weapons.

“Nice,” Gale observed. “You know... knowledge of this forge... it must be worth thousands to the right person. The dust all over everything. No one’s been down here in an age.”

“And the skeletons?” Wyll asked. “This armour – doesn’t it look like Sharran Dark Justiciar garb?”

“Hmm. Whatever came through here was not gentle. It wiped out these clerics with a single blow, by the looks of it. It must have been cataclysmic.”

“Should we go back to camp and get Shadowheart? She might want to see this.”

I sighed. The petty side of me said to let her stagnate in camp and be damned. She didn’t want to come; she didn’t get to see the Sharran enclave. But pettiness was not a useful leadership trait. Damn it to all the hells.

“We probably should,” I said reluctantly. “Come on – let’s go. We can take some time this afternoon to wash clothes, make hardtack or jerky... any other chores that we’ve been putting off.”

“About time,” Astarion observed. “I didn’t want to say anything, but you *do* all smell like a deep rothe herd in rut.”

“Oh,” Gale said. “Many thanks for not saying anything, Astarion.”

Back at camp, Wyll and I found ourselves mending and cleaning armour together, while other group members focused on washing, cooking, or organising our loot.

“Ugh,” I said, tossing away another piece of leather armour. “Leather and sweat are a hideous combination. You never truly get the stink out, do you? You just... polish it in a bit.”

“Hmm. Makes me glad to wear robes instead,” he said. “Plus, I quite like the gold trim.”

“Peacock,” I said, laughing at him. “I have to admit, though – I do quite like that set on you.”

He was wearing a red robe with an orange trim, embroidered with gold. Not his usual choice, but that was currently hanging on a length of rope tied between two pillars near the lava pits. This one brought out the orange specks in his eye, and made his red skin look darker and more vibrant.

“Flatterer,” he accused.

I raised an eyebrow and looked him up and down, letting a little heat enter my gaze.

“Umm,” he said, ducking his head to focus on the piece of armour he was cleaning. It was hard to tell from the colour of his skin, but I was fairly sure blood had rushed to his face.

“I love seeing you flustered,” I said softly.

He glanced up and smiled at me. “I like that you can do it,” he said. “It’s been a long time since someone managed to discompose the Blade so thoroughly.”

I felt a warmth grow within me, and simply sat with it for a while. The flirting was nice... but this bond was starting to feel quite a bit deeper. More secure. Hmm.

Maybe it was time to change the subject.

“This journey we’re on,” I said. “All of us. It feels as though every time we think we make progress, we find another three tasks we need to complete before we can get to where we need to be. First we wanted to be rid of these things in our heads. Easy, you’d think. That turned into saving the druid grove and rescuing Halsin. Halsin sent us to the Shadowlands. And once we reach this theoretical stronghold in the middle of the Shadowlands...”

“You think we’ll just find more problems to fix; more villains to slay?” Wyll asked.

“Well, the Absolute showed us three... prophets, or something, didn’t it? I can’t help but assume they’re not all going to be neatly waiting for us to take out with a single convenient blast.”

“Hells. I miss the simple life. Find a target. Hunt the target. Kill the target. Solve the problem. Repeat.”

“Mmm. Life seemed easier when the world looked simpler.”

“You’re saying the simple life is an illusion?”

“Wouldn’t you? I think life is rarely simple, even when we see it that way. You know what I mean – your view of the people we meet is rarely black and white.”

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right, though I don’t like it. I prefer simplicity. And I think I prefer the black and white thinking.”

“It is easier, isn’t it? But it’s hardly useful.”

“Correct again, damn you. Besides, I’d be the worst kind of hypocrite to stick to *good is good, evil is evil* thinking with a parasite in my brain and a devil as my patron.”

I nodded.

“Do you ever miss being young, though?” I asked. “With that feeling of being absolutely correct in every opinion and thought?”

“Oh. What a question!” Wyll said, tilting his head to look at me. “Do I miss the energy and exuberance of youth? The feeling that nothing could ever go wrong? Sometimes, very much so. Do I miss the reckless bravado that got me into ridiculous scrapes and could have gotten people killed? Not at all. I was lucky – not skilled.”

I think about his words. I’ve had similar thoughts myself, about my own life. Except... hmm.

“There was a carefree happiness that I both miss and almost... revile,” Wyll said, looking sad. “You know that feeling that the big people will manage everything, and you have no real worries, only childish concerns? Sometimes, in the midst of our dangers, that is appealing. But – it’s false. Someone needs to step up and take responsibility for dealing with this plague spreading through the Sword Coast, and if not us, then who?”

“I don’t remember ever having that carefree childhood happiness,” I said, shrugging. “We lived very different lives, I think. But yes, I think if anything, I sometimes miss the naivete – the lack of realisation that every action might spell our dooms. On the other side, though – I wouldn’t take it back for the world. My knowledge and experience is hard-won. I’ve come through with many, many scars. But wisdom, whatever I have, is priceless.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure I’ve gained enough wisdom to make up for the lack.”

I focused on the armour in front of me. Last piece, finally. There was another question I’d been wanting to ask him... but I wasn’t sure how well he’d take it. Let alone what sort of issues it might unleash. It had been gnawing at me, though, and would continue to until I talked it out.

“Can I ask you another question?” I asked. “This one’s a little more personal. It might be a little... too much.”

“Well. I’m up for the challenge. Try me. If it’s too much, I might just decline to answer.”

“That’s fair,” I said, nodding. “And you don’t have to answer now. I just... wonder. I know you honestly want a romance from the old tales – and I think you deserve exactly that. But I also wonder: is part of the reason that you’re concerned about your new devil form?”

Wyll audibly pulled in a breath, hard. “You certainly don’t ask the easy questions, do you?”

“Too much?”

“No, it’s alright.” He was silent for a while, lost in thought. “I think... I’ve always been very aware of my image. Mizora knew that better than I. She knew giving me a new form would rip that all away from me. You’re right – I can’t imagine anyone wanting me as I am now, not completely or wholeheartedly. Perhaps I do shy away from lovemaking out of fear just as much as seeking a higher calling.”

I put down the armour I’d been polishing, sat down next to him, and opened my arms. He curled around me, cheek resting on the top of my head.

“Hells. That you come to my arms so readily heals a wound in my heart at every turn,” he said, voice muffled in my hair.

“Thank you for sharing,” I said softly. “I know that wasn’t easy.”

“Mmm.”

“Can I share something in turn?”

“Please. I tire of feeling like the wounded deer, and you my erstwhile protector.”

“I told you the truth about why I was happy to wait to have you in my bedroll. But also... I’ve mostly ever been wanted for *what* I am, not *who* I am. Gnomes are... easily overlooked by most larger people. Condescended to. A fetish to some. A replacement for children. Small and... easily toyed with.”

Wyll’s arms tightened around me.

“Lovemaking is... a complex endeavour for me,” I said, my words halting. “A roll in the hay is nice and quickly forgotten, and who cares if one’s partner had motivations that are not the most pure? But add in love, and... I think I might get very confused.”

“But I asked for only love, not your body.”

“Mmm. I admit; I’m already quite confused.”

“I can’t imagine the pain of never being certain whether you were wanted for your outward appearance, or your inward reality.”

I looked up at him then and smiled. “Really? Because sometimes it feels as though we both resonate to that particular chord.”

“Ha! I think you have me there.”

“Once... before we kissed... you told me you’d done nothing to earn the honour of my affection. Do you remember what I said in reply?”

“That... I didn’t have to be the Blade of Frontiers for you?”

“Mmm.”

“I didn’t understand then, and I don’t think I understand now.”

I nestled my head against his shoulder and thought. “Your deeds come out of who you are. They aren’t you. They just... show who you are. I wanted to kiss you when you were kind to an orphan child, not when you killed a ravaging beast. Because it showed that you’re kind and gentle, and that you see those who are usually overlooked, and you *try to help*. That’s what I like most about you; not the killing automaton who can’t be stopped. He’s very handy in battle, mind, and as a friend. But I didn’t want to kiss you because of the services you could offer.”

“Huh.”

“You still seem confused.”

“I’ve lived my life understanding that my deeds define my very existence. That they are what I hold up to the world to say *I am here; this is who I am* . And you’re saying almost the exact opposite. It’s... difficult to even understand the perspective you look from.”

I nodded. “Give it time.”

So many shadows

Chapter Notes

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

The Shadowlands were... bleaker than Halsin had managed to convey. Imagine an entire land where sunlight could never penetrate; only shadows and a faint, eerie, greenish light emanating from the land itself.

We emerged from Grymforge's lift into the shadow curse, and I stumbled.

"Dash?" Wyll asked.

I knelt, wracked with nausea. "This is vile," I said. "Gods." I threw up and stumbled to my feet, stepping backwards to avoid the mess. Gale grabbed my arm to keep me upright.

"What's wrong?" Wyll asked Gale. "This feels terrible, but not..." he gestured to me, "not like this."

"He's a monk," Gale said. "I'm guessing one opposed to Shar. She might have particular venom towards those aligned with some gods."

"But he doesn't worship anymore?"

"Clearly that's not a concern."

"What can we do?" he asked.

"Hmm. I have an idea," Gale said. "Stand back a little." He cast a Dancing Lights spell around me, and I straightened, relieved.

"*Thank* you," I said. "That was... not pleasant."

"Do you have something like Sunlight?" Gale asked.

I nodded. I'd never seen much need for the blasted thing, and it did too good a job of announcing my history to the world, in my opinion – but if there was ever a time for it, he was right – it was now.

I cast Sunlight on the lyre I wore on my back, and it shone bright as day. The whole group sighed and relaxed slightly.

"Oh, that is a *nice* spell!" Karlach said, bouncing. "I feel better already. Can we find some heads to crack now?"

Wyll smirked and hugged me. "'Light in my darkness', indeed," he whispered in my ear.

“Careful,” I muttered. “Or I’ll cast it on my arse so you’re all following the light shining out of my arsehole all the way to Moonrise.”

Karlach guffawed. “I’d kinda like to see that, soldier.”

We traipsed through the Shadowlands, a small, moving patch of brightness in the dark. Unsurprisingly, we attracted more than our fair share of beasties. But wounds and bruises can be healed... unlike the shadow-cursed folk we found along the way. All we could do was put them out of their misery; their capacity to make choices was long gone.

At camp that night, Wyll came to sit by me.

“I don’t want to pry,” he said, diffident. “But I think... maybe it’s time we talked a little more.”

I nodded. “You’re right,” I said. “I definitely owe you a discussion. In fact – given my reaction when I found out your lineage, the words *overdue* and *keeping secrets* might not be amiss.”

He handed me a bowl of stew. “Eat, Dash. And perhaps... but I know a little something about stories that feel too painful to tell.”

I ate a spoonful of stew, more to be doing something than because I was hungry.

“Can we just cover the bare bones?” I asked. “I’m... weary, and this place... I feel it sucking at my joy and hope. I don’t want to revisit too many bad memories. I might not ever leave them again.”

Wyll put his arm around my shoulders. “We won’t let that happen,” he said gently. “We won’t abandon you to the shadows; whether they’re inside or outside. Tell me what you can.”

“I served at a monastery dedicated to Lathander,” I said. “Quite a distance from here. I was... content, I suppose? Not happy, but not unhappy either. Fulfilled. And then something happened. No one knows quite what. People died. *Friends* died. I couldn’t stay after that. I blamed Lathander.”

Wyll kissed my forehead.

“I thought my past was dealt with and left behind,” I said. “Honestly, I had no idea that I had any alignment... connection... to Lathander anymore. This is all a shock.”

Wyll looked sympathetic, but there was a hint of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“You look like you’d really prefer to be laughing at me right now,” I said, mildly confused and a little offended.

“I’ve been comparing you to the sunrise for weeks now, and you’re shocked to discover you still have an affinity to Lathander,” he said, the smile breaking through.

I sniggered a little. “Alright, that’s a fair criticism, I guess,” I said. “Gods. What an idiot. Without Gale’s quick thinking we could have been toast.”

“No, we would have retreated back into Grymforge and regrouped. Mildly annoying; hardly catastrophic.”

“Mmm... good point.”

“It does seem to be affecting you quite strongly, even here in camp.”

I nodded. “Definitely not my favourite of the curses we’ve encountered so far.”

“Eat your stew.”

I did what I was told and finished the bowl, putting it down.

“Come here,” Wyll said. “You look like you need a good hug.”

I cuddled into his side, head on his shoulder, and sighed. “You’re right,” I said softly. “This is better. I feel better in your arms.”

“Just what I wanted to hear,” he murmured. “Don’t worry, Dash. I have you.”

“How do you always end up comforting me against the night?” I asked, closing my eyes.

I startled awake in the gloom of very early morning, pinned down, and started to panic. Someone had been holding me down. Was still holding me down, and I needed to... wait. As I woke up, memories came back, and the nightmare loosened its grip. Wyll rolled away from me, face wary.

“Hi,” he whispered. “You’re awake?”

I nodded. “Did I hurt you?”

He shook his head. “I woke and you were struggling.”

“Nightmare. Thank you.”

“This place. We need to get through this as fast as we can.”

I nodded enthusiastic agreement. I was *not* enjoying the Shadowlands at all.

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, the whole *monk of Lathander* thing was almost completely accidental on my part.

I started writing about Dash and Wyll when I was halfway through playing Baldur's Gate 3, and I'd completely missed Lae'zel as a companion and the huge Lathander installation in the mountain pass. I picked Lathander as Dash's ex-god because Dash is very focused on light, love, healing, second chances, improving mind, body, and spirit... and the god genuinely seemed a good fit for him. Plus, I loved the idea of Wyll babbling on about Dash being his sun and never clicking that he was dating a sun soul monk because Dash hid all the bright-light spells.

Then I eventually stumbled across the Lathander references in-game and realised that my choice was going to have some *consequences*. Like Shar being particularly unhappy with him. And a whole chapter coming up later that downed me for a week. Welp. Never let it be said that I won't take a single lightly-made decision and run with it **really really hard**. I hope you like it! :-D

Last Light in a long while

Chapter Notes

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

By a stroke of luck, we stumbled on the Last Light Inn before we hit anything we couldn't handle.

"Protection ward up there," I said, pointing. "Big one. Light. Unless someone's seriously subverting a god's power... we should find allies there. At least, not enemies."

I reflected on my words with chagrin when Harpers tangled our feet with vines and trained arrows on us. They weren't standing down, either.

"Jaheira?" a guard asked. "What should we do with our... guests?"

She didn't look as though *let them go* was on the cards.

"Oh. My. Gods," Karlach said behind me. "Jaheira. She's right here. Talking to us. This is amazing."

"Jaheira?" I asked. "The Jaheira? High Harper of Baldur's Gate? Well, at least if I'm going to be murdered on the road, it'll be by a legend. I'm sure my shade will find that a comfort."

She barked a short laugh and produced an Illithid parasite in a jar. "You're infected," she said, and the archers prepared to shoot. "Tell Ketheric to stop. We can detect his agents now. And destroy them."

I sighed. We were outnumbered. We had no way of retreating. Even if we could take out all these Harpers, did we really want to effectively destroy what was obviously an outpost of the light because of a misunderstanding? All I could do was hope that Gale had a globe of invulnerability in his back pocket (*did robes have back pockets?*) and would think to use it.

Gale, I thought, trying to connect without looking at him. *Protection spell in 2, please? Because I think she's going to shoot on 3.*

On it, he thought back. Our parasites might have doomed us, but at least they were useful as well.

"Wait! Stop! What are you *doing?*" Mol yelled, skidding into view. "They saved us! They saved my friend from a snake! Why are you shooting them?"

Jaheira held up a hand, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I'm pretty sure everyone in the party echoed. "Illithid-infected Absolutists protected the grove?" she asked sharply.

Mol nodded. "Would trust these guys with my life. Don't say that about adults very often. They're all good, Jaheira."

“This makes no sense.”

“We’re infected,” I said. “But we’re not Absolutists. I’ll swear it to you. On the light, if I must.”

Jaheira sighed and shot me a sour look. “Come inside. We’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Well! That was tense,” Gale muttered. “Whatever happened to *Hi, would you like a cup of tea? Maybe a crumpet?* The real problem with the world going to pieces is that manners just fly out of the window.”

“Yes, Gale,” Wyll said. “That’s definitely the worst of it.”

We walked into the inn, admiring the light spell over the place. They clearly had a light-side cleric on their team, and a powerful one.

“Can you do something like that?” Karlach asked me. “That dome is *wicked* .”

I shook my head. “I’m a monk,” I said. “Or was. My order allowed us to learn the occasional light spell, but... that sort of thing is the domain of clerics. High-level clerics, at that. I can’t imagine how much power someone’s pumping out to keep that shield up and running in a place like this.”

“Pity,” Karlach said. “It would be great in camp. Looking up at the sky and just seeing darkness is starting to really get on my nerves.”

I reached out to Wyll before I realised I was doing it. The starless, moonless nights in the Shadow-cursed lands bothered me too. A lot. He gripped my hand, warm and reassuring, then let go.

The place was full of tieflings.

“Holy fuck,” Karlach said. “Guys. What are you all *doing* here?”

She got the story out of one of the guards. That they’d been on their way to Baldur’s Gate, skirting the shadow-cursed lands, and run into a company of Absolutists. Zevlor froze. Half of them ran into the shadows. Half were taken by the Absolutists.

“Shit,” Wyll said, looking grim. “At best, we have more people to get out of Moonrise. At worst...”

“... we’re going to have to take down friends who’ve been shadow-cursed,” I finished. “Maybe we should have escorted them after all. I thought what we’re doing was more important.”

“I don’t know that sitting around second-guessing our past decisions is the best way to spend our time,” Gale said. “Besides, I think you sometimes forget that we are only four people. Four extraordinary people, granted, but we’re hardly an army in and of ourselves. Like it or not, we can’t save everyone. Especially from themselves.”

I sighed. He was right, but I didn't like it.

"Alright," I said. "Let's head to camp. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm tired. I just want to sleep for a few days."

Gale fried up an omelette, fragrant with herbs and bacon. I sniffed at my plate. It didn't *look* particularly nice... but it smelled amazing. I took a bite and groaned.

"Gale, you're a master with a frying pan," I called out, and he grinned, up to his elbows in soapy water. Funny that the most up-in-the-astral one of us was also the one most likely to be found doing the simple chores.

"Sleep with me tonight?" Wyll asked, voice quiet. "You seem to cope better with this curse when you have physical contact with someone."

"Mmm..." I said, smiling at him. "There's an invitation that's impossible to resist."

He smiled and ducked his head. I took his empty plate and stacked it on mine, putting them aside.

"Are you sure you're comfortable with this?" I asked. "I know you're doing it out of care for me, and I appreciate it more than I can say... but it's a lot of intimacy, and we were trying to take things slowly."

He reached out with one arm, and I snuggled underneath it, against his side. "It's a little fast," he admitted. "But I like looking after you. The gods all know you've looked after me through my own heartaches. And not just me. I can see you starting to feel better whenever I touch you, Dash. To be honest... I'm more concerned that I thoroughly enjoy falling asleep with you in my arms."

I looked up at him and couldn't think of a single cogent reply. "May I kiss you?" I finally settled on, and rose to my knees to touch my lips to his, just a gentle caress with a flare of warmth inside me.

"Mmm," he said, closing his eyes for a moment. "Come on. We should check on the others before we turn in."

This was usually my nightly ritual; dropping in on anyone who seemed unusually emotional or flat to see if they wanted to talk or hug. It seemed that Wyll was prepared to back me up in this too, when I started to fade.

Much to my surprise, though, everyone seemed fine. Shadowheart almost glowed; the shadows almost suited her. Well, she *was* a Sharran cleric called *Shadowheart*, I supposed. Maybe it was more than a name. Karlach was still buzzing from meeting and almost being killed by Jaheira. Best day ever, somehow. Weird woman.

The camp was eventually quiet; everyone else was asleep or, in Astarion's case, out hunting. I wasn't sure how he was managing to hunt with the hungry shadows all around, but trusted

that the centuries-old spawn could look after himself.

“Thank you,” I said when Wyll and I went to bed. He arranged himself on his side, pillows supporting his head, arm out. I lay on my back, head on his shoulder, cheek resting on his chest. “You’ve taken on a lot of responsibility here. I appreciate it with all my heart.”

Wyll shook his head. “Just doing what you would do for us, in an instant,” he said, kissing my cheek. “It *is* making me grasp just how many seemingly small things you do for everyone, though.”

I shrugged. “Part of leadership, love.”

“Mmm. I think that might be the first time you’ve called me *love* .”

“Do you like it?”

“When you call me *love* , it makes me want to write poetry and kiss you all at once.”

“That sounds awkward,” I observed.

“Not if I’m writing on your skin as I kiss you,” he whispered. “May I show you?”

“Please,” I said, turning my head to kiss him.

He kissed my lips lightly, claws sliding in feather-light touches over my chest. The curse slid away from my awareness, and I focused in on the twin sensations raising thin lines of fire through my nerves.

His tongue licked slowly over my lips, and I opened my mouth to him, tongues touching lightly, lips caressing. He moved his hand down to my belly, tracing whorls and spirals over my shirt and trousers.

He laid feathery kisses down my neck. “Gods, Wyll,” I said, tilting my head back to give him better access.

“Mmm?” he said, lips gently caressing my throat, claws tracing patterns on my hip. Every touch felt like it was drawn in fire. Every centimetre of skin felt alive, waiting for him.

“I take it all back. Not awkward at all. Except perhaps trying to sleep next to you, remembering you touching me like this.”

He drew back a little and smiled at me, looking satisfied. “If it drives away the nightmares, it’s utterly worth a little... awkwardness.”

Ahhh. I hadn’t put those particular puzzle pieces together. Clever. I reached up to stroke his cheek. “I don’t deserve you.”

He kissed my forehead. “I beg to differ, dear. Go to sleep.”

Sleep was difficult with my desire raised, and the subject of it so close and so very approachable, but I eventually managed to drift off into slumber. Whether the frustration or the cleric's spell was to thank, my sleep was nightmare-free, and I woke fully aware of where I was, and who was holding me close.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry; I haven't abandoned Dash and Wyll! I have a pile of (paying) work to do at the moment, and I discovered a hole in the plot just after this that I need to fix before posting more.

I've written a lot more of this story already. Thanks to the way I write, though - chaotically! - I often discover plot holes at about this point in the editing process. Sigh. Anyway, my point is that there's definitely more story available and on the way.

In the meantime, if you're keen for more Wyll content (I see you there, Astarion!), I posted a standalone Wyll/Dark Urge piece. You might see a different side of Wyll.

Shadows from the past

Jaheira, once she decided to trust us, had some useful information. Useful, but unnerving in the extreme. According to her, the person in charge at Moonrise Towers was Ketheric Thorm himself – the person she helped to kill almost a century ago. The very person who'd unleashed the Shadowcurse on the land around us.

“But why?” I asked. “You said he was a Selunite. What changed?”

“If I understand correctly... his wife died. In his pain, he turned to Shar.”

Wyll's hand rested on my shoulder.

“But it sounds as though he's a Sharran no longer.”

“Unless Shar herself is working through the Absolute.”

“That... does not sound like something Shar would do,” Shadowheart said slowly. “We Sharrans will operate in the shadows, true, and the truth is only a tool in our hands. Ahh!” rubbing her hand, “But... Shar brings worshippers to herself in the night. In times of pain and grief. She has no need of world-ending plots and mindflayers when people will come to her willingly to lose themselves in the darkness.”

“There is a lot of pain and grief going around, what with the Absolute cult causing havoc everywhere we go,” Gale observed. “Perhaps we don't dismiss this out of hand. There are gods, like Shar, who must be amassing power from all of this.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Regardless, it sounds as though getting to Moonrise Towers is still our best chance of figuring this all out. It's going to be a tough slog, though.”

“You seem capable,” Jaheira said. “And we have help to offer. Our cleric can bless you – it will help protect you against the Shadowcurse.”

“That should help with your malaise,” Gale said to me.

I nodded. “We'll take any help we can get, at this point.”

Getting a blessing against the curse was simple – if you ignore the kidnapping attempt.

Isobel was the cleric of Selune who had erected the very impressive light dome over Last Light Inn. That made her a very valuable person to know... and apparently the Absolutists thought so too. We made it upstairs and talked to her, and she threw the blessing over us like rice at a wedding, so simple.

She coughed, and I frowned. There was an odd scent to her, like an ancient grave just opened. Dusty. Musty. Then it dissipated, and I opened my mouth to ask her if she was well.

That's when Marcus showed up to take her to Ketheric. With a group of winged horrors. Because of course.

We dispatched the horrors, Marcus among them, and ran out to the common area of the inn. It was... pandemonium. Harpers fought winged horrors. The tiefling children screamed about Mol. We jumped in to help, and soon mopped them up.

"Phew," Gale said, wiping his face. "That was fraught. What did Ketheric want with a Selunite cleric?"

"Probably to remove this outpost as a threat, I suppose," I answered. "Remove the cleric; remove the protection. Everyone falls to the Shadowcurse. No more opposition sitting here growing in strength and numbers."

"Hmm. Brutal but logical."

Jaheira handed us a moonlantern taken from Marcus's body, and wished us well. Unspoken was a wish to see a little less of us for a while. We hadn't brought this trouble to her Harper outpost – had we? – but we were very much reminders of her dead and injured people.

"Hang on," Wyll said, as I headed for the door. "That song. Someone was singing that the entire time we were fighting."

Thaniel and me...

Are climb climb climbing up a tree...

"Wyll, it's a song. What are you on about?" Shadowheart asked.

Wyll opened a door to rooms on the ground floor, underneath Isobel's. "Councillor Florrick," he said, grim-faced.

"Wyll," she said. "I wish I had time to catch up. I'd like to hear what's happened to you. But _"

"You need to get back to Baldur's Gate," he said, nodding. "We'll continue to Moonrise Towers. But... that song. Who's singing?"

"Your father is kidnapped, and you're worried about a single Fist?"

"My father taught me responsibility to all in our care, Councillor."

She sighed. "Alright. Talk to him. I need to get on the road."

The man who was singing was lost in a dream state... and seemed to have been so for a century.

"Found him wandering by himself," the Fist caring for him said. "I don't know how he survived out there. He seems to have been one of Eltan's original men."

I frowned. Everyone else succumbed almost immediately to the curse. This man had been wandering out there for decades untouched? Was he an agent of Ketheric?

“We need to talk to Halsin,” Wyll said. He turned to me. “Back to camp?”

I nodded. We were all weary, and had wounds to deal with. I wasn't sure where he was going with this, but he seemed sure that it was worth pursuing.

When we got to camp, Wyll grabbed my hand. “Remember Halsin asking us to help keep an eye out for a little boy called Thaniel?” he asked.

I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling a fool. “Shit. You utter perfect angel. You saved us from missing something vital.”

“Ha! Honestly, it was driving me almost to distraction while I was fighting that winged Fist. I kept hearing this little voice singing while dark horrors were attacking the entire inn, and it was singing about *climbing a tree* of all things. It reminded me of my childhood in Baldur's Gate. Ironically, now I know the room was full of Flaming Fist.”

“I could kiss you right now.”

“Mmm. Hold that thought, dearest. Let's talk to Halsin first. He's been waiting a century.”

We told Halsin what we'd found, and the big elf's eyes lit up for the first time that I'd known him.

“This... it must be Thaniel. He must know how to find him. *Thank you*,” he said to Wyll, grabbing him in a bear hug. “I must go. Meet me there when you can.” He let go of Wyll and strode away.

I grinned at Wyll. “You certainly made *his* day,” I said.

“You seem happier,” Wyll said.

I put down my empty mug and stretched. “I feel better,” I admitted. “That blessing has helped. I still feel the shadows pulling at me, but it's easier to ignore them. To focus on the things that bring me joy.” I nudged him gently.

“I'm glad,” he said, face soft. “I don't like seeing you that way. Drained of your happiness and optimism. It makes me realise just how much I rely on you to lift my spirits every day. Such a selfish thought.”

I leaned against his side, and he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Love, you've been anything but selfish.”

“I don't know,” he said, thoughtful. “Looking after you is my best chance of survival; perhaps my best chance of happiness. It hardly seems unselfish to care for the person who loves me.”

“Mmm... I suppose you could make that argument. But what is selfishness, then? We’re all better off with people around us. Perhaps selfishness simply refuses to acknowledge that.”

“Why are we suddenly discussing philosophy?” he asked, face crinkling in amusement.

I shrugged. “You started it. You’re talking to a monk, love – philosophical discussions come rather naturally.”

He laughed. “That’s a fair point. But I meant to ask – do you want to sleep with me again tonight? Or do you think the blessing is protecting you enough to be alright by yourself?”

I rested my head against his chest, enjoying the texture of his shirt against my cheek and the scent of his skin and sweat underneath. “Both, I think,” I said, looking up at his face in time to see him grin. “Let’s try apart. You could do with a night to yourself, I suspect. And while I like sleeping in your arms, it does have its... disadvantages.”

“Oh?” he said, eyebrow raised.

“May I kiss you?” I asked, drawing away to kneel beside him.

He pulled me into a slow, long kiss, and I felt every touch echoed deep in my loins. I pulled away, breathing heavily. “I take it back,” I said. “Nothing about this could be a disadvantage. Spending the nights longing to touch you? I’ll be there. You might be a torment, but this is the most delicious torment I’ve ever had the pleasure of facing.”

He laughed, ducking his head. “Sweet talker,” he accused.

I grinned at him.

I woke in a narrow, hard bed. A faint grey light permeated the small cell, enough for me to dress and find my shoes. The gong sounded again, and I hurried out of the cell and down the hall to join my fellows. We sat on mats in the cold, dark temple. Nearby, Wyll sat, cross-legged. He smiled at me in welcome, then closed his eyes as the prayers began.

Light slowly spilled through the stained glass as we meditated on the light, and Lathander’s dawn broke. It separated into a rainbow of corruscating colour bathing us all. I breathed in the light, and let it wash away all my doubts and fears.

Someone screamed. I opened my eyes. The cleric at the front of the room, standing in front of the window. He was staring out into empty air with a look of horror. “Help us,” he said. “Rosymorn. They’re overrunning us. We need help. Please.” He collapsed, and I leapt to my feet to run to him. I reached him, sat him up to check for injuries, and tried to help pull him back to consciousness.

I looked back to Wyll. His eyes were open, one of them streaming tears. He met my gaze, then fell, boneless. I knew without checking that he was dead, taken with Lathander in his grief. I handed the cleric to a fellow monk and ran to Wyll, screaming his name, knowing I was too late, knowing he was gone, that it was hopeless.

“Hey,” someone said, shaking my shoulder.

I flailed, hitting out.

Wyll grabbed my wrist, leaning back.

I froze.

“A dream,” he said, quietly. “Are you awake?”

I nodded. The sky was grey and the campfire was down to embers, but I didn’t need to see his face to know who was with me. “Thanks,” I whispered.

“I think we overestimated how alright you were,” he said.

I pulled in a breath, and tears took me over.

“Hey,” he said, sitting down and enfolding me in an embrace. “Dearest. Tell me about it. Take away its power.”

“It was silly,” I said. “I dreamt you were at the monastery. When... and you died in front of me.”

“I’m right here,” he said softly.

I leaned against his chest and inhaled. “Mmm, you are,” I said. I was shaking, I knew.

“You said friends died?” he asked.

“They did. It... we were meditating. Connecting to Lathander, to the light. A message came through, and the cleric fell, so I went to help. Others... were still meditating when... it was like the light turned into a pit of despair. Most pulled out of it; some didn’t.”

“Shit.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I said. “I’m not sure anyone ever found out. But... Lathander struck us down that day, all unmeaning. And I... lost my faith in the gods to be good. Better than us.”

“Because he killed your friends,” Wyll said, stroking my cheek, playing with the hairs of my beard.

I nodded, curled against him. “And because he never told us *why*. I think that hurt the most. Too much like the sun – too remote, too bright, too uncaring.”

“If that’s an example of the good gods, who needs evil ones?”

“Mmm.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“It really was.”

After a while, I stirred. “Thank you, love. I needed this.”

“It sounds as though this is a story you’ve been needing to tell someone,” he said.

“Maybe. I’d hoped it would stay in the past where it belonged.”

“Hmm. You saw how well that worked for me.”

I nodded. He had a point – *keeping things in the past* was usually code for *repressing things I don’t want to talk about*. “Let’s make tea. I’m cold, and I don’t think I’ll be getting back to sleep any time soon.”

Old cheese and stale buns

Chapter Notes

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

“We have been foolishly idle too long,” Lae’zel stated. “We must get to the creche. I must report in. We can’t delay any further for these... ferals and strays!”

I sighed. The githyanki creche was not an appealing prospect, and it was one I’d been avoiding. Lae’zel was an... acquired taste, and she had mellowed a lot since I first met her aboard the nautiloid. An entire creche full of Lae’zels, only more so? Yikes. I didn’t think their ‘cure’ was worth exploring... but Lae’zel did. And realistically, they had so much more experience with mindflayers than Faerûn mortals. Surely they’d know something useful that we didn’t. Come to think of it – we didn’t know a lot, so it was hardly a challenge.

“Fine,” I said. “You’re right. I said we’d go, and we should. Besides, we could do with gathering some fresh food. We’re down to old cheese and stale buns.”

“Heyyy, don’t talk about Withers like that!” Karlach said, bouncing. “We moving out, then? Mountain pass?”

“How about just east of there?” Wyll said, grinning at Karlach. “We can grab some supplies, give Dash a chance to recover a bit, and then move through the pass tomorrow morning, when we’re fresh.”

Lae’zel sighed. “You people mess around far too much. Can we *move*?”

“Gods, this is better,” I said, basking in the sun, fishing rod in one hand. I turned my face up to the light, eyes closed, turning my vision red.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see the divine connection before,” Wyll said, chuckling. “You look like a cat in front of a warm fire.”

“Mmm. There is something marvellous about a sunny morning,” I said. “Regardless of how I might feel about its... patron.”

“How *do* you feel about him?” Wyll asked, voice curious. “Lathander, I mean.”

I sighed. “I was angry. Confused, of course. But now I’m mostly disappointed, I suppose. I know the gods aren’t perfect – no one can be – but sometimes they fail so, *so* catastrophically.”

“I suppose the more power you have, the worse your mistakes get,” Wyll said, jiggling his fishing rod. “I remember when I learnt to cast Eldritch Blast. I rattled a few windowpanes, at best, if one went awry. Now one could level a rickety house. Same mistake; different power level.”

I thought about that for a while. That perhaps the sheer power of the gods was partial excuse for the scope of their accidents.

“I suppose,” I said after a while. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. But you have a point.”

My rod jerked, and I spent some time reeling in a fish, pulling in the line by hand. I took the hook from its mouth and placed it in the bucket of water nearby.

“This reminds me of when I was a boy,” Wyll said. “Sneaking out of the palace. Going fishing down by the river. Getting in trouble when I was inevitably caught.”

“So your sneaking has improved, then?” I asked, smirking.

“Ha! Just a little.”

The sun was past its zenith when we filled the bucket.

“My fishing has also improved,” Wyll noted. “Once upon a time, there’d have been nothing but crabs in that bucket.”

I laughed. “A lucky thing, too.” I put the bucket in the shade and took a bottle of wine from my pack. “But we have done our job, and we have the rest of the afternoon to ourselves.”

“Mmm... a treasure beyond price in these troublesome and turbulent times,” Wyll said, collapsing onto the ground in an elegant sprawl of limbs. “*A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou...* well, I can do without the bread.”

I grinned at him as I sat down and handed him the open wine bottle. “I’m sure you can find something to nibble on.”

He laughed and took a swig of the wine, eyeing me. “Hmm. I think perhaps I could.”

I took the bottle and sipped. Not bad – it was a light red, a little sour, but not too sharp. “Where would you start?” I asked, feeling daring.

He reached out and stroked a claw lightly in a line down the side of my neck, trailing lazy circles around a spot at the base where it curved into my shoulder. “Right here,” he said, voice husky. “Where all the nerves meet and converge. I’d kiss, and lick, and nibble you there, until you felt it in your fingers... your toes... your loins.”

I pulled in a breath of air, imagining exactly that, feeling a lick of warmth run through me. “Then what?” I asked.

“Mmm. Pull you onto my lap, so you feel me hard against your arse,” he said, face intent. “Bite you softly on the other side, here,” his finger moved to the other side of my neck, “until you cry out for me.”

My cock stiffened. “Gods, Wyll,” I said, breathing hard, “Best not, if you want us to stay at all chaste.”

His face changed from a look of seduction to deep hurt, and he stood and strode away.

“Shit,” I swore. I squished the cork partway back into the wine bottle neck, checked on the fish (still swimming in their bucket) and went after him.

He wasn’t far away, sitting in a clearing, leaning against a tree and staring at the sky. I paused. He didn’t seem as upset as I’d expected.

“Hey,” I said, hesitant.

“I’m sorry for running off,” he said. “I umm... needed the space.”

“Do you still need space?” I asked, hovering awkwardly.

He shook his head, still looking at the sky. “I think I’m being silly,” he said. “It felt as though you didn’t want me.”

I knelt down nearby, mindful of his comment about space.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Wyll... haven’t I showed you just how much I want you? Gods, I can barely stop touching you.”

He finally met my gaze. His mouth was downturned, eyes sad. “You say the right things, and I shouldn’t doubt you. It’s just...”

Ahh. “I’ve been too controlled?” I asked.

He grimaced.

“Gods, how ironic,” I said, putting my head in my hands. “Here I am, trying to show how much I love you by restraining my base urges...”

Wyll snorted. “And I take it as a sign you don’t? Hells.” He laughed a little. The sadness was still there – I didn’t think he was convinced, deep down – but at least we were talking.

“I think I sort of understand how you feel,” I offered. “This... transitioning to being together... I’m not sure I’m doing as well with it as I’d like.”

Pain flashed through his face, and he tensed.

“Please don’t run away from me again,” I said, heart heavy. “I can’t...”

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “I’m here,” he said. “I just don’t understand.”

“I’m *not* saying I don’t want this. Want *you*. In my heart, everything. Just... it’s more frightening than I expected. I’m scared. This... I’m starting to reach out for you when I feel scared or worried and I want reassurance. I do it without even thinking about it. You’ve helped me survive through the shadow curse in a way that I’m not sure anyone else could have. It’s an improvement, a blessing, but...”

“... now you have something to lose,” Wyll finished. He bowed his head, still gripping my hand. “Hells, I think you just punched straight through to the heart of the matter.”

I sighed. Somehow, hearing him say that made me relax. If we were *both* panicking about getting closer, maybe this was, oddly enough, alright. “You too?” I asked.

“Me too,” he said, mouth bending upwards just a bit. He leant back against the tree and looked up at the sky again. He patted the ground next to him.

I sat next to him and rested my head on his shoulder, feeling him relax as I did.

“Hells,” he said. “I panicked. Holding you at night, Dash – it feels... *right* . Even when it’s uncomfortable, I care not a jot. Feeling you against me, the trust you put in me... it’s perfect. But it can’t be perfect. It has to crack. It has to *fail* .”

I nodded and breathed in his scent. It felt like we’d arrived at a crossroads. “So what happens if it fails?” I asked.

Wyll jerked. “Huh. I suppose... one of us leaves? No, if we do that, bad things result. Hmm. I suppose we learn to be friends again, instead. Is that... can we do that?”

“Hold me?” I asked, feeling a deep sadness. I wasn’t sure if we were talking about letting this go, or just talking about what to do if it came about sometime in the future, but it left me feeling hopelessly lonely.

Wyll looked down at me and opened his arms. “Come here, dear,” he said. “Hells, you look as though I told you I was leaving on the spot.”

I knelt facing him, and he pulled me into a tight hug. I put my arms around him, head on his shoulder, and breathed, but I couldn’t help the tears rising in my eyes. “I’d rather be friends with you than not have you around,” I said, my voice annoyingly unsteady. “I think it would hurt for a while, though. A lot.”

His arms tightened around me. “Me too,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “So maybe we should stop talking about making this fail, and start thinking about how to make it succeed.”

“Trust you to be the sensible one,” I said, kissing his neck.

“Mmm,” he said, tilting his head away from me to give me more room. “I’m not used to being the sensible one.”

I let my lips slide over one of the ridges on his neck, and caught my breath as the bumps played along my lips like a vibrating caress. “So,” I said, dragging my attention back to the problem at hand, “how do we do that, love?”

“I know it’s a radical idea,” he said, “but... would you consider losing some of that monk-like control for me?”

I grinned and sat back on my heels to look him in the eye. “Love... gods, I’d love to. But...” I sighed.

“You don’t want it to end with me feeling I’ve betrayed my ideals?” he asked, suddenly serious.

I nodded. “Wyll... I know this is important to you,” I said, stroking his cheek. “I want you to have the courtship you deserve.”

He ducked his head. “Hells. You’re sweet, and I love that you’re trying so hard to give me what I asked for, Dash. But... I feel unlovable like this. I feel wrong. Can you set that aside for a while and let me worry about my own ideals?”

I lifted his chin with a finger, and traced his lips with a thumb. “May I kiss you, love?”

He drew me down to press lips together, and I stroked my tongue over his lips. When he opened his mouth to me, I made a hungry sound and straddled his lap, deepening the kiss, one hand on the back of his neck to keep his mouth right where I wanted it. I pushed further into his mouth, tasting him, filling my head with the feeling of his lips and tongue sliding against mine.

He let his hands slide down my back to my arse, pulling me snug against him, so I could feel his cock hardening against mine. I let myself focus on the stiff, hot thickness of him, pushing against me, and what he could be doing with it. What *I* could be doing with it.

I pushed my tongue into his mouth in a slow rhythm, letting my body push lightly against him with every stroke, so that he couldn’t possibly ignore the increasing bulk of my cock against him. He groaned into my mouth, his claws suddenly flexing into my arse, and I broke away to cry out.

“Sorry,” he murmured, but I shook my head and grabbed the little tail of braids at the base of his head. I pulled, and his eyes glazed.

“Do it again,” I said, and his claws stabbed small pains that felt... perfect.

I kissed him again, harder, biting a little at his lower lip, as his claws slid down my back. I pulled away to bury my face in his neck, feeling the ridges and scars against my cheek. I turned my head to kiss a scar, feeling the texture against my lips, and got caught up in the sensation. I explored the feeling of moving sensitive lips and tongue over the hard and soft areas of his skin, licking and nibbling and kissing, until his breathing turned ragged. His skin tasted like salt, that faint tang of sulphur in the background.

Wyll’s fingers drifted slowly over my arse and legs, claws digging into the fabric of my trousers whenever I hit a particularly sensitive spot on his neck and throat.

I drew back, gazing at him with eyes hazed with desire. I pushed his shirt up so I could press skin against skin, and groaned. He pulled off the shirt, and I felt another stab of heat that went straight to my cock. Gods, but he was beautiful. I pulled off my shirt in turn, and indulged the feel of skin sliding over skin.

“Hells, Dash,” he whispered.

I slipped my hands over his naked back, stroking lightly along each ridge, rubbing against him, chest to chest, cheek to cheek. “Gods, you feel good,” I whispered. “I want to touch and taste you all over.” I sucked his earlobe into my mouth, biting it gently, and he made a noise of pleasure. “I want to play with every centimetre of your skin,” I said, “and find out exactly how each part of you tastes.”

I slid my hands around from his back to his chest, stroking down the surprisingly hair-free, muscular expanse. I bent down to lick over one nipple, and he groaned. Hmm... sensitive, were they? That could be a lot of fun to explore.

His cock twitched as his hands squeezed my arse, and I broke away, groaning. Gods, I wanted to loose his cock from its confines and play with it until he climaxed. I wanted to grab his horns as he took my cock in his mouth, those soft lips sliding over it, his clever forked tongue coaxing moans from me.

“I don’t have much more control to lose,” I murmured. “Gods, Wyll. I want to fuck you. I want to suck your cock so hard and fast that you scream my name when you spill your seed over me. I want to grab you by your horns and kiss you so hard that your lips bruise.”

He stared at me, wide-eyed, breathing hard, his hands stroking over my arse and hips. We balanced on the edge of giving in to those urges for a few moments, then his face cleared. “By all the hellbeasts in Avernus, Dash, I’m starting to understand why you keep an iron control.”

I laughed, letting some of the tension dissipate through it. I took a deep breath and let it out, stroking his cheek, pulling myself away from that edge. “I’m glad,” I said. “Mmm... gods, the things you do to me. I look at you, and desire rises like an unquenchable flame. You touch me, and I want nothing more than to lose myself in the feel of your body against mine.”

“Mmm...” he said, closing his eyes. “I think... you made your point rather satisfactorily.”

“Did I?” I whispered, pushing my hips forward, my cock hard against his stomach. “I could try again, if you like. Maybe I have more than one point to make.”

I watched his breathing turn ragged again as he bit his lip. I grinned. Somehow, watching him like this was giving me back a modicum of self-control, while giving me even more ideas of what I’d like to be doing to him.

“Another wonderful point,” he said through gritted teeth, and I laughed. He twisted to dump me off his lap, and ended overbalancing and lying on top of me, with me on my back on the ground.

“I’m not sure how this is supposed to help,” I said, laughing up at him.

Wyll laughed, face soft. “Why does it feel as though all is magically right between us?” he asked.

“Oh, engage my logic! Smart,” I teased. But I sobered, recognising the sincerity of the question. “Seriously, though? We know we’re both scared of this thing between us – but we

want to try and make it work, right?" I ended on a note of uncertainty, that feeling of desperate vulnerability uncurling inside me again.

Wyll nodded, face serious. "Dash, dear... when we talked, I realised I have two options... to do something that scares me, knowing I could lose you... or commit to losing you for certain. I can't know what tomorrow holds for us. But I can do my best to hold you close and love you. Anticipating pain is ridiculous when there's so much joy right here."

I nodded, feeling my heart warm and chase away the fear for now. "You're right," I said. "I want to be with you. Whatever comes."

"But hells, Dash," he said, moving so that he lay next to me, "That... passion... you showed for me. That's really how you feel? How you want me?"

"Mmm..." I said, part of me wanting to curse him for reminding me of my very aroused state. "Wyll, love, that's what I'm holding in check every time I look at you, let alone touch you. You, uhhh... you inflame me. In the best possible way." I looked at him with what I'm fairly sure was a besotted smile. "Truth be told, it feels a little uncomfortable. Wanting you like this. Admitting it."

I saw a shadow cross his face, and sighed. I knew that shadow well. I was fairly sure a similar one crossed mine if anyone had the temerity to say anything like that to me.

"Come and cuddle with me," I said. "Tell me something poetic and beautiful that will take my mind off my loins aching for you."

He laughed and curled himself around me, an arm under my head. "When I wake with you in my arms, dear," he said, "I feel as though I've drunk from a bottle of the finest wine ever made, and then found the bottle still full, always replenishing itself."

"Mmm..." I said, cheek against his bare chest, breathing in the scent of his skin. "I swear, Wyll, when you're whispering sweet poetic words to me, I feel like nothing can be wrong in the world."

When we got back to camp, Mizora appeared in front of us. But in projection form, I noticed curiously. Not in person.

"Mizora," I said, tired. "What do you want?"

"Not you," she said, sneering at me. "Pup, your lover is getting out of control and wasting my time."

"It sounded a fair question," Wyll said. "What do you want?"

She rolled her eyes. "So unfriendly, this little puppy. Shall I yank your leash again? Or do we need stronger measures to teach you some manners?"

"I have to take your commissions," he said. "I don't have to be polite about it. But you're the one in a hurry. Perhaps you have better things to do than arguing semantics?"

She sniffed, but straightened. “I have a job for you, *pet*. The Absolutists captured an asset of Zariel’s. You’re going to Moonrise Towers anyway – free the asset while you’re there. That’s the job. Simple, don’t you think? Or *do* you think?”

“And this *asset* is our problem how?” I asked. “Will it attack us? What’s to stop us just leaving it there?”

Mizora sighed in an affectation of boredom, but I saw her eyes widen at my words. She *really* didn’t want us to refuse this job. “Because if Wyll doesn’t do this, he ends up as a lure in the Blood War for the rest of his life,” she said.

“This might be Wyll’s problem, but it’s hardly ours,” I said, watching her carefully. “If Wyll goes to Moonrise Towers by himself, he’ll end up in a pod next to the asset’s, at best.”

If we could just manoeuvre her a little more... maybe. Maybe this could work.

“Ooh. You’re quick to abandon a lover when he gets inconvenient, aren’t you?” she said, laughing. “How delicious. Wyll, how does it feel to be kicked to the kerb when you’re no longer a novelty? I would *never* do that to you.”

I reached out, trying to connect to Gale’s parasite. *Gale?* I sent.

What are you doing? he asked silently.

I need you to ask her to break Wyll’s pact if we do this.

Oh! Clever.

I bit the inside of my cheek. This was a huge gamble.

“He *is* getting troublesome,” I said. “All this running about after a cambion – it’s getting ridiculous. And for what benefit? He can barely shoot straight.”

“If we do this – if we help Wyll rescue this asset – you release Wyll from his pact,” Gale put in.

I did my best to look annoyed.

Mizora threw back her head, chortling. “Oh, this is too rich. The lover is sick of him, and the friend steps in to keep him around. I like this. Sure. Why not? This should be entertaining. Agreed. I’ll let him out of his pact. *After* he saves Zariel’s asset.”

She disappeared, and I grabbed Wyll’s hand. “Let me explain?”

He shook his head, dropping to his knees. “I heard you talking to Gale,” he said, opening his arms. “You sneaky little bastard.”

I wrapped my arms around him, kissing his cheek. “Thank all the gods,” I said. “I thought you’d be so upset with me.”

He chuckled. "I didn't know what you were doing, but I did my best to look angry about it."

"We're OK?" I asked.

"All good. Thank you, dear. Though I won't celebrate just yet. When she realises what she's done, she'll look for ways to weasel out of the agreement and pull me back in. Mark my words."

"Thanks, Gale," I said, smiling at him from Wyll's arms. "You did a great job."

Gale bowed extravagantly. "At your service," he said, smiling. "That was rather fun."

Chapter End Notes

JFC I feel like this story is taking *slow burn* and walking very very slowly with it.

I swear this was supposed to be straight-up erotica when I started it. But the characters grabbed me, and I wanted to stay true to canon, and before you knew it I had a book full of cuddles and kisses instead of cocks bouncing around and spurting juices. It's rather upsetting.

Regardless, my boys *are* finally getting at least a bit of action, and I hope you enjoy it!

I'll be posting a bit less frequently for the next week or two; I have a lot of edits to make this week, and a stack of paid work to do, so I can't focus as hard as I'd like on updating this. I am looking forward to seeing what y'all think of the creche scenes coming soon, though.

Love, Rowan

Light turned to darkness

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Depression, talk of suicide

Please be careful with yourself. I think these creche chapters are fairly tame, but hells, writing them sent me into a tailspin, so reading them might do the same to someone. I don't know. I'd rather you stay safe, you know?

I've taken a few liberties with the geography in and around the creche, to make descriptions of the travel simpler. I figure it really doesn't add much to the story to be more correct, and gets a little tedious when you've already played it through yourself. Let me know if it bugs you, though; I'm happy to consider revising.

Love, Rowan

*When your lips touch mine
Sweeter than cinnamon
I am undone
Defences come tumbling
Down like a storm
I'm left exposed
Vulnerable to your touch*

*Could I ever find a face
As beautiful and dear
That makes my breath catch
Makes my heart melt
In the fire of your regard*

*In your sharpest claw
I feel your tenderest touch
Like feathers on my skin
Burning for you
I'll wait in flames
A beacon of love and desire
Forevermore*

I sighed, frowning at the poem, but put the quill down. I definitely had my limits as a poet, and sadly, they were quite low. But... Wyll had liked the last one I wrote for him, once we got over the whole Astarion mix-up. Maybe he'd forgive my terrible scansion and imagery, and appreciate the sentiment, if nothing else. I folded it, briefly considered writing his name on the outside to avoid misunderstandings, then shook my head. We were past those, I thought. So I slipped it onto his bedroll, and went to make some tea and breakfast.

As we walked to the mountain pass, Wyll slipped his hand into mine.

“You spoil me,” he said. “Dash, thank you. I’ll carry it next to my heart, with the other one.”

I looked up at him to see his face looking more open, more relaxed, than I’d seen... well, possibly ever.

“You liked it?” I asked, feeling another stir of frustration about my lack of skill.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “But I also appreciate the reminder of how you see me. Dash, that was incredibly thoughtful.”

We were approaching the mountain pass, and Lae’zel motioned us to hide. Someone was there before us – a githyanki patrol, complete with red dragon.

“Lae’zel, do you have any authority here?” I whispered.

She shook her head. “Not senior enough,” she breathed.

“Then we sneak past, and hope for the best,” I said, and handed out invisibility potions.

The potions worked until we were almost past, almost out of sight, and then a yell and a dragon roar behind us let us know that at least one of us had been spotted. Instead of turning to fight, we sprinted towards the pass. Githyanki we might happily face; a dragon? Not today, thank you. Lae’zel was unimpressed when we reached the other side, but she usually was when a solution didn’t involve entrails.

She led us up the mountain path, and we caught our first sight of the creche. I paused.

“There’s something... those buildings. Why do they look familiar?”

Lae’zel shrugged. “I know not. Follow me.”

As she led us closer, a statue loomed out of the undergrowth. It was gilded – and once it must have shone brightly over the valley below every sunrise. My heart dropped. I knew what this place was now. And for the first time, I knew what had happened to it. This was Rosymorn Monastery. And the githyanki happened to it.

I fell to my knees in front of the statue. It leant at an angle, chipped and broken, tarnished underneath its coating. I touched it, and connected with Lathander for the first time in years. He was still here. This place still connected him to this world, and his grief and pain poured into me. The deaths of his clerics and monks hung in the air, bitter and heavy like gall. Ten years, and he hadn’t stopped grieving. Perhaps, I realised, he couldn’t while this connection remained.

Dimly I heard Lae’zel saying that we needed to move on... Wyll telling Gale to keep her away from me. Then he knelt beside me. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. I was lost in the misery of the one who’d been my god. *If I’d only been here*, I thought, *I could have helped... could have done more...* and I didn’t know if it was my thought or Lathander’s. Pain. Regret. Misery. Loss. It was a black hole of despair, pulling me down into its endless,

infinite, dark depths. There was no end to this. Just this timeless suffering. Nothing around me had any meaning. Friends, our purpose, our lives... insignificant and pointless.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he said, and put a hand on my arm. That was enough for my parasite to pull him into the connection. I felt him physically stagger under the burden of divine grief, then gently pull me up into a very mortal hug. It felt almost as though the god registered the attempt at comfort, before the loss of physical contact with his statue brought me partially back to myself.

“They slaughtered everyone,” I said, dully. “Wyll...”

He looked up at the statue, and understanding dawned. “Shit. Rosymorn. Rosy... morn. That’s Lathander.”

I nodded.

“He’s still here.”

I sat down abruptly, tears starting again. Was I crying for myself? The monks I’d known? The god? I had no idea. All I could feel was that yawning pit of darkness inside of me. The sort of darkness that screams only for oblivion – your own or someone else’s. I sobbed bitterly, curling over my knees, hopeless.

“Right. Gale, we’re making camp. Will you do a soup tonight?” Wyll asked.

I don’t know what he said in reply; only dimly heard Lae’zel arguing about the decision to make camp. I didn’t care. Next thing I registered was sitting in front of a small fire, a mug of hot soup in my hand, a blanket over my shoulders, and Wyll lying against pillows behind me, curled around me, providing a back rest.

“Drink,” he urged. “Just a bit. You need something to counter the shock.”

“He’s right,” Gale said. “Sudden, uncontrolled access to a divine mind – it can do quite a bit of damage to a mortal body and mind. We’re not designed for such things.”

I sipped. The soup was rich, brothy, with pieces of vegetable floating in it. “Thanks, Gale. It’s good.”

“Oh, thank the heavens,” Wyll said. “That’s the first thing you’ve said in a couple of hours. I was really starting to worry.”

I took a deep breath. “I...” my eyes filled with tears.

Wyll sat up, a leg to either side of me, and pulled me back to lean against his chest. I relaxed against him, starting to feel more grounded, less... overwhelmed by it all. I still couldn’t stop the trembling in my hands, though. If something attacked us, I’d be useless.

“I hate to be impolite,” Gale said, “but I have very little idea what’s going on here, apart from Dash apparently having connected with Lathander. Would someone please explain?”

“He was a monk of Lathander,” Wyll said, gesturing for me to drink more soup. “They knew something happened here – something bad. They didn’t find out what happened – at least, not before Dash left his monastery.”

I nodded and put down the mug. “I was actually scheduled to be moved to this monastery,” I said, throat dry and scratchy. “Something happened. We didn’t know what. We heard a mental cry for help from one of the priests. Then... it struck during morning meditation and suddenly Lathander was deep in grief, and us with him. Gods, meditation was usually full of light and joy. And suddenly it was the exact opposite. Dark. Full of agony and anguish. Seven of my brothers followed him so far into his grief, they died.

“But we never found out what happened. We had to... stop certain meditations and prayers. Lathander was pulling us into despair and suicide, all unknowing. He was so... so lost in himself that he forgot what he might be doing to the mortals connected to him. He certainly wasn’t capable of talking to us.”

“Hells,” Wyll whispered.

“We were an order of healing. But we couldn’t heal our god – and our god could only offer us harm.”

Gale’s eyes were sad and knowing. “And he’s still grieving?”

“This part of him is. The part that connects to mortals here. This monastery – it was never deconsecrated. It’s still... his, I suppose.”

“But what did happen?” Gale asked.

“Githyanki,” I hissed.

“Shit,” Wyll swore.

“There’s more. There was a weapon that the monks and priests here never had a chance to use. We could explode the whole place. Deconsecrate it in one blow. It would sever this connection to Lathander and wreak vengeance in the name of the god all in one.”

“Wow, I’d like to see that,” Gale said. “But seriously – you can’t be thinking...”

“It sounds like an excellent idea,” I said, “but I’m not sure how many of my thoughts and feelings are my own right now. Lathander had existing channels to work with in my mind, and... he was not gentle. I think he put thoughts in there as well as emotions. I... don’t know how to separate them back out.” I frowned, feeling for Wyll’s hand next to me. His fingers interlaced with mine, and I took a breath. “Wyll. Talk to me. Help me sort this out.”

“There are *innocents* in that creche,” Wyll said, rubbing his cheek against the side of my forehead. He seemed to understand that physical touch was bringing me back to myself, so he was ensuring I had as much as possible.

“Not people who killed the monks, probably – but people who are profiting from their deaths. They’re knowingly living at the scene of a massacre. They’re not innocents. They deserve

death.”

“It’s a creche. There are *children* in it. Unborn children as well. You can’t judge children like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t know enough about the world or themselves to understand what they’re doing, or the weight of their decisions.”

“Hmm.”

“Is this... a common debate you two have?” Gale asked, sounding worried.

“No. Usually this conversation is the other way around, if anything. Did you miss the great goblin fight?” Wyll asked.

“Come to think of it, I do remember coming back to a very chilly camp a few weeks back. Astarion filled me in.”

“He’s been overwhelmed by what this... Toril-bound aspect of Lathander wants, I think,” Wyll said. “It’s full of grief and a desire for vengeance. He’s trying to find his way back to his usual attitudes, I suppose. The way he normally thinks.”

“Hmm. I’m starting to wonder if Mystra cutting herself off from me for a year was the punishment I thought it, or a mercy.”

Wyll nodded, kissing my neck. “I only caught the edge of the blast. It was... not an experience I think many would cherish. If someone had handed me a dagger straight afterwards, I might have slit my own wrists before I’d even thought about it. The depths of the misery the gods can feel – hells. I’m both appalled and awestruck. Dash is stronger than I realised. I’m surprised he’s not off slaughtering githyanki right now or dying in the attempt.”

Gale’s face turned sad, looking at us. “He’s lucky to have such a stalwart ally and lover,” he said.

I looked up at Wyll, a question on my face, and he grimaced slightly but nodded. “Gale, would you take Dash’s other side? Just... hug him. I think the physical contact is helping him more than anything else. And maybe two people would be better than one. Bring him back to himself more quickly.”

He rearranged himself to one side of me, and looked inquiringly at Gale.

“This feels... strange.” Gale said, sitting down.

“I promise I won’t try to seduce you,” I said. “But... gods, just holding my hand would help. If you don’t mind?”

Gale shook his head and scooted close, pressing the side of his body against mine and slinging an arm around me, over Wyll’s. “I told you whatever you needed of me was yours,

and you asked for a hug. I'm sadly out of practice in offering physical comfort, but I'm happy to oblige. It just feels... oddly intimate."

"Mmm. I think gnomes in general are more prone to casual physical affection than you humans. Rock gnomes definitely. Even at the best of times, I like to cuddle with people."

Wyll pressed against my other side, offering mute encouragement.

"And this is far from the best of times?" Gale asked.

"Mmm. I didn't know it was possible for me to hold this much grief." Two arms tightened around me. I took a long, deep breath, and let it out. "Gods. I feel the weight of the world. Thank you both for looking after me." Tears slid down my cheeks as the void within pulled at me again.

Wyll kissed my forehead. "Dearest, you look after each one of us every day. Of course we're going to do the same for you."

I let the tears flow, sobbing, as Wyll and Gale held me. There was too much pain inside to let out, but the loving arms around me at least offered a glimmer of comfort in the darkness.

Retribution and blood

I woke up to light just starting to brighten the horizon in the east. I was still cuddled between Gale and Wyll, blankets covering the three of us.

“Gods. A threesome, and they’re still just *cuddling*,” Astarion said, sounding utterly disgusted. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you all, but I hope to all the hells it’s not contagious. Ugh.”

I thought about getting up, meditating, organising breakfast. I closed my eyes and observed my thoughts and feelings... intense sadness and pain pulled at me, trying to drag me under. Nope. Maybe meditation was a bad idea for the next couple of days. Instead, I turned to face Wyll’s back and snuggled close. Gale turned in his sleep, murmured something that sounded like *Tara*, and threw an arm over me and Wyll both. Being practically trapped between them should have felt smothering... but at this moment it instead felt like exactly what I needed. So I shrugged, found a comfortable position, and went back to sleep. Lae’zel would have to wait. If she didn’t like it... well, her kin shouldn’t have massacred an entire monastery.

Later, someone else had cooked and made tea, and I woke feeling hungry and hungover. Gale was gone – and judging from the smells in the air, he was the one cooking. The morning sun shone down on us, and I stretched to bask in its warmth before yesterday’s events could come tumbling back into my awareness. Then I winced as a stab of pain lanced through my head. Headaches and bright morning light really didn’t go well together.

Wyll felt me stir and kissed my cheek.

“Morning, love,” I said. “My head hurts.”

“I’m not surprised,” Wyll said, brow furrowed. “Yesterday was... hells, I think I’d rather the Absolute trying to turn our minds inside out.” He sat up and offered me a mug of tea. “Gale said this should help a bit.”

I sat up, wincing, and took the mug. I sniffed. “Elderflower and chamomile?” I took a sip. It was sweet, with a hint of mustiness underneath. A root, perhaps.

“No idea. Gale said it was his twist on Wizards Cureall, whatever that is.”

“Used when people overdo Weave use,” I said. “Gale definitely seems the sort to have needed it a time or two.”

Wyll smiled and stood. “Back soon, dear,” he said, noticing my instinctive movement towards him. “You need food.”

He came back with scrambled eggs and wilted greens on a plate, with... “Are those *scones*?” I asked, incredulous. “We’re in the middle of the mountains, and Gale managed to make *scones*?”

Wyll laughed. “He had some supplies he’d been hiding for a ‘rainy day’. Despite the lovely weather, I think he figured this qualified. He’s worried about you.”

“Gods. I don’t deserve the two of you.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure I quite like the wording, but given the battering your brain got yesterday, I think I can let it slide.”

I took a mouthful of eggs, thinking. As I swallowed, I realised how I might have sounded. “Oh. Umm...”

“It’s alright. I’m just letting Astarion and his snarky comments get to me. Ignore it.”

Memory replayed of Astarion’s *threesome* comment, and I frowned. “Ow. That hurt,” I said, grabbing my head. “Why is it hurting *now*?”

“Because you channelled a god’s emotions, which bruised your brain, and then had a very understandable emotional reaction of your own to that,” Gale said, sitting down next to me. “It’s similar to drinking a large amount of alcohol, if you’re lucky. Our minds are not intended for such... depths, such power. People have been driven mad by such things.”

“Or to suicide,” I said quietly. I chewed on some greens.

“Quite. Anyway, food and tea should help – but you’ll need to take things slowly today. Stay in camp, perhaps. Let us handle the gith.”

I nodded, carefully, and drank more of the tea.

“I think I know what I want to do,” I said. “But – I’m not sure anyone in camp is going to like it.”

“This bodes well,” Gale observed.

I set the plate aside. “Wyll?”

“What is it?”

“Hold me again? I want to... I don’t know.”

“Feel connected to mortals?” he asked, sitting down behind me and wrapping his arms around me.

I leant backwards onto his chest, relaxing, and sipped the last of the tea. “I want Lae’zel to warn her kin – and then I want to blow up the monastery.”

“An... interesting plan,” Gale said. “And how do we avoid the gith just... stopping us?”

“We don’t,” I said, bleak. “They *will* come. They *will* die. But... they might evacuate their children first.”

“Why is this important?” Wyll asked. “I’ve never known you to advocate for genocide before... well, yesterday.”

“Because this monastery *needs* to be both cleansed and deconsecrated. We can’t do either with the gith still here. Their presence here is an affront. To the god, to the people who used to come here on pilgrimage. To *me*. And I can’t think of any way to get rid of them save killing every last one of them or pulling the whole hells-damned monastery down around their pointed ears.”

Wyll sighed.

“And if they kill us instead?” Gale asked.

“Then... we’re dead, I suppose,” I said, shrugging. “As with everything we do. It’s a fool plan in many ways, I know. I won’t demand that anyone help me. I’ll do it on my own if I must. But... I think I need to do it.”

“Like hells you’ll do it alone,” Wyll murmured, squeezing me tighter.

“And we warn them because...?” Gale asked.

“Because I can’t agree with Lathander that all here deserve to die. Without warning. Without a chance to leave peacefully. I cannot abide the suffering they have brought, or the peace they shattered... but I won’t indiscriminately kill, either.”

“Hmm. Lae’zel is not going to like this plan,” Gale said.

“Lae’zel indeed does not,” Lae’zel said, moving into sight. “You would kill my kin? Over – what? A dead god, mourning the loss of its relevance in the world?”

I pulled her into an illithid sharing, and *showed* her the depths of Lathander’s pain and grief – and anger. “That’s not a dead god,” I said, coldly, angrily. “That’s a live, powerful god who is bent on vengeance. Your kin did a cruel and wrong thing, Lae’zel. Now justice is here. They can pay by leaving, or they can pay by dying. But they *must* make amends.”

“And if I kill you all instead?”

“Others will come. And *they* won’t resist the command to kill without warning or mercy. *They will just destroy*,” I snapped.

She stepped back, silent. I bent over, head pounding with sudden pain. I heard her turn and run, and Wyll swear.

“We’ll have to act, now – and fast, before they can mount a dragon squad to hunt us down from the air,” he said.

“Well, at least it saves us from taking a vote,” Gale said, drily.

“Who’s with us?” Wyll asked, raising his voice. I lifted my head to see the whole campful of people surrounding us, silent.

“Blowing up a monastery with a mess of gith inside? What’s not to love about this party?” Astarion said. “I’m in. I’ll bring the alcohol, since you clearly have the homicidal urges and the death wishes covered.”

“You have my axe,” Karlach said, looking grim. “I don’t know that I like this plan, but the big guy’s right – it’s too late for talking. Let’s do. We can examine our consciences later.”

Wyll, Karlach, Astarion, and I ran to the monastery, my head reverberating in pain with every step. Astarion cast Invisibility on us all, and we slowly, painstakingly, crept through an increasingly busy creche. Lae’zel had managed to raise a general alarm, then. Would they evacuate the children? Well. They might.

Eventually, with a couple of near-misses, we came to the door we needed. Blocked by an access field. Shit. Nearby was a central area clearly being used as an office. Inside, the captain yelled at a subordinate to organise the young to retreat – they would only be a distraction in the coming fight. It sounded as though they were evacuating. I waited for a feeling of relief, but – nothing.

I felt a brush of moving air, then another a few moments later. Then a light tap on my arm, and a pull. Out in the hall, Astarion whispered, “Got the key. These gith are incredibly easy to pickpocket. Huge pockets for such tight pants.”

We slid through the portal, as I held my breath. “Shit,” Astarion swore as we all swam into view, and recast Invisibility over the group. We crept down the hall to another office.

That, of course, was where our luck ran out. The inquisitor was most definitely in. And he was angry, to put it mildly. He called nearby guards to mob us, and... I said a word, and they were blasted into the walls. Without hurting my companions. Hmm. That was new.

“Holy *fuck* when did you learn to do that?” Karlach asked, decapitating a guard with her greataxe.

“About five seconds ago,” I said, clinging stubbornly to consciousness despite the darkness creeping around the corners of my vision and the weakness in my legs.

“Hail Lathander,” she said, sounding impressed.

Eventually, they were dead and we... weren’t. Although Astarion wasn’t looking too good, and Wyll was bleeding copiously from a forehead slice. But we needed to move on. Someone was going to notice the ominous silence in here very soon.

“Align those statues,” I said. “There’s a door here. Astarion, can you lock the outer door?”

“So they can’t get in to attack us? That *would* make me feel a bit less like a sitting duck,” Astarion whispered, and put an Arcane Lock spell on it.

“They can still knock it down,” Karlach said, grunting as she wrestled with a statue. “Ugh. These things are dusty and old as hell.”

Click .

The secret door opened, and we ran through, just as someone started to beat on the outer office door.

“Shit. How do we close this?” Astarion asked, looking frantically at the walls.

I pointed at a small button on the other side of the chamber, and he ran to press it. The wall slid shut, closing us in. In front of us was a light barrier. Behind us were hundreds of very angry gith.

“Whew. That was a nervous run,” Karlach said. “But surprisingly unbloody, given we just snuck through a bunch of gith. Did we just get unnervingly lucky?”

“I got stabbed *17 times*,” Astarion pointed out. “I’d hardly call that lucky. I prefer other people doing the bleeding, thank you.”

“I bet you do, Fangs.”

Astarion swigged a couple of healing potions. “Ugh. Why can’t these taste better?”

“What do we do?” Wyll asked, eyes on me.

I pointed to the crystal on the wall. “Take that,” I said.

Wyll pulled it down with mage hand, and the barrier fell. I pocketed the crystal. We might be able to use it later, Lathander willing. “Through here,” I said. “Watch for traps.”

We walked out onto a sunburst platform over a huge, cylindrical room cut out of solid rock. Sunlight shone down through windows high above, gleaming on the gold construct in the very middle of the sunburst. And in the middle of the construct...

“Hells,” Wyll said, reverent. “It’s beautiful. What is it?”

The light was striking daggers of agony through my head, but I looked regardless. “The Blood of Lathander,” I said quietly. “The blood of the god himself, formed into amber long ago. We need to take that... and then we need to run like all the hounds of all the hells are coming after us. Because it will be worse than that – a god’s might will be concentrated on this one place for a second. It will be...”

“Cataclysmic,” Astarion whispered, the most joyful I’d ever seen him. “Oh, I can’t wait to see this.”

“Wait,” Karlach said. “How do we get out?”

“A way will be opened,” I said, head screaming in pain.

“Oh, now we’re trusting the gods to save us,” Astarion groaned. “Well, it was nice knowing you all. Except you, Wyll. You’re a little annoying.”

I stepped forward and snatched the mace from its resting place. Machinery started moving.

“Fuck,” Karlach said. “Fuckity fuck fuck. We’re really doing this.”

Beams of sunlight shot from crystals around us into the gold mechanism, and redirected a single beam out and upwards through a sudden portal in the wall.

“That looks like our invitation to depart,” Wyll said. “Dash... come on!”

I stood staring at the light. “Gods, it’s... resplendent.”

“Fewer big words; more big steps,” Karlach advised. “Come on, let’s go !”

They grabbed an arm each and ran, dragging me, through the portal. Out in the sunlight, I shook myself. We were on the roof of the monastery, and the weapon on top was arming and turning itself to point directly at the monastery itself. It would work. But we were currently in its direct path.

We pelted away, towards camp. I could barely think or see through the throbbing pain in my head, spreading down my neck. But that was a problem for later. I grimly held on, following the others’ lead, running and jumping when they did, cursing when a rogue rock messed up my landing and I twisted my ankle. I ran on, limping, and then the earth shook beneath us and we fell.

I sat up and looked back. The monastery blazed with light, like looking into the rising sun on a clear day. And then it was just... gone. The boom roared over us.

“By Balduran’s bones,” Wyll swore. “What did we *do* ?”

“That was fun!” Astarion said. “Can we do it again?”

There's always another dawn

Chapter Notes

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

In camp that night, the mood was sombre.

“Where’s Lae’zel?” Karlach asked. “Do you think she made it out alright?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. We... never really saw eye to eye, but –”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m not sure what to do with this either. I don’t think we did something evil, but... I really don’t feel good about it.”

“I... don’t really feel anything,” I confessed.

She eyed me, looking concerned. “Dash, you always have at least one feeling for every occasion. What’s wrong?”

Wyll walked up and sat beside me. “Lathander took him over,” he said. “Or at least... this Toril-bound aspect of Lathander, lost to himself in grief and vengeance. And now we’ve done something we can never take back.”

Gale brought me a mug of his tea, and I sipped it carefully.

“I don’t know whether to apologise or thank you all,” I said.

Wyll shrugged. “We chose to back you up on this,” he said. “Knowing what we were doing. I at least knew exactly how you were affected. I chose to be involved regardless. Dash – if there is blame here, I think it rests on everyone’s shoulders.”

I sighed.

“Did we at least succeed?” Karlach asked. “Is the place... deconsecrated or whatever... now?”

“I’ll have to visit the statue to check,” I said. “But I think so. All I could feel earlier was Lathander’s immeasurable, colossal grief. I don’t... feel that every time I stop now. I don’t feel anything.”

“Thank fuck.”

“Thank you all, regardless.” I said. “For the backup. For the care,” I said, reaching out to touch Gale and Wyll.

Wyll threw an arm around my shoulders and hugged me to his side. “Dearest, it’s a relief to realise you’re just as human and frail as the rest of us.”

“Hear hear,” Karlach said. “You might be the short-arse, but you absolutely carry this team when it comes to keeping everyone sane. Ish.”

“You do have terrible luck lately, though,” Astarion pointed out. “Shadow-cursed lands? Down you fall. Come out to the lovely mountains for a breath of fresh air? Get smited by a loving god. Being a monk is seeming less appealing by the day.”

Gale got up to collect mugs, and walked away towards the stream.

“Would you like to ask Gale to sleep with us again?” Wyll asked me quietly.

“Would you mind?” I asked, keeping my voice down. “I don’t want to make things... odd. Or confusing. You seem to be taking it exceptionally well.”

“Honestly?” he said, a half-smile quirking his lips. “Part of my heart is seething with jealousy at the mere thought. But the rest – a much larger portion – is deeply concerned about you, Dash. I’m not sure if you realise just how... not-yourself... you are just now. It’s like all emotion has been sucked from you. I never realised just how vibrant you seem until it was just... whoosh. Gone.”

“Hmm.”

“If cuddling in a huge group will make you feel more like yourself, then I’ll happily sacrifice my personal space,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Just don’t ask for an orgy, please. There are some lengths I might struggle to go to, even for you.” He looked down at me and sighed. “Not even a smile, see?”

I rubbed my cheek against his shirt. “You smell like home,” I said, and his arm tightened around me.

“How’s your head?” he asked. “Wasn’t it hurting earlier?”

“Like all the devils in all the hells were dancing jigs in it all at once, but none could find the beat. It’s... better. Just aches.”

Wyll winced. “Gale,” he said when that gentleman returned. “What’s going on with Dash, do you know? Why is he so... flat? Will the headache pass soon?”

“Might take another day. Imagine... hmm. Imagine a body that must be purged. You apply the purgative, and it empties itself rather violently. Then for a little while, you’re not very hungry. You can’t really taste anything you try to force down. Your body is trying to tell you that it’s had a bit too much and needs to shut down for a bit, to recover.”

I nodded, then winced. I needed to stop doing that. “You have a good grasp of medical lore.”

“A pet hobby of mine,” Gale said, dismissing it. “But it’s a little like that. Dash’s emotions are a little overstressed right now, so he’s just shut down that part of himself. Instinctively. So he can heal. It’s... quite normal for those who associate with gods to occasionally suffer for it, although I haven’t seen as bad a case for a long time.”

“So he’ll be alright?” Wyll asked, insistent.

Gale smiled at him. “He’ll be fine. Just rest and good food. And I must admit, I’m surprised by how effective physical contact seems to be. Most people would still be in the depths of despair and rage.”

“Might be the monastic training, too,” Wyll pointed out. “It seems to provide a few odd advantages.”

I reached out for Gale’s hand and he took it, patting it gently with his other hand. I closed my eyes, cuddled against Wyll’s side, and half-listened to them talk about me and what they could do tomorrow.

I must have drifted off, and into a heavy sleep, because I woke sweating, sandwiched between Wyll and Karlach. Whoa. This was how hot she ran *after* the heart upgrades? No wonder she’d been an unstoppable force. One touch and *whoomph* – enemies turn to ash. That reminded me of my poetic efforts re: fire and going up in flames, and I smiled a little.

“Mmm. How are you *always* the meat in a gorgeousness sandwich?” Astarion asked. “I’m starting to get envious, darling.”

I extended an arm. “Help me get up without waking them?” I asked quietly. “I need tea and food, I think.”

He pulled me free of my attractive confines, and impulsively, I hugged him. “Thank you,” I said. “For everything. For backing me up. For caring.”

Astarion returned the hug, then backed away, looking confused. “You’re welcome, I suppose?” he said, and did his best to find some shadows to disappear into.

I walked over to the campfire, hoping Gale was on duty. Sure enough, there was hot porridge with berries and honey, and another billy of tea. “Something smells good,” I said, sniffing.

“I found some bacon,” Gale said, eyes on his pan. “Not much, but enough to add some flavour. I wish we had cinnamon, though. Porridge just isn’t the same without it.” He looked up, and his face brightened. “Ah! Wyll’s going to be so happy to see your face. You have some feeling back.”

He poured out a mug of tea and handed it to me. Heat radiated from it, so I blew on it to cool it.

“Was I really that scary last night?” I asked.

“Just very devoid of emotional content,” Gale said, thoughtfully. “You have a very expressive face, you know. I’ve seen that sort of reaction before; Wyll hasn’t. He was... worried, to put it mildly.”

“Mmm. He did mention that.”

“How’s your head?” he asked.

“Aching, but not too terribly. This tea seems to help,” I said, taking a small sip. Still too hot.

“May I bring up a topic that’s been troubling me?” he asked. “Are you feeling up to it?”

“I think so,” I said, careful. “What’s bothering you?”

“I don’t know how to approach this subtly, so I’ll just need to be very direct, instead, and trust your good nature to not take offence. Do you – have any designs on bringing me into your bed?”

My heart dropped. This was a slightly more complicated question than I’d hoped to deal with before breakfast. “Do you mind if I get breakfast while I answer?” I asked, eyeing the porridge.

He smiled and ladled out a bowl. “Not a problem! Happy to oblige. With breakfast, that is.”

I took it, thinking. “I’m not sure how you feel about this, so I’m not sure how to approach it... and I’m not at my best, so my apologies if I’m unintentionally rude.

"Gale, you are wonderful. You're attractive, erudite, charming, and an amazing cook. I love you dearly, but... Wyll has my heart in the palm of his hand. He's the stars in my night sky. I'd... like to see you find that with someone, Gale. Or multiple someones, if your heart has room. I have a lot of room for love in my heart, but... only one person it beats for."

“That sounds like a no,” Gale said, looking relieved, but a little sad, too.

“No, I’m not seeking to bed you,” I said. “And I’m fairly sure Wyll isn’t either, if that helps. But, Gale... I wanted you close because I trust you. I knew you’d care about me, and for me, and you’d make sure I was alright. It’s been a long time since I’ve had such a close friend. Especially one I could trust like this. I hope you realise how much that means to me.”

He smiled, eyes crinkling. “That means far more to me than you can know, Dash. Thank you. Morning, Wyll.”

Wyll sat down behind me, a leg on either side of me, and wrapped his arms loosely around my waist. I put down my bowl and leant back on his chest. “Morning, love,” I said.

He rubbed his cheek against my hair and kissed my forehead. “You look so much better,” he said, smiling.

“Mmm. The patent remedy really works.”

“Speaking of remedies,” Gale interjected, “drink your tea.”

I drained the mug and handed it to him.

“And the porridge,” he reminded me, so I picked up the bowl and began to eat again. After a few mouthfuls, though, I stopped.

“I can’t eat any more,” I said. “It’s good, I just... don’t have an appetite.”

“As long as you got some nourishment,” Gale said.

“Yes, mother.”

A few minutes later, Wyll and I were mysteriously alone near the campfire. Our group seemed to making a habit of clearing out and giving us time by ourselves. Hmm.

“I heard most of your conversation with Gale,” Wyll said, tightening his arms a little around me.

I pulled away, but only to turn so my side was pressed against his belly and chest. I rested my head in the hollow of his shoulder and thought about what to say.

“You know,” he said, saving me the trouble, “I heard the first words of your answer to him, and my heart dropped – but gods, I felt a fool when you told him that your heart beats only for me. How am I jealous of you when your every word and deed only shows your love for me?”

“Mmm...” I said. “I’m not sure what to say to that.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to say,” he said, thoughtful. “But the sun has risen – do you want to visit the shrine before you rest again? I think we should take the day to get you feeling better; Karlach found a cave nearby we can camp in tonight so we’re not out in the open, at least. We can handle all that; but we need you to check on Lathander, I suppose. I’d rather not leave it primed to smack someone else like it did you.”

I winced. “Not something I’m looking forward to, just in case it didn’t work the way I think it did. But you’re right – now’s the time to go. Will you come with me?”

“Just try to stop me.”

We walked – slowly – up the hill to the gilded statue. The remains of the monastery were quiet, except for the occasional creak or crack of stones shifting and settling. There wasn’t much to see, though, with the crest of the hill in the way. No more stately, shining temple to the divine. It would just be a smoking pile of rubble.

I took a deep breath, stilled my mind, and touched the statue. Before, I’d been immediately overwhelmed in a flood of misery and guilt and anger; now there was just a background hum of sadness and loss.

“I think we did it,” I said. “Gods. I’m so relieved.”

“Thank Balduran himself. Blowing it up a second time might be more challenging.”

I was trapped in darkness, drowning. All around me were the bones of the dead, whispering old torments, old woes, old regrets. Their sorrow and agony crawled over me like rats,

weighing me down, making it ever more difficult to swim upwards, to reach the surface, and *I couldn't get there, I couldn't breathe* .

“Dash. Dearest.”

This voice was louder than the whispering dead, but less immediate, less weighty. I flailed, trying to break through, get to the air. If only I could breathe. Just one breath. Something grasped my arm and I hit out, hard, hoping it would clear some space around me and let me out.

“Argh! Dash, it's just a dream.”

“Not like that. Here.”

My foot thumped against something, and I jolted, surprised. I opened my eyes to see Wyll holding his cheek, and Shadowheart wearing her best *Do I have to do everything around here?* look.

Oh. A nightmare.

“Thanks,” I said to Shadowheart, and she moved back to her bedroll. “Wyll, love – did I hurt you? Shit.”

“I'll be fine. Might have a black eye tomorrow, though,” he said. “You cracked me right on the cheekbone.”

I winced. “Let me check,” I said, sitting up to press carefully along his cheekbone. No obvious breaks, at least. “No, seems alright. I'm so sorry, love.”

He shook his head. “It's fine. I was foolish, and I got a smack in the head to teach me a lesson.”

“Hmm.” I noticed my limbs twitching a little – was I cold? Going into shock? I couldn't tell.

Wyll held out an arm. “Cuddle?”

I thought back to the dream. The bones. The whispers. I shuddered. “Can we get away from here, a bit?” I asked. “I don't want to wake people again.”

We walked out of the cave, stumbling a little in the darkness, and out into the mountainside. Below us, a sea of darkness. Above us...

“Gods. Stars. Still good to see, after the shadow curse.”

We sat down on a small ledge, and I snuggled close to Wyll.

“What was the dream about?” he asked.

I sighed. “No surprise that it was Rosymorn. Gods. All those skeletons. Just lying around like so much debris. Like crumbled stone that's no longer of use for building. Not even discarded.

Just... left where they fell. My siblings in the order. So unimportant to the githyanki, they just left them where they slaughtered them. And moved into their most sacred spaces. Made them into *offices*. ”

“Well. We got revenge, I'll wager.”

“No, we got the picked-over carcass of a shadow of justice. Revenge would have been hunting down those who did this and razing their home creche to the ground, while everyone they ever cared about screamed and burned and died. *And making them watch*, ” I spat.

“I knew you were struggling with the memories,” Wyll said softly. “I didn't realise – I should have – that we were seeing the remains of people you might have known. People who were just like you.”

I leant against him and shivered. *Shock*, a cold, clinical part of my brain said. *Wyll's too warm for me to be freezing*.

Wyll kissed my forehead. “I have you.”

“I keep seeing their faces. People I knew. My friends. The people who died at my monastery as a result. Just an endless parade of people whose lives were of no importance to the gith. They slaughtered everyone. Set off so many tragedies. Not because they were desperate, or someone attacked them. No, they just *wanted a new military training ground*, ” I said, my face set in a snarl. “And gods forbid they should buy land, or settle somewhere entirely unpopulated. No, just move in and kill a bunch of monks with fucking *dragons!*”

“This is your real reaction, isn't it?” Wyll asked with insight that surprised me out of the anger for a moment. “Earlier... that was more Lathander's than yours?”

“Probably,” I said, inhaling, letting his scent soothe me. “I feel like an assorted bag of emotions was just emptied over my head.”

“No wonder,” he said. “I can't even begin to imagine how you must be feeling.”

“Angry. Sad. Overwhelmingly frustrated. I think... I'm feeling all the emotions from a decade ago, all over again.”

Wyll stroked my back gently. “It wasn't fair.”

“It really wasn't. They were just peaceful monks and priests. Living there. Protecting the Blood. Ministering to the pilgrims who came looking for healing and hope. They weren't perfect, but they were trying to bring light into the world. Just... snuffed out. Such senseless violence.”

“So much of that around us, lately.”

“Mmm,” I said. “At least some of it feels like it has a purpose. Gods. I should have been there. I could have helped.”

Wyll's arms tightened around me. “You would have died too.”

“At least I wouldn’t be feeling relieved that I lived while they died.”

“Ahh. That little voice that tells you you’re a terrible person for celebrating your own survival, when others weren’t so lucky?”

“That one,” I said, lifting my face to kiss his cheek. “Thank you. You’ve been so sweet. You must be tired.”

He shook his head, then yawned. “Maybe a little,” he said, grimacing.

“Well. I’m ready to try sleeping again. Hopefully I can avoid waking everyone up again.”

“No one minds, dearest,” he said, smiling fondly at me. “Don’t worry about it. We know you’re having a hard run of it right now.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled. “I’m setting a terrible example.”

“By feeling your feelings, and letting them out?”

“Hmm. When you put it that way…”

“Exactly.”

Chapter End Notes

More coming soon!

I have a huge pile of paid work on this week, and I need to focus on that first.

Thanks to my habit of writing in chaotic bursts that completely ignore the limits of time and space, the next (written) part of this story is about two weeks in the future. Sigh. So I need to fix that, and make sure you actually get a vaguely-continuous story. Bumpy, perhaps, just not... *Thelma-and-Louise-driving-off-a-cliff* bumpy.

In the meantime, Halsin's been in my head a lot. He and I have some feelings in common about city living. I've been thinking about what happens to the *jewel of the Sword Coast* post-game. All the adventurers wander off, and the place is in utter shambles, even with the best of endings. So, what happens to the people of Baldur's Gate then?

I'm exploring that in [A Balance in the Ruins](#), which - since it features Wyll and Dash - does contain minor spoilers to this series. If you've played through the game and read romances before, though, I don't think anything will actually feel spoilery. Maybe I'm wrong. Please yell at me if so.

Love, Rowan

Horrors and healing

“Well. I guess we’re not exploring Githyanki tadpole removal options,” Gale said.

“Hmm. I think that’s a safe bet to make,” Wyll agreed. “Blowing them up might have burnt some bridges.”

“It seemed like a remote chance anyway, given the weirdness of these parasites,” I said. “So. Back to the shadow-cursed lands? We need to check out that House of Healing place.”

“Sounds like a nice, soothing kind of place,” Gale said.

“Oh yes,” Shadowheart agreed. “In the middle of a shadow curse. I’m sure it’s lovely and wholesome. Full of bouncing babies and people who are *feeling better* .”

“Huh. We’re not going to be finding any *nice* any time soon, are we?”

“Better to set your expectations a little lower. Maybe hope for *mildly disturbing* , or *I think I’d like to lose some memories now please* .”

The House of Healing did not live up to Gale’s amended expectations.

“What the hells?” Wyll whispered.

We stood watching four undead nurses cutting into a live, conscious patient. His eyes were pools of blood. How long had they been torturing him? Was this one of Jaheira’s Harpers? The surgeon in charge gave nonsensical instructions.

“Twisted by the curse,” Gale whispered. “From surgical lessons to... whatever the hells this is.”

“Torture instruction,” Shadowheart said quietly. “He was a master once, I’d wager. I recognise the methods.”

“Lovely. *That* won’t keep me up at night at all,” Gale muttered. “What do we do?”

The figures simply ignored us.

“We have to help,” Wyll said. “That poor man. We have to do something, surely.”

I nodded and stepped forward into the lecture theatre.

“Ahh! New students!” the surgeon opened his arms, welcoming us into the lecture.

“Why are you torturing that man?” Gale asked, his voice ever so slightly shaky.

“We do not *torture*,” the surgeon explained. “We help poor souls to ascend to a higher level of spirituality, to become closer to Shar, through letting go of their earthly shackles. Pain is a spiritual tool, to be wielded by the faithful – not a punishment.”

I glanced at Shadowheart. She looked sickened but fascinated, all in one. “I thought Shar required that her worshippers come to her voluntarily; not by force?” I asked. “This man doesn’t seem to be on your table willingly.”

The surgeon sighed and bowed his head. “This is a truth you speak, indeed. A most vexing one. For where shall my sisters receive their training, if they have no patients on whom they can practise their arts?”

I nodded, thoughtful. I wasn’t sure that fighting a group of shadow-insane Sharrans armed with sharp and probably infected blades was a great idea, if we could avoid it. But maybe their very loss of self could work for us. All I needed to do was follow their logic. “Who better than their teacher to offer guidance and a willing body, to teach them how to sacrifice and cut, all in one?” I asked.

“Ahh! A cogent suggestion!” he agreed, and killed the man on the table in a single blow.

I lurched forward in an instinctive move to stop him, but restrained myself. We’d probably have ended up doing the same, after all. There are only so many injuries that a person can heal from – and a few less that a person can heal from and stay whole in mind and soul.

The surgeon lay down on the table, and the sisters started cutting into him. He didn’t scream once. Just... talked them through the slicing of his flesh, then fell silent when the stabbing started. We watched until his blood stopped flowing, and the sisters walked away to whatever other duties their addled minds had devised.

“Well. That was the most disturbing thing I hope I see in... forever,” Gale said. “I think I might have nightmares tonight.”

“Me too,” Shadowheart said. She looked pale, which, given her usual pallor, was an impressive feat. She grabbed her hand and massaged it, wincing.

“Is that a lute under the operating table?” I asked. “What the hells?”

Wyll walked over to pick it up. “A.C.,” he read. “Art’s lute? So he was here. Whatever happened to him, he made it this far before succumbing to the curse.”

We searched the old hospital, but found no more sign of Art or any other Fist. We did, however, find Arabella’s parents.

“*Shit*,” Wyll said, hitting a pillar with the side of his fist. “Both dead. Dead for days. Where the hells is Arabella, then?”

“Fallen to the shadows, I’d guess,” Gale said, staring soberly at the corpses. “Poor Arabella. What a terrible fate for such an adorable little scamp.”

We walked out of the House of Healing with hearts even heavier than usual, sobered by the horrors within.

Straight into a shadow ambush. Of course. Except this one included Arabella, who handily bound the shadows in vines and turned to us, eyes glowing green.

“Shit. Did the curse get to her?” Gale asked. “No. Wait. That’s druidic magic. What’s going on here?”

We destroyed the shadows, then I approached the young tiefling.

“It’s you!” she said, brightening. “Somehow I knew you’d come and rescue me. Hey, have you seen my parents?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. What horrible news to have to deliver. “I’m sorry, Arabella,” I said as gently as I could. “We just found them. Come back to camp with us. We’ll look after you.”

“What? No, they’re here somewhere,” she said, looking around. “I’m sure of it! Stop lying to me.”

Wyll sighed and led her away to camp.

“You’ll never believe who’s taken over looking after Arabella,” Wyll said later, sitting down beside me and handing me a mug of tea.

“Is it Astarion? Because that seems like a dangerous pairing,” I said.

“Ha! No, Withers. He’s talking to her about the Weave. He seems... oddly paternal for a skeleton.”

“Hmm. Maybe he wasn’t always a skeleton,” I said, sipping my tea.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “Being back in the shadow-cursed lands can’t be easy.”

“I don’t know,” I said, thoughtful. “After Rosymorn, a simple soul-sucking misery is almost a relief.”

“Oh, how lovely for you,” he said, deadpan. “Perhaps we should come here on holidays.”

I smiled a little and leaned my head on his shoulder. His arm crept around my back to pull me closer. “My dear one,” he said, kissing my forehead. “I wish there were another way through these lands. I hate seeing you suffer.”

“Mmm. You make everything feel better, though,” I told him. “I can’t think such miserable thoughts with your arms around me.”

“If only all of our problems could be allayed so simply,” he said, “I’d never let you go for a moment.”

“Gods, you say the sweetest things.”

“Imagine defeating Ketheric with a good snuggling.”

I snorted, and felt Wyll’s cheek move in a smile against my forehead. “Snuggling with the undead. Now there’s an attractive picture.”

“Don’t let Astarion hear you say that.”

“Huh. I suppose vampires *are* undead, aren’t they? I never really think of them that way.”

Gale brought over dinner, and I picked at mine in a desultory manner. Not that it wasn’t tasty; I just couldn’t feel much enjoyment from it. I ate enough to calm the complaints from my stomach, then pushed the plate to the side. Wyll stroked my hair.

“You must have things you’d rather be doing than looking after me,” I said, wanting and not wanting him to leave all in one confusing jumble. Being constantly in the position of the weak, supported person was starting to grate on me.

“I thought I would,” he said, pensive. “I’m surprised to find that I’m content just keeping you safe and well, instead. Turns out, I rather enjoy being needed.”

“Mmm. I think all those hapless villagers you saved from goblins and ogres could have told you that.”

“I think that’s different, though,” he said. “Being the Blade is a responsibility, but I’m ever-distant from any true friendships with the people I help. With you, though... it feels as though every day we entwine ourselves a little closer together. Like Jaheira’s vine spell creeping up our legs. Except,” he amended quickly, “less threatening! Oh, that imagery was a little unfortunate.”

I chuckled, looking up at him, and he grinned down at me. “Oh,” he said. “I got a laugh out of you. I’m almost proud of myself.”

“My stars,” I said softly, and closed my eyes, suddenly exhausted.

I roused to a fuzzy half-waking state when Wyll lay down beside me and covered us with a blanket.

“Mmm...” I murmured. “Not sleeping alone?”

“Not on your life,” he said, quietly but firmly. “I saw the nightmares. Let’s face those in the light someday; not here in the darkness and gloom. You’re stuck with me at night until we leave this land.”

“Such a hardship,” I said. “Forced to snuggle up to my favourite person in all the world for hours at a time. However will I survive?”

“Oh, you’re a tough customer,” he said, voice amused. “I’m sure you’ll find some way to cope with such a crushing burden.”

I threw an arm over Wyll and closed my eyes, relaxing against him. Infernal heat radiated from him, making the blanket almost redundant. It was soothing on sore, tense muscles, as was his familiar scent in my nostrils. I slid my hand up under the hem of his shirt to lay skin on skin, and drifted off.

Echoes from the past

I woke up to a quiet camp, no nightmares, no horrors. Just Wyll curled around me as I lay on my side by the faded campfire. There was a distinct nip in the air, and I was tempted to not move at all from the warm cosiness of my night-time refuge... but there was breakfast to make and tea to steep. I needed to start contributing again.

So I roused myself to get up properly, then paused, chagrined. Minor problem: Wyll's arm was firmly around me, and if I got up, I'd wake him. Sleeping with people is a pain in the oddest ways, sometimes. Oh well – no point lying around hoping things would spontaneously change. That was the purview of sorcerers with wild magics. I extricated myself gently, and Wyll muttered and opened his eyes.

“Alright?” he asked, still sleepy.

“All fine,” I said, and kissed his cheek. “Go back to sleep, love.”

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath, relaxing back into a doze. I gazed at him, feeling an upwelling of love and affection. How on Toril had this man found his way so firmly into my heart? I shook my head. Time to be *doing*, not just sitting around mooning over a pretty man.

I coaxed the campfire back to life, filled the billy in the river, hung it to boil, and looked at the supplies. We had... a lot. The fish were going to go off fastest, though, especially in this oppressive landscape. I'd probably hear some complaining, but fish it would have to be. However... maybe some fried potatoes would calm the complaints of waking up to horrible smells. If nothing else, it would make me feel better about having to listen to said complaints.

I sliced some potatoes and threw them in a frying pan with a bit of butter, then put them close to the fire, but not directly over it. I'd add herbs later, when they were nearer being cooked. I filleted a few fish and left them under a bowl – I could fry them in the same butter as the potatoes, and they wouldn't take long. I pulled the billy off the fire, added a mix of invigorating herbs, and put the lid on. It would sit near the fire and stay warm until everything else was ready.

I walked down to the river and sat down with a sigh. Would I even be able to meditate here? It was tempting to not even try. Things had felt far too difficult lately. But... a discipline was only useful as long as I kept it. So I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. Then I reconsidered, set a shield around myself, and sank back into the light trance. The shield wouldn't keep out much... but it should help alert me should any of Shar's little nasties come along and find me too inward-focused to notice them.

I thought about the happenings of the last few days. The horrors of the shadow-cursed lands. The irony of travelling with a Sharran, burbling about how wonderful it felt to not be affected by the curse, and how it meant that Shar must love her. The gut-wrenching *wrongness* that permeated the whole place. The odd adorable nature of Shadowheart, who nevertheless revelled in the darkness and unnaturalness of the land.

About Lathander. The god I'd served so ardently, worshipped with such joy. Reviled with such anger when my friends died. I'd lost so much when I left the monastery. I lost most of my life – the friends who'd become my family, my mentors, my spiritual home. And I'd been wandering ever since. I'd thought I needed to settle down to find a home and family; maybe I had needed to find a family in order to make a home.

Lathander. Gods, his pain had been so raw, so... gargantuan. I suspected I hadn't felt even a fraction of what he'd suffered. Surprised, I realised I felt sympathy for the bright-shining god of new beginnings. *I suppose the more power you have, the worse your mistakes get*, Wyll said in my memory, and I sighed. Maybe I'd never forgiven Lathander for his mistakes. Maybe it was time I did. Doubtless he wouldn't so much as notice... but sometimes we don't forgive for other people's sakes, do we? We forgive because we come to understand, and accept, and let go.

This was fruitful, but as a meditation session, it was quite horrendous. I opened my eyes and shook my head, rueful. Some days were like that, and at least I'd found some insight. Perhaps. Maybe it was all terrible.

I returned to the campfire, stirred the slowly-browning potatoes, and poured myself a mug of tea. Hmm... I could start cooking the fish now, and risk cold fish if the potatoes took too long... or hold off, and risk cold potatoes if the fish took too long. That decided me – start the fish now. Better a cold fish than a cold fried potato.

“My sun,” Wyll said, sitting down next to me on the ground in a sprawl of limbs, reclining on an elbow. “All around is darkness; still you shine so bright, my heart could find you anywhere.”

“Ahh, my Wyll is waxing poetic,” I said, slapping fish into a hot frying pan. “All is right with my world.” I smiled and glanced sideways at him.

“Mmm. Call me yours again,” he said, shivering.

Hmm. I took the fish off the fire, to be safe. I slid a hand around to the back of his neck and grasped his braids, pulling a little. His eyes half-closed and his mouth fell open.

“*My* Wyll,” I murmured, putting a bit of growl into my words. “You're mine.”

I kissed that very tempting open mouth, biting gently at his lower lip, and his breathing sped up. Then I smelt burning potato, and sighed, drawing away. “Duty calls, love.”

“Mmm... breakfast be damned,” he said, grinning at me.

“*Very* tempting, trust me,” I said, shifting to readjust my clothing. “If you keep this up, the fires of Avernus will be all this breakfast is good for.”

“Ugh, are you two flirting *again*?” Astarion asked. “Can you at least wait until after breakfast? I want to have something in my stomach when I throw up.”

“You don't eat,” Wyll pointed out.

“I drink! – tea,” Astarion countered. “Works just fine. Now stop distracting our cook and find something useful to do.”

“We *do* need some plates out,” Wyll admitted. “Fine. Come on, Astarion – help me grab what we need.”

“Not exactly what I had in mind, but fine,” he grumbled, and they walked away together. Hmm. I wondered if our camp vampire had been angling to get me alone. Oh well – he'd have plenty of opportunities.

After breakfast, we headed for Last Light. Despite Isobel’s rather impressive and long-lasting blessing on our party, I still relaxed as soon as we walked into the shielded area, feeling as though a weight fell from my heart. That spell was *good*.

“Any luck?” Halsin asked when we walked into the Fist’s temporary barracks.

I held up the lute we thought was Art’s.

“Play it,” he urged. “Nothing is reaching him – perhaps his instrument will.”

I looked at Wyll. Out of all of us, he seemed the most likely to have been tutored in musical arts. He shook his head. Gale likewise. I sighed. Back to me and my childhood plucking, I supposed. Could I remember any songs? Were any of them even vaguely appropriate? I tuned the lute gently, as best I could, and picked out a simple tune. I couldn’t remember what it was, or the words, and the strings were a little sour, but Art stirred, muttering.

“Keep going,” Halsin said, eyes on Art. “I think it’s working.”

I realised that I was playing *Polish Your Knob For a Buck* and grimaced, then thought – screw it. Why was I caring about such silly details? When did I become so damnably uptight? I gained confidence as the fingering forms came back to me, and relaxed into playing. Wyll and Astarion exchanged an amused look.

“Thaniel!” Art yelled, sitting upright. “He’s still there! In the Shadowfell!”

I stopped playing and put down the lute.

“Easy,” Halsin said, a hand on Art’s arm. “You’ve been in the Shadowfell for a century. Take your time. Adjust. We’re here to help.”

Back in camp, Gale was cooking a meal – but Astarion wanted gossip for dinner.

“That was an interesting choice of song,” he said, eyeing me. “*Polish Your Knob For a Buck*? What sort of monastery did you belong to, exactly?”

I sighed. Well, it was going to be one of *those* nights, wasn’t it? Might as well get the sticky stuff over quickly.

“I grew up in a whorehouse,” I said. “My mother was a whore. I used to entertain the guests. *Not like that, Astarion!* Anyway, that’s how I knew the song.”

“Hmm... but you grew up in Baldur’s Gate, didn’t you? I thought I knew all the whorehouses. Unless you were in –”

“– the one your master went to, instead?”

“Well! Your mother wasn’t just a whore, then. She was an *expensive* whore. Good for her!”

I looked around the campfire. Gale was smiling at me. Wyll was off practising fencing forms, but he’d already heard this particular revelation. Astarion seemed more impressed than appalled. Everyone else seemed... indifferent.

“I expected moral outrage, or disgust, or something,” I confessed.

Gale shrugged. “Can’t have been an easy life,” he said. “Other than that, what have we to cavil at? It’s not as though we checked pedigrees before having parasites forcibly inserted into our ocular cavities.”

“I am curious, though,” Astarion said. “Isn’t Sharess’ Caress the brothel that the nobles go to? I wonder if your mother and Wyll’s father ever... *you* know.”

I made a face. “Thanks for that, Astarion. Thanks so much.”

He grinned. “You’re so *very* welcome.”

Death and life

“Halsin?” I asked. “How’s Thaniel?”

Thaniel lay on a campbed in the back of Halsin’s tent, still and pale.

Halsin frowned. “Not well. Something’s missing. As though he were sliced in two, and part of his soul is just... gone. I don’t think he can survive like this.”

“So we’ve rescued him, just to doom him?” I asked.

“Unless we can find this other half, certainly,” he said. “But... perhaps we can find it. A child, wandering the shadow-cursed lands. It can’t be so normal that it would escape notice.”

Something tickled at my memory. “Is there anything else that might show who he is, or the location? Something related to Thaniel?”

“Art told me that the place Thaniel was in smelt like lavender,” he said slowly. “Perhaps... lavender, or other greenery. It would be out of place, here where nothing thrives.”

I thought back to travelling here from the mountain pass, and smelling a brief aroma of lavender on the breeze. I’d not been focusing too well, what with the sudden introduction to the shadow curse, but... perhaps.

“I have an idea,” I said. “I’ll head out. You look after Thaniel. We’ll be back as soon as possible to let you know.”

Halsin nodded.

“New plan,” I told everyone over breakfast. “It’s a long shot. But if we want to take down this shadow curse, I think we need to try it. Near the mountain pass, I think... we might find Thaniel’s missing half. If we can find it, or him, or whatever, he’ll be whole – and this land might have a chance of being whole as well.”

“Shadowheart?” asked Gale. “How do you feel about dispelling the shadow curse? It’s from Shar, after all.”

“*Lady* Shar cast it for the sake of Ketheric,” Shadowheart said, thoughtful. “He’s an apostate. I doubt she’ll care if all of his works are torn down. She’s more likely to approve, regardless of her involvement in them.”

“So you’re with us on this?” Gale pressed.

Shadowheart nodded. “I am.”

“What’s the plan?” Wyll asked. “Just wander around looking for... what exactly?”

“A boy like Thaniel... surprising greenery... something that screams *doesn't fit Shar's aesthetic*, I suppose.”

“Ha!” Shadowheart said, and rubbed at her hand.

So we travelled back to near the mountain pass, and started to look. Soon, I could smell it – that faint hint of lavender.

“Tell me someone else can smell lavender,” I said.

Shadowheart sniffed. “Slight hint, perhaps? Why?”

“Why would lavender grow where there's no sun?”

“Good point,” she said, nodding, and strode away. I shrugged and followed. Either she had a better nose than I, or she was going in a completely random direction. With the amount of information we had at our disposal, either option seemed good.

Sure enough, we came to a young boy hiding alone in a ramshackle shed of a house. Once it might have been quite nice – now it was a ruin at best. A few old corpses lay around... indications that this child might be a lot more formidable than he looked at first glance.

“Hi,” I said. “Can you help us? We're looking for someone.”

“I don't know anyone,” he said with a shrug.

“He's a little boy. His name's Thaniel, and he's been lost for a long time. We want to help him get better,” I said gently.

“I'm Oliver. I don't know any Thaniel. I want to play!” he said. “Will you play with me?”

I met Wyll's eye over the boy's head and sighed. Looked like playing would be the order of the day. Regardless of who or what he was, who knew when he'd last had someone just play with him? Unless the corpses were victims of his 'play' – and considering that a couple were gith, probably not.

“What would you like to play?” I asked.

“Hide and seek!” he said, bouncing. “You stay here. I'll go hide. You find me. Easy!” He disappeared.

“Hmm. Invisibility. Interesting,” Gale noted. “Here...” he threw an invisible something over me, like throwing a sheet onto a bed.

“Stay here,” I said, and went looking for Oliver.

It was surprisingly easy – a few steps out the door, and he was crouching behind a wagon.

“Hey!” he said. “No fair! That was too fast. Are you sure you're not cheating?”

I smiled at him. “Do you want to play again?”

He nodded. “This time, let’s make it hard! My family can look for you while you look for me!”

Shadow beings popped into sight, and Oliver ran to the house. I sighed and hid. Great. Innocent game of hide and seek in the shadow curse? I should have known it would turn dark in a hurry.

I crept back to the house, carefully skirting the shadow creatures. We could take them out... but I wasn’t sure how Oliver would react to that. Better to play the game by the rules if we could. As soon as I reached the house, I could see him, plain as day – but the others didn’t seem to. Ahh. Gale had given me the ability to see invisible creatures. Wizards are handy creatures, when they aren’t eating your magic items and blowing themselves up.

I snuck over to Oliver and tapped him on the shoulder. “Found you!” I breathed.

He jumped. “Again!? You’re better at this than I thought. Well. Fine. Here’s your prize.” He handed me a ring, and I pocketed it. “Well? Off you go now. I don’t want to play anymore.”

“I know who you are,” I said. “You’re part of Thaniel, the spirit of this land. Thaniel needs you, Oliver.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, scowling. “I don’t care. I want to stay here. I like it here! I have a mummy and a daddy and a dog.”

Those were the shadow creatures we saw. I felt sick. Imagine a child playing with those things for a century.

Oliver opened a portal and stepped through.

“Shit,” I swore. “This kid is slippery.”

“He’s scarpered, alright,” Gale said. “Guess we should follow him.”

“Follow the creepy child through a portal to a mysterious location,” Shadowheart said. “I like it. Let’s go.”

“Is it just me, or did that sound far too much like Astarion?” Wyll asked.

Shadowheart raised an eyebrow at him.

“Just saying he’s rubbing off on you!” Wyll said, hands raised as though to ward off a blow, but smiling.

“Hmm. A bit presumptuous, given what you two get up to when our backs are turned,” Shadowheart said, sniffing.

Wyll laughed.

“Stop flirting, you two,” I said, grinning. “Come on.”

We went through the portal, and ended up in a fight. Of course.

“I think we should avoid hitting Oliver?” Wyll said, doubtful.

“Sounds good,” I replied, facing off with a shadow creature.

Once we’d dispelled all of them, Oliver crumpled. “Why couldn’t you just *let me play?*” he wailed.

I knelt down beside him. “Because you don’t belong here, and this place isn’t good for you,” I said, putting a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, but you’re part of Thaniel. And Thaniel needs you. You need him. You can’t go on only being half a person.”

“But... I’ve changed!” he said, tears in his eyes. “I can’t be Thaniel again. Thaniel left me here all alone. I’ve been all by myself for so long.”

“You’ve been so brave,” I said. “And strong, and smart. Thaniel couldn’t help leaving you behind. But you can come back to him now. And you’re smart and strong and brave enough to be even better than you were before.”

“Really?” he said. “You mean... I’m not *bad*?”

My heart broke a little. I knew this wasn’t quite a child in front of me. But to hear him say that... oh. It still hurt my heart.

“You’re not bad,” I said, with as much warmth in my voice as I could muster in this cold, dead land. “You’re wonderful. You’ve done *so well*. But Thaniel needs you. And you need him.”

He sighed. “Would he play with me, do you think?”

“I’m almost certain he will,” I said, smiling.

“OK,” he said, bouncing to his feet. “I’ll do it. I want to.”

He glowed green and disappeared.

“Did that work?” Wyll asked.

“Felt like druidic magic,” Gale said. “So I think the answer might be yes.”

“Let’s hope so,” I said. “Back to camp?”

We returned to a smiling Halsin and a resting Thaniel who looked asleep rather than dead.

“Oh, thank the gods,” I said. “We weren’t sure —”

Halsin knelt in front of me and grabbed me into a bear hug. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you so much. He’s so much better. Once Ketheric is dead, this land can finally start to heal.”

The mood in camp that night was cautiously jubilant. We hadn't defeated any giant villains... but we had found the key to destroying the deathly curse that had lain on these lands for a century.

Wyll, on the other hand, seemed quiet.

"Hey," I said, sitting down next to him. He smiled and slung an arm around my shoulders. "You seem subdued, love."

"Hmm," he said, resting his cheek against my head. "Thinking sober thoughts. Not bad ones. Sad ones, perhaps."

"Tell me?"

"Let's find a bit more privacy," he said, and led me down toward the river.

When we were comfortable again, I put my head on his shoulder. "Talk to me, love," I urged.

"Don't rock gnomes live for hundreds of years?" Wyll asked.

Ahhh. I knew this topic had to come up eventually. Appropriate that it should come up here, I supposed.

"We do," I said.

"But you're... what, late 30s?"

"I am."

"So... you could reasonably expect to outlive me, three or four times over."

"Mmm. It seems almost ridiculous to think about in our current situation, but – yes, if we survive the next year, I could."

"And yet... you still want to entwine your life with mine? Knowing the inevitable outcome?"

I sighed. "Would you hold me? This is a topic guaranteed to make me feel a little... alone, I suppose."

Wyll turned to pull me into a hug against him. "We don't have to talk about it if it upsets you," he said.

"No, we do," I said, rubbing my cheek against his shirt. "Especially if you've been talking to Halsin."

"Hmm. How did you know?"

"Ha! Because... love, Halsin holds his loves lightly, as many wood elves do. I don't criticise; it seems to work well for them. Everyone seems content, generally. But... it means that he's

amassed many loves throughout his long life, and while they each occupy a special place in his heart... he doesn't seem to have ever given himself over, body, soul, and mind, to another."

"Hmm."

"What I mean is: if we come through this, and we build a life together, you and I. And we build the sort of love that we want. That we're working on. And we have fifty or sixty wonderful years together, and I lose you... Wyll, I would grieve losing you as losing part of myself. It would be devastating. But the pain would absolutely be worth the joy you bring me. And... while eventually I might find someone else to share my life... love, you would *always* be in my heart. To my dying day."

His arms tightened around me.

"I'm not just talking romantic nonsense. I've seen it in others who've had deep, very loving connections and lost them. They might find others to fill their loneliness, but they never replace their lost love in their hearts. I'd like to think eventually the same will be true for you, if I die facing one of our enemies and you survive. That you'll carry on and find another love, but... never let me fade from your heart and soul."

He sobbed, once. "Gods, don't even talk like that."

I squirmed around to face him, and lifted a hand to his cheek. It was wet. I felt a pang of regret. One of the disadvantages of being long-lived was facing the reality of loss early on, and being more pragmatic about it than shorter-lived races. I'd gone too hard; been too logical.

"I'm sorry, love," I said. "I wanted to reassure you; I didn't mean to make you cry." I knelt and pulled him into a tight hug.

He relaxed into the hug for a moment, then drew away, shaking his head. "It's alright," he said. "It's not what you said, so much. It's... I was thinking about you outliving me. Going off to live your *real* life after I'm dead. And then you mentioned *you* dying and the reality of our situation crashed back in. And it hurt. Gods. How can you even face it?"

"I guess... I weigh the joy against the sorrow," I said, thoughtful. "Wyll, you bring so much good into my life. So much *comfort*. I'd struggle to face so many of these challenges without your empathy and kindness supporting me. The idea of losing you devastates me – but gods, love, the thought of never having had you in my life at all is far worse still."

He pulled away a little, studying my face. "May I kiss you?" he asked, and I leaned forward to close the distance between us again. The kiss started out gentle, then his arms pulled me in tight and he deepened the kiss, one hand stroking down my back.

We broke apart, breathing hard. "Hells," Wyll said. "Why do I want nothing more than to suck your very juices from your dick right now?"

I wanted to tell him that it was a normal reaction to talking about death, but I was suddenly fixated on the mental image of his mouth on my cock, sucking it while I climaxed, and I froze, staring at him. Staring at his mouth. All the words fled from my head, and my cock stood to attention. It was all for Wyll's plan of action.

"That... was a step too far, wasn't it?" he said, looking rueful.

I closed my eyes and took a long, deep breath, then let it out. "Gods, Wyll. That image is going to be burned into my memory for weeks. Full colour. Full sensation. Everything."

"If it's any consolation... it's going to torment me, too. That and your reaction."

I met his eye, knowing my face was flushed and my eyes still full of heat. "You know... you're rather terrible at being chaste."

He laughed. "Hells. I never found it much of a challenge, until now."

Sneaky, sneaky...

“So, what's next?” Gale asked.

“Moonrise Towers?” Wyll asked.

I nodded. “Seems the logical next step,” I said. “We've dismantled part of his support. Now we need to find out how to take him down... and see about rescuing some prisoners while we're at it.”

Wyll's mouth turned down, and I knew he was thinking about his father.

“We can do this,” I said to him. “The curse is lightened. I feel it. It doesn't have such a hold anymore. Which means we'll all be better able to function. To think. Plan. Get as many people out as possible.”

He nodded. “I know this made sense,” he said. “I know we couldn't just rush in without getting things sorted out. But... I want to get there. *Now*, by all the hellbeasts. Not soon.”

I nodded. “Me too, love. So – Moonrise Towers tomorrow, folks. Hopefully we can just walk in, like the goblin camp. But I don't think we can rely on that. Maybe we find a back door, in case we need to fight straight up.”

We broke apart to sleep, and I followed Wyll to his tent.

“Are you OK, love?” I asked. “I know this must be...”

“Confronting? Worrying?” he finished. “Those, and a thousand more. I feel as though rats are gnawing at my soul, Dash. What if we get there and he's dead? Or they've already taken him to Baldur's Gate? Or he's tadpoled, and they've turned him into a mindless drone?”

He sat down, hard, and held his head. “I can't face it,” he said, voice cracking. “I can't... all these possibilities. And they all lead to me being a terrible son. If I'd been there... if I'd been with him...”

I knelt next to him. “Then they would have taken you, too – and we'd be trying to rescue two of you; not just one. Wyll, you're only one man. You can't take all of this on yourself. Not knowing is tearing you apart, I understand. But please – don't let it take you down fruitless paths that will only sap your strength for the struggles ahead.”

He sighed, and raised a tear-stained face to me. “You're right, damn it. I know you're right. Will you hold me? Tell me a story or something. Distract me from my thoughts.”

We lay down on his bedroll, his head on my shoulder, and I stroked his face and told him stories my mother told me when I was a child. About Garl Glittergold and the time his battleaxe Arumdina lost him. About the joke Garl Glittergold played on Kurtulmak. About Chiktikka Fastpaws, the biggest and brightest raccoon Faerun has ever seen, and his friend,

the god Baervan. About Nebelun, and his quest to create a leash that could hold Kezef, the Chaos Hound itself.

I could tell that Wyll was still brooding, not hearing more than a third of what I said, but I held him and kept talking quietly, knowing that sometimes a soothing voice is its own comfort, regardless of how well you listen. I told tales into the depths of the night, until my throat was sore, watching him occasionally get trapped by a piece of a story and smile or frown. Eventually his eyes closed, and he relaxed into an uneasy slumber beside me. I kissed his forehead, wishing I could shift my position but not wanting to undo my hard work, and eventually drifted off too.

When I woke, Wyll was sprawled on his stomach, half off his bedroll, head in the crook of one arm, the other arm over me. I smiled. There was something adorable and engaging about the way he reached out to me even in sleep.

I slipped out from under his arm and went to the campfire, started porridge with apples cooking, and walked down to the river to meditate.

When I opened my eyes, Wyll was beside me, eyes closed, breathing slowly. I hesitated, then stood. Breakfast wouldn't wait too long before burning.

“Morning, dear,” he said, opening his eyes and smiling. I offered a hand, and he stood with me.

“How'd you sleep?” I asked, walking back to the campfire.

“Like a babe,” he said. “Thank you. I don't think I paid very good attention, but your stories felt like just what I needed.”

“They always did that for me,” I said, stirring the porridge and putting the billy on to boil. “I thought there was little harm in seeing if they'd work for you, too.”

“They were all from the rock gnome pantheon, weren't they?” he asked, and I nodded. “How did you end up with Lathander?”

“A Lathandrian priest used to visit Baldur's Gate,” I told him. “No gnomish clerics in the city, for many reasons. He took an interest in me – was a bit of a father to me, in his way. Made sure I went to school. Tutored me. Taught me about his god. And honestly, Lathander felt like a good fit for me, when I was older. Possibly because of Dawngreeter Patric's early moulding, granted. But... I liked his optimism and care for all. And his disdain for dogma. It suited me well. Still does, truth be told.”

“Trust me, we've noticed,” Wyll said, touching my hair lightly.

I smiled at him, and dumped some herbs into the billy, putting it back near the fire and checking on the porridge. It was basically cooked, so I moved it a little away from the fire so it would stay hot, but not keep simmering.

“Is there tea?” Astarion asked, stumbling to the fire and sitting down. I looked at him with concern – he looked oddly hungover. I didn't think I'd ever seen him looking so under the weather.

“Are you alright?” I asked, pouring out a mug of weak tea and handing it over.

“Drank a boar last night. Salty bastards, boars. Now my mouth tastes like a goblin shat in it, and my head hurts.”

“Huh. Salty blood is bad?” Wyll asked.

“Disrupts the humours,” I told him. “Too dry; not enough moisture.”

“Oh, and now the tea tastes like goblin piss. Perfect.” Astarion shuffled away, muttering.

“Well. That bodes well for the day's venture,” Wyll said, his face turning bleak.

“Almost there, love,” I said, resting a hand on his knee. He took it in one of his and squeezed briefly.

“I know. I just... want to know.”

I nodded, ladled out servings of porridge, and handed one to Wyll. “I know eating is probably the furthest thing from your mind, love – but I need you upright all day, if possible.”

He nodded, distracted, and mechanically started to eat.

Walking into Moonrise Towers was appallingly simple. We came in through the docks, just in case the fake True Soul approach didn't work – but the guards accepted the parasite connection without question, and let us through.

We headed down, looking for Wyll's father and the rest of the prisoners. We found tieflings and gnomes; no duke.

“Shit. We should have known better than to think he'd be locked up with the riff-raff,” I said. “Any ideas on where they might have put him?”

“Further in and further down,” Wyll said grimly. But our only accesses were to *further up*, so... this was going to be a less-than-direct rescue. Of course. Nothing about it had been simple. Why had we thought we'd just stroll in and spirit the man out?

“Well, might as well get out whomever we can,” Gale said, philosophical. “Oh look! Some of the tieflings from the grove!” He waved surreptitiously, and they scowled at him. “Oof. Why are they so grumpy?”

“Being stuck in a cage will do that to you,” Astarion drawled. “But also, they think we're Absolutist spies, dearie.”

“Oh. Of course. Like everyone else does.”

“So,” I said. “Take out the spy eyes floating about. Take out each guard in turn. Take out whoever or whatever is in that tower thing in the middle. Let out the prisoners. Sound like a plan?”

“Uhh... then what?” Wyll asked. “They fight their way to the docks and steal a ship?”

“These people have the combined fighting power of a mouse,” Astarion agreed.

They were right. Terrible plan. We either had to slaughter every guard standing between them and the docks – and then go with them to take out any guards on any ship happening to come in – or come up with something different.

I approached the cell full of gnomes.

“I hear water,” one was saying. “I think we’ve a good chance there’s a pier back there. And piers mean boats.”

“AHHH we’re just discussing shoring up the back wall,” the nearest gnome said loudly, eyeing me. “It has a small structural weakness. You know gnomes, sir. We have to fix everything.”

“Barcus sent me,” I said quietly. “What do you need?”

“*Barcus?* Didn’t think he had it in him. You’re not a True Soul, then?”

“Long story. What’s the plan, and what do you need?”

He looked me up and down, clearly calculating the odds of getting assistance compared to telling an Absolutist their entire escape plan. “We’re going to knock out the back wall,” he said. “We think there’s a good chance there’s a boat out the back in the cave system. One of us is very good at feeling out underground spaces. Anyway, if you find us some tools and deal with the guards, we’ll break out ourselves and those tieflings a couple of cells down – they’ll be useful in a fight. Worst case, we can head out to the docks, but that’s a last resort.”

I nodded. “I’ll see what I can do,” I told him, and moved away.

“They’re going out the back,” I said. “They think there might be a boat back there.”

“Well – and this is just a crazy idea, you know – we could *go and see* before setting off utter chaos,” Astarion pointed out.

Sure enough, there was a pier behind the prison cells; presumably for bringing in supplies. Or taking out bodies. Hmm... no, actually, considering some other things we’d seen so far, it seemed obvious the bodies stayed here. Supplies, then, once upon a time. I looked at the boat. It looked fine, but the rope tying it was old and tattered.

“Anyone know anything about boats?” I asked.

Wyll jumped on and bounced up and down a few times, causing the whole thing to rock. I winced, but he stayed upright and the boat didn’t sink. He knelt to examine the hull. “No

immediate leaks,” he said. “Might not be perfect, but should get them to solid ground, at least. As long as someone’s prepared to bail just in case.”

We broke the spy eyes floating around the prison, then moved on to individual guards. Then the warden in her tower, and the surprise spy eye above.

“Ugh. That little shit of a thing almost got an alarm off,” Astarion said. “What do those little rockmunchers want? Hammers? Pickaxes? High heels so they can see over the gunwale?”

I crossed my arms and glared at him.

“Fine!” he said, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. What do our *erstwhile allies* need? Never known you to be so on edge!”

“I’ve never known you to be so in need of having your teeth shoved so far down your throat you’d need to swallow the whole damn boar to drink its blood, either,” I snapped.

Astarion’s head jerked back, and he stared at me for a long moment. He strode away to pick up a hammer from the table, and descended the ladder in silence. We all followed, tension in the air.

Astarion handed the hammer through the bars to the gnomes. “Here,” he said. “I hope this helps. There’s a boat out the back. This one –” pointing with a thumb to Wyll, “thinks it will get you where you need to go. Do you need help getting out?”

The gnome shook his head. “Just take care of the guards,” he said.

“Done,” I told him. “You’re good to go. I’d recommend now, before they change shifts or something.”

He nodded, and they went to work.

We went back to camp.

“Well,” Wyll said, taking my hand and leading me away to the riverbank, “that was an interesting encounter.”

“With the gnomes, or with Astarion?” I asked.

“Astarion,” he said, watching me.

“Mmm,” I said, grimacing. “Not my finest hour. I note you didn’t step in.”

He laughed. “Step in? Dear, I damn near followed through for you.”

I took a breath and leaned against him. “Are you trying to tell me I didn’t overreact?”

“Not at all, sweetheart. You shocked all the sass right out of the poor vampire, mind you, but he utterly deserved that and a lot more.”

“Is that why you grabbed me and brought me down here?”

Wyll drew away to kneel in front of me. “Dearest... you have a bad habit of second-guessing yourself on the very rare occasions when you let loose and give one of us a verbal slap. I should know. And I can tell you – you’ve never done it without a stack of provocation first. No, you didn’t overreact.”

I looked down at him. “Everything that’s going on, and you’re still worried about me,” I said softly. “Love, may I kiss you?”

He brought his mouth up to mine, and melted into me. I slid my tongue against his, and felt the familiar warm flow of arousal spread straight down my spine.

“Gods, Wyll,” I said, drawing away. “Will I ever get used to kissing you?”

“I hope not,” he whispered, and pulled me in for another long kiss. I happily surrendered to the taste of his mouth on mine, the sensation of his lips and tongue moving against mine, his body pressed against my front.

When he pulled away, I closed my eyes and sighed, smiling. “That was perfect, love,” I told him. “Gods, you kiss like an angel.”

He smiled and stroked a finger down my beard. “You need to go talk to Astarion, I know,” he said. “I’ll go cut some wood for the fire. I just wanted to make sure you were... fortified.”

“Thank you,” I said, hugging him. “You were just what I needed. As always.”

Astarion wasn’t hard to find. He was just beyond the limits of the camp, pacing back and forth.

“Hey,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, turning. “Well. Might as well get on with it.”

I stopped, feeling like I’d missed several lines of the conversation. “With what?” I asked, cautious.

“Yelling at me. Castigating. Casting me out. I don’t know,” he said, with a careless wave of his hand.

Ah. I sat down and patted the ground next to me in invitation. He eyed me cautiously. “I’d like to do something worse,” I said. “Well. I think it will bother you more. I’d like to tell you how I feel.”

Astarion stopped pacing and stared at me. “You’re right. Please yell at me.”

“I’ve been hated for being a gnome since I was a baby,” I said. “People – strangers – called me every name under the sun. I learnt to deal with that and ignore it. But then people I

thought I was close to did it too. They fucked me, then called me names when I didn't accept bad treatment. So..." I sighed. "I let them. Because I thought I deserved it."

Astarion sat down next to me. "Shit."

"It hurts when people I love call me those names," I said quietly. I could feel my lip trembling, and let it. I couldn't expect Astarion to offer comfort, but I could give him an honest emotional reaction, at least. "I know you think it's stupid of me, but I love you. I think of you as a friend. And that hurt."

He sighed. "I don't know what to do here."

I shook my head. "That's fine. An apology would be nice at some point. I just wanted you to understand why I was angry."

"I am sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I don't think of you as... well, as a gnome or anything. You're just you."

"Thanks," I said, wiping the tears from my face and standing. "I appreciate it, Astarion."

He stood, looking down at me uncertainly. "You're still upset, aren't you?"

I nodded, feeling another tear fall. "I'll be fine." I smiled at him.

He knelt and pulled me into a hug. I resisted for a moment from sheer surprise, then wrapped my arms around his shoulders and relaxed. Astarion gave surprisingly good hugs.

"Don't be sad just because I'm an idiot," he said, pulling away. "I need to go hunt."

"Is Astarion still in one piece?" Wyll asked, holding out a hand to take mine.

I slipped my hand into his and leaned against him. "In body, yes," I said. I related the encounter, and Wyll laughed.

"By Balduran's helm, you're merciless," he said.

I frowned.

"I could be wrong, but I think a tongue-lashing would have glanced off Astarion like water off a duck's back. Likewise a physical beating. But you hit him where it hurts – mortal connections."

I opened my mouth to reply, then closed it.

"I'm sorry," he said, letting go of my hand and pulling me close. "That was uncharitable, true though it might be. You wanted to connect with someone, and I'm trivialising it as punishment."

I sighed. “Gods, thank you for saving me the effort of thinking that through and enunciating it.”

“I’m not sure why you bother, sometimes. But I’ve been the beneficiary of your benefit of the doubt too, so I can hardly cavil, can I?”

I smiled.

“Hardest hit by this shadow curse, and still our light in the darkness,” Wyll said softly, stroking my arm.

“How are you feeling, love?” I asked.

“Frustrated, mostly. I’d hoped beyond hope that we’d find Father today. I knew it was unlikely. But... hells, I wanted so badly for something to go right with finding him.”

“You must be so worried,” I said, cuddling close.

“Hmm. Trying not to think too much about it, lest I lose focus again.”

“Fair.”

That night, we put our bedrolls together in his tent, away from the campfire.

“Distract me?” he asked. He lay on his side, head cradled in his arm, watching me.

“Anytime, love,” I said, smiling. “Stories or kisses?”

“Mmm. Kisses. Please.”

I pushed him onto his back and fitted myself against his side, supporting myself on my elbow. “Gods, you’re beautiful,” I said, running a finger over his jaw. I pressed my mouth to his, sliding the tip of my tongue over his lips, and his arm clutched my waist as he opened his mouth to me. I explored the taste of his mouth for a while, then broke away.

“Gods, Wyll. I swear I could lose all senses but taste and smell, and know you anywhere, with just a kiss.”

“It might be amusing watching you try to find me,” he said, chuckling.

I laughed, picturing a queue of failed kisses.

“Oh, my love,” I said, and kissed him again.

We kissed for a while, with the warm arousal between us never quite flaring into something stronger. This was a comfort night. Eventually, Wyll’s eyes grew heavy, and he yawned.

“Mmm...” he murmured. “Come cuddle against me, dear. I want to wake up with you in my arms and feel for a moment as though all is perfectly right in my world.”

I turned, my back to his front, and snuggled close. He threw the blanket over the two of us, draped an arm over me, and relaxed into the shallow, steady breathing of sleep. I lay awake for a while, thinking over the day and revelling in the large, warm presence in my bed. We might be days or hours away from death at all times, but to have each other was still an amazing gift.

The fucking Ironhands

“I want to talk to you,” Astarion said as I cooked breakfast.

I looked up at him, curious. “Is this about yesterday?” I asked.

“No. Yes. Sort of. Will you just... can we just go somewhere?” he asked.

I finished the meal preparation and put the pan to the side. It could wait for a while, or someone else would come along and continue it.

“Let’s go,” I said, and followed him down to the riverbank.

He faced me and peeled his shirt off, and I took a step backwards. “Astarion? You might have misinterpreted me yesterday.”

He laughed, but with a hint of bitterness. “No, I got *that* message, dearie. I...” he sighed. “You showed me your scars yesterday. I... wanted to show you mine.”

I frowned. “Tell me.”

He shook his head and turned his back, kneeling in front of me. “A poem,” he said. “From my old master, Cazador. He considered himself quite the artist.”

I traced the marks with a gentle finger. Carved and then burnt, if I wasn’t mistaken, into a rather ritualistic circle on Astarion’s back.

“He carved it over a single night,” Astarion said, old pain lacing his words. “He... made a lot of revisions as he went.”

I winced. *He said my screams sounded sweetest*, he’d said to me, once.

“This must have hurt an insane amount,” I said.

“*Insane* is right,” he agreed, turning around. “I need to know what it is. What it says. Whether it binds me to him. Lets him control me.”

I nodded. “What do you need?”

“Well, an expert of some kind,” he said. “And we have a fan of poetry who seems to be following us around.”

“Raphael?” I asked. “Makes sense, I suppose. If you’re willing to pay whatever twisted price he decides to ask.”

“My soul?” he asked, sneering as he put his shirt back on. “It’s barely mine as it is. Might as well end up in servitude to a demon as to that crackpot of a vampire.”

“Fair point,” I said. “OK. What do you need from me?”

“Don’t fight me on it. Help me, I suppose.”

I nodded. “To the best of my ability and conscience, I will.”

His shoulders relaxed, and I realised just how tense he’d been through this encounter.

“Hey,” I said. “I mean it. I won’t go killing people for you or something. But if we can do something to help you find some peace of mind, I’m all for it.”

“Thank you,” he said, and strode away.

“Right. Tieflings rescued. Gnomes rescued. We’ve done our good deeds for the tenday,” Astarion said. Shadowheart snorted. “What’s on today’s agenda?”

“Two choices,” I said. “We know there’s an artefact called the Nightsong. It seems to be linked to Ketheric Thorm. Logic would imply it’s the source of his power... but it could also be a dead end. The other option is to stick our heads into the lion’s mouth, now that we’ve wandered into its den.”

“See if there’s any information in the upper levels of the Tower?” Wyll asked.

I nodded. “I highly doubt it, mind, but I suppose it’s possible they’d be holding higher-ranked prisoners up there, too. The thing is – either way we go, we risk wasting time in taking out Ketheric and rescuing Wyll’s father.”

Shadowheart nodded, sober-faced. “I’d vote for the Tower, I think,” she said. “We could go haring off after the Nightsong, and it could pay off – but delaying a day might save us a lot more time.”

“I don’t really care,” Astarion said. “Sounds like we’ll get to the same place in the end, either way – the top of that tower, trying to push Ketheric down. Sounds fun.”

“Wyll?” I asked. “What do you think?”

“We’re voting now?” he asked.

“Taking advice,” I said, smiling.

“Then let’s away to the Tower,” he said. “I think you’re right – there’s no clear good choice here. Let’s just do something instead of sitting around. Worst case scenario, we end up dead, and we don’t care.”

“Oooh! I do like starting the day with a nice hot cup of optimism,” Astarion gibed.

We slipped back into the Tower, and to my surprise, no one seemed at all concerned that guards were dead and all their prisoners had escaped.

“Do you think the tadpoles scramble their faculties?” Astarion asked.

“Probably,” Shadowheart answered. “Having something sliding through your brain matter hardly helps your thinking skills.”

“So we’re incredibly stupid too?”

“Probably.”

“Oh. The optimism just keeps on coming this morning.”

“Maybe calm down and let the grown-ups talk to the guards, scramble-brain.”

We chatted to a couple of guards in a casual fashion, and found that a Commander Z’rell was looking for us. Given that there were no orders to arrest or kill us on sight, she probably didn’t want to confront us about the small detail of us killing half of her prison guards. Probably.

So we trudged upstairs to meet with the orc commander of the Absolutists. She was... large. As a gnome, I was used to being outsized by pretty much everyone, but Z’rell was impressive. And flanked by an ogre who somehow didn’t manage to make her look small.

“About time,” she said abruptly. “Whatever your previous mission, consider yourselves pulled off it. General Thorm has a project he needs you to check on.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Balthazar, one of our researchers. He’s working in a facility to the north. We lost contact with him a few days ago; haven’t been able to reestablish communication. Go check on him. Report back if there are any problems. This project is *essential* to the general. Don’t mess it up.”

“Is there anything we might need to complete if this Balthazar is dead or badly injured?” I asked carefully. “Details we should know?”

She shrugged. “Artefact called the Nightsong. There are notes on Balthazar’s desk, in his chambers. Here’s the key. I don’t know anymore. Figure it out. You look clever enough.”

I bowed, and we made a retreat.

“Hmm. I guess the Nightsong is our next step after all,” Wyll said as we ransacked Balthazar’s chambers.

I nodded. “Now at least we have official sanction, though. Looks like this wasn’t a complete waste of time.”

His desk held notes on a soul cage. I frowned. “I’ve never heard of this,” I said slowly. “But... if I’m understanding correctly, this sounds like a way of transferring immortality from one person to another.”

“You mean Ketheric is feeding off an immortal to keep himself alive?” Wyll asked. He looked ill at the thought.

I nodded. In honesty, it wasn't doing much for my stomach either. I suppose it was too much to hope that he'd trapped a nice evil orthon or something. No, wait – if he had, he'd probably end up in the hells every time someone landed a killing blow.

“Shit,” I said, understanding dawning. “He's captured an angel or a fey or something.”

“Not the *asset* Mizora wants us to retrieve?” Wyll asked.

“Didn't she say that was a devil?” I asked. “Do all devils go back to the hells if they're killed here? Would that transfer to Ketheric?”

“Hmm. I have no idea. I think we need Gale,” he said.

“Mmm. I suppose it doesn't matter much. If we destroy this Nightsong device, hopefully it will free whoever is powering it. Even if they're an evil entity, they might be appreciative, at least.”

Before going to check on Balthazar, we needed provisions. And frankly, I needed a break. Even with Isobel's blessing over us, every step felt dragging. Every morning was bleak. Food tasted bad, and wine felt like an escape, not a fun drink. I spent every moment convincing myself that we needed to keep going; that we could do this – against the arguments of the depression constantly rising within me.

So we went to the Last Light Inn. As soon as we crossed the boundary, I straightened and relaxed.

“Gods,” I said. “That's so much better. It feels as though someone just added colour to a grey, bleak world.”

Wyll held out a hand, and I took it, leaning against him. “I wish we didn't have to go back out there, dear,” he said softly.

I smiled. “If wishes were horses, love.”

“... we'd ride to Baldur's Gate? Ha. That would be useful.”

We stocked up with the quartermaster, handing over some jugs of lamp oil we'd found somewhere. “This might help you hold out a little longer,” I said. “It's not much, but...”

“Every little bit counts,” she said grimly. “You have our thanks.”

Inside, we found gnomes and even more tieflings than there had been earlier.

“They made it!” Gale said, sounding genuinely happy. “How wonderful!”

Karlach bounced over to hug someone – I thought I remembered her from the party. Lia, perhaps?

“Hey, you got back here safe and sound!” Karlach said. “I was worried when I heard these jabronis let you go off in a boat without any muscle.”

“We’re fine, thanks to our saviours,” Lia said, smiling at us. “We couldn’t believe it when you busted us out of that place. Like magic!”

“Speaking of magic,” another tiefling said. He was tall and serious-faced, wearing robes. A wizard, I’d guess. “Thank you. For looking out for these madcap siblings of mine after they got themselves caught by those sadistic dicks. The silly twits.”

I laughed. “Our pleasure. Did we meet at the grove? Or at the party?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think we talked, no. I’m Rolan. Apprentice wizard.”

“Yes, he’s very proud of that, too,” Lia said, nudging him with genuine fondness in her eyes.

“And why not? It’s not every day someone’s chosen to apprentice with the great Lorroakan.”

“Lorroakan, eh?” Gale said. “Isn’t he the chap that took over Sorcerous Sundries? Bit of a cad, I’d heard. I’m glad the scuttlebutt was wrong.”

“I wanted the best,” Rolan said, stiffening. “And I got it.”

“Well! Congratulations to you,” Gale said, smiling. “And best of luck in your endeavours. I’m sure you’ll love studying magic. There’s nothing like it.”

Rolan smiled slightly and turned away, and I watched him pensively. He’d just been talking to the ex-Chosen of the god of magic herself, and told him he’d *wanted the best*. What would he think if he knew that the scruffy-looking wizard in front of him had been a pre-eminent archmage just a couple of years earlier? I shook my head. Not my problem; not my concern.

I walked over to the gnomes, Wyll following me. The tieflings still made him uncomfortable, I suspected.

“Oh. Nothing for us,” Wulbren said, motioning me to depart.

“Wow,” Wyll said. “That’s a cold welcome for the people who pulled you out of prison and almost certain death.”

Wulbren sighed. “Fine. Thank you. Here’s your reward. Now off you trot.” He handed over a clinking pouch.

I gritted my teeth, took it, and turned away, but Wyll was... less inclined to just walk away.

“You’re an unfriendly lot,” he said. “Dash risked his life getting you out. We all did.”

“You’re right,” Wulbren said. It sounded insincere to my ear. “My apologies. The Ironhands pay their debts. We have planning to do now, but look us up when you reach Baldur’s Gate. We’re handy people to know.”

“You’re Ironhands,” I said, drawing in a breath. I reached out, and Wyll took my hand, squeezing gently. “The Ironhands are banned from Baldur’s Gate.”

“Not for much longer,” Wulbren said, frowning “What’s the problem? You don’t like Ironhands? We’re fighting for your freedom too.”

I put this together with his kinwoman’s confession about runepowder, and came up with a very unsavoury picture of their plans. Runepowder and zealots. This couldn’t be good.

“The Ironhands could do with a little less freedom-fighting, and a little more inventing of things other than quarrels,” I said, trying to keep an even tone. *Breathe, Dash.*

“Inventing quarrels?” he asked. “Do you have any idea what conditions are like in the city for gnomes? Any idea at all?”

“Hatred? Prejudice? Yes. I know all too well. Better than most of you, it seems. If you’re planning to win over the city by providing your services in these difficult times, best of luck to you. But with runepowder and talk of freedom, I’m guessing a peaceful approach isn’t your first option.”

He looked at me, silent.

“Gods, what are you planning? The Ironhands destroyed the reputation of all gnomes once; you plan to do it again? That’s what will happen with a bunch of zealots and a barrel of runepowder. And the main people to suffer, as always, won’t be you – oh no, you’ll die thinking you’re heroic, or take off afterwards full of self-righteous glee. It’s the common people who’ll suffer for Ironhand actions. Again. They’ll be tormented and judged and thrown from the city, all because you lot can’t leave well enough alone!” My voice had risen to a shout.

“Keep it down,” he hissed. “We don’t want the whole world knowing what we’re doing. I’ve killed people for less. But this is all interesting talk coming from the person planning to take down Moonrise Towers, don’t you think? Sound familiar at all?”

“We’re trying to help *everyone*,” I snapped, but more quietly. “Not just ourselves.”

Wyll stroked a thumb lightly over my hand, and I looked up at him. He nodded in agreement, but his eyes were concerned.

“Keep telling yourself that, bucko,” Wulbren said. “Just keep out of our way, we’ll keep out of yours, and everything will be fine.”

My jaw clenched, and my free hand clenched into a fist. *Fucking* Ironhands. Would they never stop fucking up my city? But – Wyll’s quiet face was asking me to drop this before it got unhelpful, I thought, and that time was now. I could either start a fight, or I could leave.

Time to pick my poison, because both of those options were terrible. If I attacked, or goaded them enough, this would turn into a bloodbath and they'd all die. And my kin – distant, certainly, but we were all gnomes – would be dead by my hand.

“I won't let you hurt innocents,” I said. “Try, and I come after you. Remember that.”

“Oh, we'll keep it in mind,” he drawled. “Four scruffy adventurers and a dog. We're terrified already.”

“These scruffy adventurers just saved your ungrateful arses,” Wyll snapped. “Try remembering that, too.”

He sighed. “Your prejudice aside, you did. You have our thanks. Just... keep out of our hair, or we might stop being so grateful.”

I turned and stalked away, back to camp.

“You seem tense,” Wyll said, finding me down by the river after dinner.

“Very,” I admitted. “I'm still so angry, and I have nowhere to release it. I wanted to abuse them all. Start a good old-fashioned fight. Get out my rage and solve the problem all in one.”

“I was impressed at your self-control,” he said, sitting next to me. “I thought you were going to blow your top, and I can't say it wouldn't have been justified.”

“I was close,” I admitted. “I still want to storm back there and beat someone to a pulp.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Kit out a tree as an Ironhand gnome so I can hit it?” I asked, smiling despite myself.

“As long as we use plenty of padding,” he said, taking my hand to kiss it. “No self-inflicted injuries, please.”

We set up some padding around a tree, and I let loose. “Fucking Ironhands,” I yelled, and pummelled it mercilessly until I was panting and sore, and my hands were bruised.

“Feel better?” Wyll asked.

I sighed. “Yes, but only a little. I got rid of the anger, but... shit. What are they planning? And how many lives are they going to destroy in the process?”

He pulled a pot of healing salve from his pocket, and started to slowly rub it into my knuckles and fingers, then the sides of my hands. “We'll stop them, dear. Whatever it is. We're faster and much better equipped than they are. If we can find my father, he'll help us.”

My muscles slowly started to relax as he massaged my hands, and I took a deep breath, then exhaled. This time, it actually helped me let go of some of the frustration and fear I felt underneath the rage I'd – at least partially – taken out on the tree.

“Thank you, love,” I said, leaning against him, trying to let go of the unhelpful emotions. “You were a steadying influence today; one I desperately needed.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, arms stealing around me. “But I only held your hand.”

“You took me seriously, didn’t you?” I asked. “When I asked you to step in if you thought I was feeding the darkness within.”

He nodded, cheek against my hair. “That moment surprised me out of my self-absorption, dear. Made me realise that being on a team might be more of a challenge than I’d expected – and reap greater rewards. Of course I took you seriously.”

“It means the world to me, love. Without you there, I might just have given in to the urge to deck Wulbren. And then we’d have had an all-out brawl in the middle of the only bastion of light we have left.”

“Have a bit more faith in yourself,” he said, smiling. “But come on, dear. It’s time for sleep.”

Dark justiciars and darker plans

We made our way to the Thorm mausoleum, and – Raphael.

“Oh look,” Shadowheart said. “It’s our favourite bad penny.”

“Ooh. Spicy little Sharran,” he said, glancing at her. “But I think someone in your party has a request for me.”

“*And* he comes when he’s called. How sweet.”

“Will you *please* stop antagonising the devil until I’ve had a chance to ask him something?” Astarion snapped.

Shadowheart raised an amused eyebrow and stepped back.

“What can I do for you, little spawn?” Raphael asked, eyeing Astarion. “Keen for a nibble, are you? I think I’m a little too rich for the likes of you to handle.”

“No doubt you’re a very fine vintage, aged in the finest of infernal barrels,” Astarion agreed. “No, I want to know about these scars on my back.”

He stripped to show Raphael, who stepped close to trace each with a languid hand. Astarion shuddered under his touch, and I stepped forward to take his hand. He gripped it hard, like every movement from Raphael hurt him deep inside.

“Well. If this isn’t a lovely piece of work,” Raphael drawled, his hand still resting on Astarion’s back, his thumb lightly caressing the flesh. “But what could it be? A poem? A spell? A brand?”

Astarion’s grip on my hand tightened further.

“This seems like a bad idea, Astarion,” I said, watching Raphael in the corner of my eye. “I don’t think Raphael knows anything. We’re better off going with that other guy.”

“Oh *really*?” Raphael retorted. “I can tell you *all* about it, little spawn. And all for a very reasonable price. Just kill the orthon that lurks in the bowels of this place. Kill him, and I tell you all.”

“No additional conditions?” I asked, wary.

“None. I’m a very reasonable devil,” Raphael said, and vanished.

Astarion sagged and let go of my hand.

“Well,” he said. “That was... less of an ordeal than I expected.”

We walked through the mausoleum to a place that looked oddly familiar.

“Is it just me, or does this look like Grymforge?” I asked.

“I... think I know what this place is,” Shadowheart said slowly. “I think it’s the old Justiciar proving ground. How did they find this?”

“It was lost?” I asked her.

“Well. Certainly not used. Dark Justiciars are promoted using a different path these days. But this... this is Lady Shar’s own trial. If I’m right.”

“So you could become a Dark Justiciar here?”

She nodded, face shining. I repressed the urge to ask her what in all the hells she could possibly be thinking. She was dedicated to an evil deity. I’d known that for a long time. It seemed hypocritical to suddenly stop and decide that this was a step too far, just because now I couldn’t ignore it.

“How does one *become* a Dark Justiciar?” I asked cautiously.

She shrugged. “Usually, now? Sacrifice a Selunite.” She caught sight of the expression on my face. “Oh, come on. Don’t act as though this is a big surprise. Besides, the Selunites try to take us out whenever they come across us too. It’s not as if we’re hunting poor defenceless baby bunnies.”

I sighed. “How the hells did an ex-Lathandrian and a Sharran end up as friends?”

She laughed. “Not my idea of a great pairing, either. Yet here we are.”

Balthazar did not seem happy that we’d come along to crash his party. He was alive; that much seemed certain. At least until we won through the defences to meet him, and... well. *Stitched-together monstrosity* seemed a compliment.

“General Thorm is concerned,” I told him. “That this mission is... a little too difficult for you, perhaps.”

As I’d hoped, he bristled. “Nonsense! I’m almost through these ridiculous Sharran defences. And once I am... the Nightsong. We’ll have untrammelled access to her for the first time in decades.”

Hmm. That was some interesting information to unpack.

I affected boredom. “General Thorm ordered us to assist,” I said, inspecting my fingernails as though I’d rather be at Baldur’s Gate. “You need someone to win through to the Nightsong, yes? Use us. I’m sure we’re more capable than these...” I waved an arm at the shambling corpses around us, “*zombies* you have serving you.”

He sneered, looking me up and down. Mostly down. “Fine,” he said, dismissing us. “Go. See if you can do a better job.”

We left the chamber, Shadowheart nearly vibrating with excitement beside me. I’d never quite realised how contained she was until now.

Getting through Shar’s trials was surprisingly easy. We had a trained assassin and spy with us – all we had to do was sit back and watch her creep, sneak, and stab her way through them.

“That was a nice effort,” I said, applauding as she finished the final one, barely breaking a sweat. “These are supposed to be *difficult* for people with your training, right? I mean – they look hard. You just make them look incredibly easy.”

She smiled the sweetest, most incongruous smile, given the circumstances. “Thanks, Dash.”

The next room seemed to be a library. Hmm. Removing the librarians and traps was a simple enough endeavour. The reading material, though... that was a smidge more concerning. *Still the Nightsong*... using the Nightsinger, Shar.

I thought back to Balthazar. Hadn’t he implied that the Nightsong and the entity trapped in the soul cage were one and the same?

Shadowheart unlocked the room that held the Spear of Night.

“Shadowheart,” I said. “This sacrifice. You’re supposed to kill whoever is being kept in that soul cage, aren’t you?”

She raised her chin and stared me in the face. “Probably,” she said calmly.

“And they’re someone Ketheric has imprisoned for a century? This weapon – it will kill an immortal for eternity, won’t it? Remove them from existence?”

She nodded silently.

“Shadowheart,” I said, heart breaking.

She closed her eyes. “Let’s just go and find out,” she said, finally. “No point arguing about maybes and possibilities.”

I sighed and reached for Wyll’s hand. It clasped around mine, warm but not quite as reassuring as I’d hoped.

Anger and memories

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings

- Talk of sexual and physical abuse
- PTSD episode/mild panic attack

Folks, this might be a rough read for some.

Please look after yourself, OK?

Love, Rowan

“So,” Wyll said. “Do we talk about Shadowheart and the looming sense of doom I feel in that quarter? Or about Astarion and what on earth was going on there?”

I sighed. “I think both.” I took his hand, and we walked down to the water to sit on a fallen tree.

“I felt as though there was something I was missing with Astarion and those scars,” Wyll said. “Something intimate. He held your hand like a lover, Dash. I... feel like yelling.”

I nodded, and my heart hurt in my chest. This was going to keep happening, wasn't it? I was going to do things as a leader – as a friend – that Wyll didn't like. And he was going to assume infidelity every time. There was nothing I could do to prove otherwise. A losing battle. I let go of his hand and turned to face him.

“Bring on the yelling, I guess,” I said, trying for a smile.

His mouth twisted into an angry frown, and I felt a jolt of reflexive fear. *It's Wyll*, I reminded myself. *It's OK*. It calmed me on the outside, but dread curled in my stomach, my heart speeding.

“Wait,” he said. “I saw that. “What's going on?”

Tears tried to rise. Shit. I'd been doing so well at handling conflicts rationally.

Wyll stilled. “Hey,” he said more gently. “Dearest. I don't understand.” He pulled me into a hug, but the sudden confinement sent my burgeoning panic into a spiral.

I broke away, shaking. “Don't.”

He let me go, sitting back. He looked deeply hurt.

“Wait,” I said. “It's... not you. I'm sorry.” I wanted to get out of there. I didn't want to leave him with that look on his face. The two impulses pulled me in opposite directions.

He sat watching me with troubled face.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths; felt muscles relaxing, felt more part of my body. That was good and bad - my body wasn't happy right now. My heart was pounding. My head wasn't far behind. Come on. I had better physical control than this. I could do this.

“Right,” I said, opening my eyes. “You're angry and it... reminded me of something. I got...” I sighed, because I didn't like the implication that this was going to convey. “Scared.”

Wyll's face crumpled.

“Not of you. I'm not scared of you. Just... something hit different tonight and...” I shrugged. “Bad memories.”

“Oh, my dear.”

“But I don't want you to feel like you can't get angry for fear I'll react this way, either.”

“I want to hug you, but you don't seem to want that, so I'm a little... at sea,” he said.

“Mmm. Soon. I need to breathe through this first. Love, if I tell you this, I can't untell it.”

“I'm here for all of you, darling.”

“Part of me is expecting to be held down and hurt now. Forcibly. Just... don't restrain me in any way. Please.” Fear clenched around my chest. *Don't tell them when you're vulnerable*, the thought came, *they'll just use it against you*.

“What would help?” he asked.

I blinked. “Aren't you still angry?” I asked.

“That can wait. Let's get you through this, dear.” He held out a hand, and I put mine in it. He squeezed gently, then let go, keeping our palms together, so I could withdraw my hand at any time.

I closed my eyes. He actually understood. *Shit*.

“Talk to me,” he said softly.

“One of the men I used to hang with,” I said. “Jurgen. Human. We were in a relationship... I thought. When I did something wrong, he'd hold me down. Hit me. Hurt me. It would turn to sex. It was passion, he said. He was just such a passionate person. Love and hate, sides of the same coin, you know?”

“The others agreed. It was romantic, all that passion. They even saw it happen, and... nothing. I thought it was just... how things had to be.” I felt the dread and fear again. The shame of even being upset about something that was supposed to be good. The look in his eyes.

“Oh, my love,” Wyll said quietly.

“Why the hells do you want damaged goods, Wyll? You could have a nice, sweet, wholesome guy with zero baggage. Not... me and my mess.”

I looked up at Wyll and saw tears streaming down one side of his face.

“Don't you understand how much *more* precious you are to me?” he said. “Because you've been through so much and come out the other side? Because you understand some of *my* mess?”

I squeezed the hand he was very carefully not holding.

“You're not damaged goods, dear,” he said fiercely. “You're a bright shining light. You're wonderful.”

“Thank you,” I said. I wasn't at a point of believing it, but I appreciated the words, at least. They were helping to push away the memories and the panic.

I took a few more breaths, feeling my chest start to loosen and my head let go of the pounding fixation.

“Can I just lean against your chest, love?” I asked. “Don't cuddle me yet.”

He opened his arms, and I nestled myself against him, head on his shoulder. I inhaled, my shoulders loosening.

“Gods, I smell your skin and I feel better,” I said, smiling a little.

Wyll's chest shook in a sob, and I looked up at him, concerned.

“It's OK,” he said, smiling at me. “It's just... seeing you scared was upsetting. I knew you weren't scared of *me*. But it felt as though you were. You saying my scent makes you feel better... balm to the wound.”

I rubbed my cheek against his shirt. “Thank you, love. You could have been annoyed at me for this.”

His arms moved as though to hug me, then he stopped. “I'd like to think,” he said slowly, “that I'll never, ever be annoyed at you for having feelings and showing them to me, my dear. *Not* showing them, maybe. But... three circles, Dash.”

“Mmm.”

He stroked my hand lightly. "Thank you for telling me about it. For sharing yourself with me. It means the world to me."

We sat in silence for a while as I breathed, letting go of the memories that had shaken me so hard.

"So," I said, cheek still pressed against his chest, "tell me what upset you about Astarion."

He inhaled as if to speak, then blew out the breath in a rush.

"I've never seen Astarion accept comfort like that," he said. "And you knew about the scars on his back. Ones he would have needed to be naked for you to see. I..."

I nodded against his chest, not wanting to move away.

"I'm being an idiot again, aren't I?" he asked.

I craned my neck to look up at him.

"No," I said, serious. "I'm clearly poking your insecurities right where they hurt. Over and over. But whether we can change that without trying to change the sort of person I am... I don't know."

"Hmm. I know I don't want that. I like that you'll sit down and cuddle a kobold if it's sad."

I chuckled. "Can I take a wild guess?"

"Please."

"You see me getting closer to Astarion, and it looks a bit like what you and I getting closer looked like?"

Wyll stilled, his breathing going shallow. I drew away, worried, and he gave me a rueful smile.

"Damn," he said. "I think you got it."

"Oh, love. I'm the moth; you're the flame. There's no one else for me."

His face softened.

"We have such different ideas of what friendship looks like, though," I said. "I'm not surprised this keeps coming up. I just..." I shrugged.

He nodded. "I'd be hugging you so tight right now," he said softly. "I want you to know that."

"Mmm. Let me tell you what happened?"

"Please."

“He showed me this morning. Told me I showed him my scars; he wanted to show me his.”

“How did you know to hold his hand when Raphael was touching his back?”

I stared incredulously at him. “Love, he was tortured for two centuries. Cazador used him as a honeypot to pull in victims.”

Wyll closed his eyes. “Fuck,” he swore quietly. “I heard him mention it, but he always said it so lightly. I didn’t think...”

“Gotta admit, I almost smacked you one when you made a smart remark about a rat diet once.”

“I’m an asshole.”

“Oblivious, perhaps.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been an utter rothe about this.”

I got up on my knees. “May I kiss you, love?”

He leaned forward to lightly press his lips against mine and drew back, smiling.

“Is there anything I can do to help you feel more secure?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You’re wonderful,” he said, stroking a finger down my jawline. “You keep showing me how important I am to you. I’m just a jealous fool.”

I rested my forehead on his shoulder. “Never *just* a jealous fool, love,” I said, smiling.

Impatience and frustration

“Right. First things first,” Astarion said. “Before we go hunt down that Nightsong thing, let’s take down the creature Raphael wants dead.”

“Does anyone else feel as though we’re being played for fools?” Wyll asked. “Just a convenient little errand in the middle of an ancient Sharran temple?”

“Constantly, darling, but I think the rest of us are more aware of it,” Astarion told him. “Regardless, I need to know what these marks are on my back. Raphael knows. Let’s go .”

“And if this creature turns out to be an innocent?” he pressed.

“Ugh. Then we argue when we get there, and it attacks us while we’re distracted, and we all die. Happy?”

There was only one section of the temple that we hadn’t explored yet, so it seemed obvious the creature was probably there. Sure enough – an ambush, with an orthon and a group of merrigons.

“Shit. Should’ve brought Karlach,” Wyll said. “What did she say about orthons? Throw their bombs back in their faces?”

“Greetings,” I said to the orthon training a large crossbow at my face.

“Ha! You want to parley?” he asked.

“*What* do you think you’re doing?” Astarion hissed.

“Hmm. A gnome. You smell of the surface, tiny creature. But...” the orthon inhaled. “Musk. Cherries. Sulphur. *You stink of Raphael!* Where is that bastard?”

“Hiding,” I said with a shrug. “He wants you dead. He doesn’t want himself dead.”

The orthon bellowed with laughter. “And *you’re* going to do the job?”

I shrugged again. “You know Raphael. Always has a deal going. What’s your history with him?”

“Less talking, more *killing* !” Astarion hissed.

I clenched my jaw and used the parasite to connect briefly with Astarion. *Give me some room to move, you silly chaos gremlin, and calm your tits before they explode. I’m working on it!*

He sent back a wordless wave of frustration, but stepped back a pace.

“He set me a task,” the orthon said. “A contract in the form of a song. Once none survive to hear the song, I am free. *But the song still plays!* I’m never free!”

“He’s a tricky bastard,” I agreed. “The devil’s in the details with this sort of contract. Your followers have been hearing the song all along.”

He stared at me. “*They* are the reason I can’t be free of this wretched contract?”

I shrugged. “Try it.”

“Kill yourselves,” he ordered, and the merrigons fell on each other, then disappeared back to the hells.

“*I still hear the song!*” he roared, infuriated.

“That’s because you’re the one who originally heard it, and you still remain alive,” I pointed out, with... well, not flawless logic.

He snarled at me. “If you are wrong, I will rise from the hells and hunt you for eternity.”

I nodded soberly.

He turned his sword on himself, and ran himself through, leaping from his platform to his death, and disappeared.

I turned to Astarion. “There. I *told* you I was working on it!”

“Will that count?” he demanded.

“We caused his death,” I said. “If Raphael wants our cooperation in his bigger deal... he can damn well play ball in this one.”

Astarion sighed.

“Can we *please* stop muttering things about killing in my ear when I’m trying to talk to people?” I asked the group. “It’s distracting, and it gives them a heads-up that we might be more violent than we seem. It’s rarely helpful, even if it *does* make you feel better.”

Wyll laughed, and I raised an eyebrow at him. “Priestess Gut?” I pointed out, and he smirked.

We returned to camp, and Raphael materialised.

“Well,” he said. “I just received a delivery of several tonnes of orthon. My thanks, I suppose. So. Astarion. Do you still want to hear about those scars on your lovely, lovely back?”

Astarion visibly gritted his teeth. “I do,” he said.

“An infernal contract,” Raphael said. “Binding you to your master. To the Rite of Profane Ascension. A deliciously evil piece of magic that allows a vampire to ascend to greater

power. Walk in the sun. Et cetera. Those scars bind you as a keystone in the ritual. A sacrifice. One of many, many souls that must be consumed, devoured, to fuel Cazador's rise."

"He's never going to let me go, is he?"

"Oh, he was *most* put out when he had all his cards in his hand... and then you simply disappeared from the city one starry night. Gone without a trace. His rage was... delicious."

"I see."

Raphael disappeared.

Astarion collapsed to sit in the dust of the campsite.

"I'm just a sacrifice to him," he said, voice dull.

I knelt next to him, not touching him. Not yet.

"Not to us," I said. "We'll help."

He looked at me. "You have no idea how powerful he is."

I shook my head. "I don't care."

"Naive fool."

"*Friend*."

"What?"

I held out my hand. "You're my friend. I love you. I have your back, Astarion."

He frowned at me and sighed. "You're a fool, you know that?"

I shrugged, still holding out the hand.

He grasped my hand. "Fine. Thank you."

"We'll take him down and free you. Alright? We'll get to Baldur's Gate, and the bastard will fry. If I have to take the sun out of the sky and shove it up his arse, we'll get him."

Astarion laughed shakily. "I'd pay to see *that*."

I walked down to the river with Wyll, feeling tense. Last night we'd been close to fighting about me and Astarion. Tonight I'd been holding hands with the self-same vampire. This was... unlikely to go well.

Sure enough, Wyll was quiet, and tension felt high. Well, I could at least soften it by expressing gratitude, I supposed. We might have only postponed the confrontation, but his care last night had also meant the world to me.

We sat down on the riverbank, and I lay back to look at the sky. Where the stars would be without the shadow curse.

“I know you’re angry,” I said hesitantly. “But... first? Thank you. For looking after me last night. For caring even though you wanted to be... upset. It must have been confronting, and you were really sweet.”

He reclined beside me and sighed. “I’m not angry, dear. Well. Not with you. A little with myself.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I had some time to think, this morning. I realised that my anger was what brought that fear down on your head – and there was no just cause behind it. No righteous reasons. Just my wretched jealousy.”

“I *have* given you plenty to get jealous of,” I said with a shrug.

“Stop *saying that*,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist.

I sat up, feeling wary.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Here I am getting angry while trying to apologise about getting angry at you, which is... well. I’m not sure *irony* will cover it. It’s just...” he sat up and took my hand. “... I realised last night that you keep accepting me being an utter *arse* to you about this. Somehow I’ve convinced you that I’m perfectly right to get upset and need soothing every time you pat Astarion on the back.”

I frowned as I tried to follow his thoughts through that one.

“You haven’t changed anything about how you behave towards anyone else in the time I’ve known you,” he said. “You’re consistently caring and loving. And somehow here I am, both admiring that and undermining it by whining when someone I’m threatened by gets attention from you.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“I just watched you hold his hand again, and it hit me that you would have *hugged* any one of the others, and I wouldn’t have blinked. I’m a fool. I’m insecure because Astarion is prettier than I ever was, but especially now. And he’s more charming. And funnier. He makes you laugh. You two... you have an undeniable connection.”

“Oh, my love,” I said, sad to hear him say such things.

“But that insecurity is my monster to fight, not yours. I need to stop pulling it out and throwing it at you every time it roars.”

“I... don’t even know how to think about what you’ve said, let alone how to respond.”

“I keep thinking you’re so wise in the ways of the world and relationships, Dash. But I’m starting to realise you might have a large blind spot around me, and I need to stop relying on you to give me a good kick if I’m not doing the right thing by you. I need to be better for you.”

My nose tingled as tears rose in my eyes. I was still confused, but the idea of him wanting to *be better* for me unblocked something inside.

“May I hug you, dear?” he asked, looking pensive. “I’d really like to kiss that look off your face for a while.”

I straddled his lap and threw my arms around his shoulders. His arms came around my back and squeezed. I buried my face in his neck and breathed. “Mmm. I have no idea what to do with what you just said, love, but gods, it feels so good to have you back in my arms,” I said.

His arms loosened so I could draw away a bit. “Kiss me?” he asked.

I bit his lower lip gently, and his breathing hitched. I slid the tip of my tongue lightly between his lips, and he opened his mouth to me, claws scraping lightly down my back. I let the kiss deepen, luxuriating in the taste and feel of him.

After a few moments of indulgence, I drew back, studying his face, stroking one of the ridges on his neck absentmindedly. “Gods, I love this face,” I said softly. “I don’t understand why you think I’d want to kiss any other. I thought I made my choices very clear the first time I kissed you.”

Wyll looked puzzled, then as though light was slowly dawning on a new idea. “You said you had other offers,” he said slowly. “If you’d wanted a *roll*, or some such. You meant Astarion, didn’t you?”

I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. Was this conversation about to go to the hells?

“I did,” I said slowly. “I didn’t realise I hadn’t clarified that though. What’s... where did the confusion come in?”

“You turned him down before you even came looking for me,” he said, frowning.

“Because I wanted *you*,” I said.

“Yes, my very slow brain is just starting to grasp that,” he said.

“I’m so confused,” I said. “What did you think happened? Did you think I kissed you and slept with him or something?”

“No, I thought you kissed me, then he propositioned you, and... well, you were stuck.”

I stared at him. “STUCK?”

Wyll winced.

“So I was with you, but my poor sad arse was languishing after the pretty vampire who hadn't made a pass at me until it was *too late*, so I had to just content myself with – what, pathetic second-best? Because I'm completely incapable of making any new choices for myself?” I noticed the volume of my voice increasing and took a few breaths.

“I'm... realising how offensive that was,” he said.

“I'm offended on *your* behalf, you great lumbering buffoon,” I said. “What the hells, Wyll? Are you ever going to look at yourself and see the kind, sweet, deeply ethical person who'd sacrifice anything for the people he loves? For that matter, your incredibly attractive outsides? Dammit, Wyll, if you have a thing for vampire twinks, ask Astarion into bed, already!”

Wyll stared at me, shock written on his face. Then he started to laugh.

“Did you...” he spluttered, “just insult me, tell me I'm wonderful, *and* tell me that I should fuck someone else if I think they're so great?”

I tried to repress my answering laughter, but grinned.

“You implied something mean about my man, and I think my protective instincts got confused,” I said, then howled with laughter, my forehead on his shoulder.

“Hells, Dash,” he said, still laughing. “I needed that. Thank you.” He wrapped his arms around me and cuddled close for a while as I laughed.

When I calmed, I sat back and stroked a hand down his cheek. “My silly fool,” I said softly. “What can I do to convince you that you're the stars in my sky; the only light I want?”

He turned into the caress, rubbing his cheek over my palm. “You could call me yours again, darling.”

I slid my hand around to the back of his neck, and his breath sped up. I grasped his braids and pulled, watching his eyes close. Something about that really flipped a switch for him. “You're mine,” I said. “*Mine*, Wyll.” I kissed him, hard, letting my teeth graze his lips. I drew back, watching his peaceful expression. “My love,” I said softly, stroking a finger down his neck. “Gods, I love seeing that look on your face.”

“Mmm,” he murmured. “Something about you claiming me makes me feel safe.”

“I'll call you *my Wyll* whenever you want, love,” I said, kissing the base of his neck where it joined his shoulder, biting gently.

He let his head drop back, leaning back on his hands, breathing hard. “Hells, Dash. You know you could do anything to me right now?”

“Do you want to let go?” I asked, stroking with soft fingers the place I'd bitten. “You know I'll keep you safe.”

“Mmm. Please? I want you touching me.”

I slipped hands under his shirt, sliding fingers over his abdominal muscles. “Like this?”

He pulled the shirt off in one quick movement. I smiled. “I feel like a kid in a candy store,” I said, kissing a scar over his breast that looked like an arrow had skewered his ribs. I pulled my shirt off and pressed against him, skin to skin. “Gods, you feel good,” I told him, watching his eyes glaze a little as I rubbed against him.

I felt him harden against my leg and bit my lip. Gods, I needed to keep control. I’d promised. “Lie down on your stomach, love,” I said, moving away. He obeyed, and I straddled his legs, stroking long, light caresses down his back and over his arse. I leaned forward, letting my cock slide over his arse crack, and he groaned. I kissed his back, pressing my cock against his arse, pulling his hair.

He made a noise, and I paused.

“Alright, love?” I murmured, and he nodded.

“Harder,” he said, and I pulled his back into an arch, his arse sliding against my cock.

I desperately wanted to be inside that arse right now.

“Gods, Wyll,” I said, getting lost in the feel of his arse against me. “Oh, by all the hells.”

He moved underneath me, pushing against my cock, and I groaned. “Best slow it down, love,” I said. “Turns out my iron self-control is more like taffy around this lovely arse of yours.”

He turned and grabbed me, pulling me down onto the ground with him, and kissed me. I laughed and lay next to him, stroking his face.

“Lovely arse; really?” he asked.

I inhaled, smiling. “Mmm. The loveliest, darling. Especially when my cock is pressed against it. It feels like the heavens themselves.”

His gaze heated. “Tell me.”

I paused. This felt like one of those things I wouldn’t be able to take back, and would cause... issues. But... maybe he needed to feel desired.

“I wanted to bury my cock in your arse,” I said honestly, “and feel that gorgeous muscle bunched around me. To fuck you while I admire the beautiful, wonderful man underneath me. To make you scream my name as you climax with my hand on your cock, my cock in your arse, and my hand pulling your hair, telling you that you’re mine, every part of you is mine, and that I’ll taste every last bit of you.”

His eyes widened. “Dash...”

“Too far?”

He closed his eyes and breathed slowly. “No, perfect. But... by all the hells, that... was a vivid picture.”

“Mmm.”

“Holding you tonight is going to be a challenge.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’re suddenly rather monosyllabic.”

“Just regaining some of that self-control I promised to show, then promptly lost.”

He laughed, sounding more satisfied than anything. I watched him with fond eyes, letting the arousal move and flow through me, slowly letting it go.

He sat up. “Let’s head to bed, dear,” he said. “If you think you can control yourself, anyway.”

I pushed him, faking indignance, and he laughed.

“It is a *very* nice arse, though,” I muttered.

Punishments and preparations

Shadowheart waded into the pool that led to the Shadowfell. Wyll, Gale, and I exchanged glances, and followed.

Balthazar confronted a winged woman in arcane chains. This, then, was the Nightsong. Did we want her dead? Probably not. Did we want Balthazar dead and no longer feeding immortality to Ketheric? Most definitely.

“Thank you for your assistance getting this far,” he said, waving a hand. “You may go.”

Instead, we attacked.

“Hmm. I would name you saviours... but one among you carries the spear forged to be plunged into my heart, casting me into eternal darkness,” the woman said, staring hard at Shadowheart.

“Lady Shar requires your death,” Shadowheart said, her mouth twisting.

“And what does Shar give you in return?” she asked. “Takes your memories and your family, little wolf?”

Shadowheart stared at her.

“We are not enemies,” the woman said. “Oh, if you only knew how true that is. We could be great allies, you and I. Were it not for the cruel goddess who took everything from us both.”

“You know something about me,” Shadowheart said slowly.

“Is that difficult, when Shar has spent a lifetime taking your life away from you? And yet, she cannot break you, can she? Still you stand firm.”

Shadowheart hefted the spear and pointed it at the woman’s chest. The woman went down on her knees and spread her arms wide, offering no defence.

“Will you kill me?” she asked sadly. “Will you take the last steps to losing everything? All hope, all joy, all love, all light – forever gone from your life? And for what? A goddess who cares nothing for any of her worshippers. Nothing.”

Shadowheart’s face twitched as she drew back the spear to strike. Wyll stepped forward beside me, then stopped as she threw the spear away.

She fell to her knees and sobbed.

“Lay a hand on me in friendship, not-quite-Sharran,” the woman said gently. “Release me from these chains, and I will unleash retribution on Ketheric. And I will tell you all I know, when we have time for talking.”

Shadowheart raised her face and put a hand on the woman's shoulder.

"Nightsong no longer," the tattered woman said. "DAME AYLIN RISES!"

She transformed into a shining aasimar as we watched, awestruck, and flew in a shining bolt out of the Shadowfell.

"We need to get out of here," Shadowheart said, face pale. "Lady Shar is *not* going to be happy with me."

We ran through the portal, but my mind was still buzzing. Shadowheart had simply... defied her goddess. At the urging of a complete stranger.

The entrance to the Thorm mausoleum materialised around us. I looked around and sighed. Shar hadn't managed to – shit. Wyll, Gale, and I were fine. Shadowheart was nowhere to be seen, though.

"She's taken Shadowheart," Gale said. "What can we do? Go back for her?"

"Fighting a god on her own turf seems a bad idea," Wyll observed. "Maybe we can –"

Shadowheart appeared with a *pop* and fell a metre onto the ground, crying.

"Hey," I said, kneeling beside her. "We were just about to go looking for you. What happened?"

"Lady Shar," she said, wiping her face. "She held me there. Grasped me tight. Would not let me go. She inflicted a thousand agonies, one after the other, trying to make me scream, make me apologise, but..."

"What have I *done*?" Shadowheart asked. "I turned my back on my goddess. She took me in when I had no one. She protected me. She *loved* me. And I... I threw it all back in her face. And now I have no god. I'm faithless. I'm cast out." She buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

I put a hand on her shoulder, and when she leaned towards me, pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry, honey," I said. "You did the right thing. I'm so sorry it hurts so much. It's not fair."

"Right. Fair. Meaningless words," she said, her sobs quieting. She rested her head on my shoulder, sighing. "We should get out of here. To camp. I assume that Dame Aylin creature will be going after Ketheric. We should prepare and do likewise."

I nodded and kissed her forehead. "You're right. Let's go."

Back in camp, Gale was uncharacteristically missing.

"Hmm. I suppose we're cooking for ourselves," Wyll said, a hand playing with my hair. "How do you feel about *Roast a la Blade*?"

“Mmm...” I said, looking up at him. “Perfect. I’ll see if I can track down Gale.”

“Maybe see if you can find some ale as well? It would be the perfect accompaniment.”

“I’ll see what I can do, love,” I said, smiling as I walked away, looking back. He leaned over a supply chest, intent on finding the right ingredients.

I searched around the camp, but no sign of Gale. I frowned. His belongings were still in his tent; he hadn’t left for good, then. If his orb were playing up, surely he’d have said something. Left a note; taken his favourite book. I sighed and looked for ale instead. There, at least, I had better luck.

“No Gale; just ale,” I said, returning to the campfire.

Wyll looked up at me, face soft. “I hope he’s alright, dear,” he said. “Are you worried?”

I nodded and put down the ale bottles, sitting next to him. “It’s a fraught time for him, I think,” I said. “Mystra’s commandment must be weighing heavy. I just hope he hasn’t done anything rash.”

“Hmm. It hadn’t occurred to me, what with Shadowheart’s drama.”

“She’s my next stop,” I said. “I can’t imagine how she’s feeling just now.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “You look after us all so beautifully, dear,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“That’s what you’re here for, love,” I said, relaxing into the embrace. “Mmm. You give me strength.”

He stroked my arm, staring into the fire. A haunch of meat was suspended over the flames, sauce dripping and crackling from the roast.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

His attention returned to me with a start. “Just thinking about Shadowheart,” he said. “I’ve never been one for following the gods, or caring much what they think. She was so devoted. And now Shar would take everything from her. But... she can’t. Shadowheart is so much stronger than that. She’s so much more than someone’s worshipper.”

I put my hand on his leg. “She is,” I said. “I like that you see it.”

“You should go check on her,” he said. “Would you like a kiss first?”

I grinned and rose to my knees. “Always, love,” I said, and lowered my lips to his, feeling the familiar flush of warmth and security that came with kissing him. “Fortified,” I said, drawing away. “Thank you, love. See you soon.”

Not much to my surprise, Shadowheart was up on the cliffs, with wine.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, taking a bottle and pouring a half-measure into a chalice.

“How do you think?” she said, her words laced heavily with bitterness. “I’ve been spurned by my goddess; my life is forfeit. Soon my fellow Sharrans will start hunting me. And for what? A few dropped hints about my past? I was a fool.”

“You were brave and kind and wild,” I said, sitting down next to her. “I know that’s not a comfort now. But you’re spectacular, Shadowheart.”

“Hmm. Well, at least you say nice things.”

“I do have my uses.”

We sat and drank for a while, looking up at the starless sky.

“Thank you,” she said. “For the company. I know I’m not a very cheery presence at the best of times.”

“You’re part of the family, and I love you,” I said, nudging her arm gently. “Of course.”

She sighed and drained her chalice. “I’d like to be alone for a while,” she said. “But thank you. Have a good night.”

I climbed down the cliffs, back to the campfire. Wyll was taking the roast from the spit above the fire, and digging in the coals for potatoes. He started slicing, and I snagged a couple of slices of roast.

“Mmm,” I said, chewing. “Love, this is tender. How did you manage that with a spit over a fire?”

He shrugged. “Secrets of the Blade,” he said and winked.

I grabbed an ale and brought it over to him while he filled his own plate.

“Not having one for yourself?” he asked.

“I just had wine with Shadowheart,” I said. “I might have water for a while, lest hangovers interfere with fighting Ketheric.”

Later that night, Gale was still missing. I sighed and lay down with Wyll on the shared bedrolls we’d taken to using since the shadow curse started affecting my sleep.

“He’ll be alright, love,” Wyll whispered as I dropped into an uneasy slumber.

I ‘woke’ in a forest glade, green grass underfoot, bright stars spread out over the sky above, with the lights of an aurora rippling over the horizon. I inhaled. The air was redolent with roses and jasmine. Gods. I’d forgotten how good it felt to see the sky.

I walked further, and saw Gale sitting on the ground. Oh.

“Gale?” I asked, sitting next to him. “Is this a dream?”

He turned, smiling. “A waking dream,” he said. “I needed to think. I wanted to do it under a canopy of... beauty. And wonder. I can’t do this often, but... Dash, this might be my last night on Toril. It felt an appropriate time to be self-indulgent.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. “It’s beautiful,” I said softly. “You’re an artist.”

He sighed. “Such beauty in the world. So many marvels to discover and explore. I wish...”

“I won’t let you die,” I said quietly. “Gale, until we reach a point of utter desperation, losing you is not a sacrifice I’m willing to countenance. Not then, either... but I’ll accept that if I’d die to save the world, I must allow you that noble gesture too.”

“What if it’s the best choice? The one my fate decrees for me?” he asked. “It might not be the only way, Dash, but it might indeed be the best thing. For me. For the world.”

I shook my head, cheek still resting against his arm. “I refuse to believe that the world will be better without you in it, Gale Dekarios. My dearest friend.”

“Damn you,” he said, with a sob in his voice. “Damn you for making me *care* about all this. The world. Our friends. *You*. It was so much easier when I was numb. When it was all a distant, faraway dream that I could barely touch. You brought it close. You brought it to life. You reminded me that I could love and be loved.”

I knelt to offer him a hug, and he buried his face in my shoulder, clutching me. “Whatever you need, Gale,” I said, holding him tight. “I’m here for you. You know that, right?”

His desperate hold on me slowly eased, and his breathing slowed. “Stay with me?” he asked. “Just... keep me company against the dark?”

“Of course.”

We lay down in the grass, his head on my chest, my arm around his shoulders, and watched the colourful billows of the aurora move across the sky Gale had created.

“This is truly amazing,” I told him. “You’re such an artistic soul.”

He sighed. “I must take you out to the outer planes someday. This is a rather subpar effort, truth be told. My powers are sadly lacking in this place.”

I chuckled. “Your *subpar* is another’s splendid, you silly wizard.”

“Hmm. That is true.”

I woke to find Wyll regarding me thoughtfully.

“Morning, love,” I said, reaching towards him, and he touched his lips to mine, smiling.

“Why were you and Gale connected when I awoke?” he asked.

Hmm. This could be an interesting conversation, given our recent ones. I stood and offered him a hand up.

“I keep forgetting that a warlock will see metaphysical connections that others wouldn’t,” I told him, walking towards the supplies chests. “He brought me into a dream. Wanted to talk about dying today.”

Wyll winced. “A harsh topic,” he observed.

“Mmm. Not pleasant bedtime conversation, to be sure.”

“I’m glad you found him, at least.”

I found some dried fruit and flour. Fritters, I thought. Something comforting but filling for a day that was guaranteed to offer more than its fair share of challenges. I added wine and water to the dried fruit in a bowl, covered it, and left it near the fire to soak. I filled the billy and put it on to boil, then sat. I was so sick of dancing around this topic.

“We lay in the grass and I hugged him half the night,” I said abruptly. “Is that... are we going to have a problem, love?”

Wyll knelt before me, sitting back on his heels. “Are you still mine?” he asked. His face was suddenly vulnerable – I could see that he wasn’t entirely sure of the answer, and he desperately wanted to know.

I softened. “Body, heart, and soul,” I said, reaching out to stroke a finger down his jaw. “Sweetheart. Always.”

He closed his eyes and leant into the light touch. I stood to pull him into my arms, hugging him tight.

“I got a shock,” he said, forehead against mine. “I woke; you were in my arms, but you weren’t really there. You were with Gale. It... felt as though you were with me, but wanting to be with him, in a way.”

I nodded, starting to understand. “That does sound... jarring,” I said. “And you asked me about it rather than moving straight to being upset?”

He gave me a wry smile. “There might have been some upset before you woke,” he said.

“Hmm,” I said. “Love... I appreciate the effort. Thank you.”

“Hells, you just spent the whole night looking after people,” he said, drawing away to kiss my cheek. “The least I can do is be careful how much more I lay on your shoulders, dear.”

“Mmm. Now you mention it, I am feeling a little drained.”

“I’m not surprised. Go meditate. I’ll deal with breakfast. It might not be up to your standards, but it should be edible.”

I grinned and decided to do as I was told, for once.

Starry, starry sky

When I got back to the campfire, Wyll had made thick pancakes with the flour and soaked fruit – almost scones, but fried.

“There’s tea,” he said, nodding towards the billy. “I’m just frying some eggs. That should do us.”

“Lifesaver,” I said, smiling. “That’s two meals in a row you’ve come to the rescue.”

He grinned and slid fried eggs onto a platter. “I live to serve, dear.”

Astarion wandered over to pour a mug of tea, yawning.

“How are you tired when you don’t sleep?” I asked. I’d never quite understood the whole elven meditation-instead-of-sleep thing. Come to think of it, maybe it was a skill I should try to learn.

Astarion shrugged and walked away, sipping his tea. Guess I wasn’t going to learn any time soon.

After breakfast, I went to organise my pack for the day. On top was a folded piece of parchment. Hmm. I unfolded it.

*How do you know how to light up my night
Glimm’ring so dark around kisses so deep?*

*Why do you come here to call up the sun so bright
Into my starriest sky ev’ry morning?*

*When did my world orbit yours in a fall of light
Hands clasping tight in the woods with the setting night?*

*Questions on questions and none have the answers but
Swirling with brightness you’re here in my heart.*

I smiled, feeling the familiar prickle of tears trying to rise, with a upwelling of warmth in my chest. I looked back to the campfire, to see Wyll watching me with a soft smile. I blew him a kiss, and he dramatically caught it and clutched it to his heart. I grinned; gods, he was so different to the pleasant but closed-off man I met just months before. I couldn’t imagine that man being so open with his feelings in a camp full of people. This Wyll didn’t give a damn.

Getting to the top of Moonrise Towers was relatively easy, with Jaheira’s trained Harpers on our side. Getting Ketheric on the run, even easier with Dame Aylin helping out. But the giant tentacle appearing to pull Ketheric into the bowels of the towers? *That* we hadn’t expected.

We stood on the roof of Moonrise Towers, peering down a slimy, fleshy tunnel that pulsed slowly and led only to darkness.

“That might be the nastiest-looking hole I’ve ever been invited to enter,” Shadowheart said. “There’s no other way, is there? We can jump down into the tentacle’s squishy, meaty lair, or we can stand out here for eternity while the Absolute takes over the world.”

Jaheira nodded. “Better to do the deed, than stand about wondering if it can be done,” she said, and jumped in.

Gale sighed and cast Floating Feather. “A *little* preparation never hurt,” he said to the hole.

We jumped down, and went looking for Ketheric.

We found Mizora.

“Of *course* it’s Mizora herself,” Wyll said, scowling. “Of *course* I’m saving her from Absolutists. Arsehole!”

“Eyes on the prize, love,” I said quietly, touching his hand, and went to free the cambion.

“Well well,” Mizora said, masking relief with a large dose of *laissez faire*, “the pup finally made it. Good boy! You play fetch so well! Don’t you? Don’t you?”

Wyll bared his teeth at Mizora. “You promised me an end to our contract,” he said. “Time to pay up.”

“Oh, I’ll pay up, pup,” she said, examining her fingernails. “In six months, at the end of the contract.”

Wyll’s mouth opened to argue, and I stepped forward. “Seems rather rude to let us come all this way to help you out, and offer no reward,” I said to her. “Wyll might be pacted to you – but we aren’t.”

“Hmm,” she said, examining me. “What do you want? Freedom for the puppy you found on the side of the road and adopted? You’ll get your mutt, dearie – just be patient! But for now... I suppose you *have* earned a little treat. Here.”

She raised her hand and shook it, and a rapier appeared in Wyll’s hands. “You’re welcome,” she said, and disappeared.

“Well, bugger,” Jaheira said. “I assume that was not quite the desired outcome.”

We’d been walking a long time when we snuck through the door leading to Ketheric’s chamber. Three people stood on a platform – an elderly elf, a young woman dressed in skintight red and blood, and a middle-aged human who looked... well. *Tired* was probably a polite way to put it, if you cared about hurting the feelings of Absolutists.

A large brain, wearing a crown, floated behind them. Was it really there? Or were some of them here in vision?

“The elderbrain,” Gale whispered beside me. “I can finish this now.”

“Gale, no,” I hissed. “I know Mystra told you to do it... but she doesn’t know everything. This is a terrible idea.”

“But it’s our best chance,” he said, eyes shining.

“You’ll take us with you! That’s not a chance; that’s certain death,” I pointed out.

He frowned.

“You have the right to make the choice for yourself,” I said, my hand on his arm. “But Gale – you don’t have the right to make that choice for your friends. Not unless we’re at the end of all our options.”

I cast a quick glance at the people on the platform. Luckily they were far enough away to miss our presence, and our hissed debate.

Gale closed his eyes and sighed. “I’ll stand down,” he said. “For love of you all, and trust that we’ll find a different way.”

I nodded and squeezed his arm. “Love you,” I said. “Come on. Let’s figure out how to take them out.”

The woman pulled a dark-skinned man from a cage and threw him onto the ground in front of the elf.

“Father,” Wyll groaned, and started to move towards them. *Shit*. Was this entire encounter just going to be me trying to restrain people from running off into immediate danger? I grabbed his arm, and Shadowheart grabbed the other as an illithid parasite slithered into Grand Duke Ravengard’s brain.

The trio invoked the Dead Three, and the puzzle pieces started to fit into a very uncomfortable picture.

“Can we take all of them?” I asked Jaheira. “What do you think?”

She shook her head, watching as two of them, the grand duke, and the brain disappeared. “Three Chosen? Ketheric was strong enough to give us trouble alone. Now, however?” she said. “Now we can fight him. And we can win.”

Wyll was shaking in my grasp.

“Come on, love,” I said gently. “Let’s kick some Chosen arse, already.”

“He was *right there*,” Wyll yelled. “We could have saved him. Instead we stood by and let them infect him. We let them *take* him. My father!”

I nodded. “You’re right. We did. Love... I’m sorry, but Ketheric almost wiped us once Myrkul took him over. Dead, we’d be no good whatsoever to your father.”

Wyll closed his eyes with a grimace. I watched him carefully. He was angry – understandably so – and feeling profoundly guilty too, I thought. Logic might be right, but it was hardly going to make him feel better right now. That was for later, when the rawness of emotion had calmed down.

“Do you want to spar?” I asked suddenly. “Unarmed.”

He stopped mid-pacing to stare at me. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

I smiled. “I think I can take any hits you might be able to deal,” I said. “As long as you play by the rules.”

His jaw clenched.

“Come on,” I said. “Fight me.”

He threw a half-hearted punch, and I blocked it. He threw another, and I blocked it, yawning. Then he started to take it seriously, launching a flurry of blows, and I had to fight not to grin. All the fighting we did, and we’d never stopped to spar with each other. In other circumstances, this would be *fun*. Who was I kidding? This *was* fun. I just needed to remember that wasn’t the point of the exercise.

We traded punches and kicks, and settled into a rhythm of blows. I could block Wyll’s blows easily – he didn’t often find himself disarmed, and when he did, he had spells and cantrips to use. I didn’t, so I was far more practised. But I let the occasional hit through; he needed to let off steam, and he was just going to get frustrated if he couldn’t land anything.

He looked alarmed at the first punch landing solidly on my shoulder... but I took the opportunity to smack him in the thigh with an open-handed blow. He staggered, and I winced. If I’d hit him right, that was going to hurt intensely for a few minutes.

His face set, and I had him. His punches were in utter earnest now, hard and focused. I pushed harder, aiming a flurry at his midriff, and he stepped backwards. When I followed, expecting another block and punch from his higher reach, he kicked out instead with the flat of his foot, completely bypassing my defences and knocking me backwards. I flew backwards, tumbled into a roll, and stood.

“Oof,” I said. “That was a good one.”

His face crumpled.

“Hey,” I said, walking back to his side. “Talk to me.”

He sat and held his arms open, and I knelt to hold him close. He rested his forehead on my shoulder, tears streaming. I kissed his hair and rested my cheek against his head, squeezing his shoulders gently.

When we finally moved, the stars were out and had made significant progress across the sky. Hang on. The stars were out. My heart leapt in my chest... but maybe this wasn't the time to talk about it.

Wyll drew away and blew his nose. "Ugh," he said. "Worst thing about crying."

"That and the things that cause it," I said, stroking his arm.

"Hmm. I still wish we'd done something different. Teleported him out of there. Stunned everyone. Something."

I nodded. "Me too. I can't think of anything that would have worked, but I'd almost rather have tried and died, I think."

Wyll sighed and rested his head back on my shoulder. I tried to ignore my knees' protests – it had been a long time since kneeling for hours had been part of my disciplines. "Don't say that," he said. "I know you're right. I know we did all we could, even if it wasn't enough. Even if somehow we maybe could have prepared more thoroughly. Three Chosen. Three gods. I couldn't lose you to save my father, even if we'd had a hope. I know we didn't."

I kissed his forehead. "Still."

"Hmm. Still."

"Can I make a suggestion?" I asked, when the silence started to drag. "You need food, love. You might not want it, but your body needs it."

He nodded and rose to his feet, offering me a hand up. I took it, then realised one calf was rebelling in a muscle cramp. "Shit," I said, almost falling, Wyll catching me with ease.

"You're OK?" he asked, and I nodded reassurance.

"Just a cramp."

I limped over to the campfire, where a lidded pot sat promisingly close to the flames. Close enough to stay hot, possibly enough to burn a little... far enough away that it should still be edible, whatever it was. I blessed Gale, then realised with a guilty start that I hadn't checked in on him yet. He'd tried to kill himself today. That probably warranted a pretty in-depth check. But – first things first. Wyll.

I opened the lid and sniffed. "Chilli?" I asked. Wyll shrugged, so I ladled a portion out for each of us and cajoled him into eating. It had been an excellent chilli, hours earlier. Now it was... edible. Oh well. Wyll was eating mechanically, which was all I really needed.

When we finished eating, I rinsed out the bowls and left them near the campfire. Someone would deal with them. Eventually.

Karlach wandered over and sat down next to Wyll, throwing an arm over his shoulders. “Hey, soldier,” she said. “Heard you had a shit of a day. Thought you might like a hug.”

I smiled, watching Wyll lean against her and slip an arm around her waist. Seeing the group reaching out to look after each other made my heart feel warm. “I’m going to check on Gale,” I told them. “Back soon, love.”

Wyll nodded, so I walked away, looking for Gale.

I found him lying near his tent, uncharacteristically unaccompanied by mystical lights or projections. I sat down nearby.

“Are you alright?” I asked. “Today must have been a whirlwind for you.”

He reached out an arm in invitation, and I lay down next to him, head on his bicep. Gale had oddly muscled arms for a wizard, I mused. Someday I’d have to ask him what the story was.

“I’m watching the new stars,” he said, voice hushed. “Funny, isn’t it? Last night, I created a spectacular vista. It was beautiful. Well. It looked beautiful. But this! This is so much less spectacular on the surface, and yet a thing of such greater beauty. This sky... this one signifies lives moving forward. No longer death, but vigorous life. And that makes it so infinitely precious. I thought I could create beauty and wonder, Dash. Now I’m not sure I ever understood either.”

I gazed up at the starry sky and thought about what Gale had said. Was he talking about healing the land, or not dying on the schedule his goddess laid out for him? Did it matter, in the end?

“*You* are beauty and wonder, Gale,” I said, finally. “Thank you for being here to see this sky with me.”

He sighed. “I hope I didn’t doom all of Toril with my decision today.”

“Mmm. On the bright side, it’s unlikely to be a single bad decision that leads to our catastrophic and spectacular failure.”

“Ha! Nice to see you remain upbeat.”

I sat up, turning to face him and crossing my legs. “Are you alright, Gale?”

He nodded, staying where he was, putting his spare hand under his head to pillow it from the ground. “Just marvelling at the novelty of being alive,” he said, “when I rather expected to be anything but.”

“Come get me if you need to talk,” I said, patting his shoulder. “I love you. I’m here if you need me. I just need to check on Wyll.”

“Go. Be with Wyll; he needs you. I’m fine, tonight. I’ll stay here awhile longer, I think. I want to drink in this night.”

I left Gale stargazing, and went back to Wyll and Karlach. Well, Wyll – Karlach was nowhere in sight.

“Did Karlach leave you alone?” I asked. He was sitting on a log; I sat on the ground at his feet so I could rest my head on his leg.

“Only to get beer,” he said, his hand drifting idly to my hair. “How’s Gale?”

“Happily stargazing, it seems,” I said. “I think he’s feeling a little euphoric.”

“Hmm. I envy him,” Wyll said, his mouth twisting slightly. “Better than this dragging sorrow.”

“Do you want to talk?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I think I just want to go to bed,” he said. “Beer be damned. Will you come with me? I know you probably don’t need it, but…”

“Of course, love,” I said, standing, wincing as the cramp from earlier twisted in the muscle. “Come on. Let’s head to bed.”

Lying down, Wyll curled himself around me and sighed. “That’s better,” he said. “Hells. This is what I need. You in my arms.”

I cuddled close, stroking his chest. “Balm to my spirit, too, love,” I said.

“Can we not spar again when I’m angry?” he asked abruptly. “I… think you were just trying to help me let go of the negative feelings, yes?”

I nodded, drawing back a little to see his face.

“It felt bad,” he said. “When I landed that final kick. I didn’t like that. Anger and hitting you together. I know you can hold your own in a fight. I know you were holding back, and you probably could have kicked me around the entire campsite. But… it felt wrong. Please don’t ask me to do that again.”

I frowned.

“Is this because of my reaction the other night?” I asked.

He shrugged, his shoulder moving under my head. “Perhaps. It certainly made an impression. But… dearest, I’ll happily spar with you. Just… not like that.”

I nodded. “I’m not sure I understand, but I don’t need to. I won’t ask that again.”

He squeezed me tight. “Thank you.”

We lay in silence, looking up at the sky. There weren’t many stars out, as though a haze lay over the land still, but it was still a stark contrast to the lightless nights we’d previously

faced. “Isn’t it amazing?” I said softly. “Imagine. These are the first few stars this land has seen in a hundred years.”

“Halsin must be ecstatic,” Wyll said.

“Oh. I forgot to check on him,” I said, chagrined.

“Hm. I think he’ll survive the night without Father checking on him,” Wyll said, stroking my arm.

“*Father*?” I asked, amused.

“Didn’t you know?” Wyll asked. “Gale is Mother. You’re Father.”

I laughed. “I had no idea.”

“It is beautiful, though,” Wyll said, looking back up at the sky. “At least we accomplished something meaningful today. We couldn’t save my father; but we could strike the final blow to a curse that’s infested this place for a century.”

“He’ll be alright,” I said. “They won’t hurt him. And you and I both know it’s possible to survive a tadpole with mind intact. We’ll get to Baldur’s Gate, and we’ll find a way to take down the other Chosen and free your father.”

Wyll nodded, sighing. “You’re right. But I can’t help fretting, regardless.” He yawned, folding his pillow to turn onto his side, pulling me close against him. Despite his words, his breathing turned shallow and even quickly, as he relaxed into sleep. Light stained the eastern horizon as my eyes grew heavy, and I slowly drifted off.

Bibberbangs as far as the eye can see

“We have to *go*,” Wyll said. “Baldur’s Gate. We have to get there as soon as we possibly can. With Father infected, they’ll have the city under their control. We have to take it back. We have to convince people to go against Gortash, the upstart!”

“And how exactly will we do that?” Shadowheart asked. “Hi everyone, I’m Wyll Ravengard! I know you all haven’t seen me for seven years, and ooh surprise I’m a devil now, but I’m completely trustworthy, I swear! Far more trustworthy than the person with all the giant peacekeeper machines promising to keep your city safe. I have a band of adventurers and a pretty rapier! Look! I can call devils to my service! Isn’t that reassuring?”

Wyll’s face twisted at this diatribe of – to be fair – harsh truths.

“While I agree Wyll’s being adorably naive, we still need to get there, and fast,” Astarion added. “Everything leads to Baldur’s Gate. We have to get those other two stones. And deal with bloody Cazador before he takes me back and you end up with a bloody uber-vampire to fight as well as the Absolute.”

“A day’s rest to recover might not be the worst idea,” Gale put in. “We’re hardly in the best condition to make decisions right now.”

Three people turned on him and started shouting. My head started to pound. I was tired and my heart hurt. I felt like I’d been running all night without eating anything. And now it was daybreak, and we were arguing instead of doing anything vaguely useful like preparing breakfast.

“SHUT. UP!” I yelled.

Everyone stopped and turned to me. “Can we just stop for a bit, please?” I asked at a more normal volume. “I know you’re all upset and worried, and dealing with a lot of emotional fallout. But... can we stop taking it out on each other, and trying to rush off into disaster, just for a day? Please? I love you all. I just... I need a break.”

I stood and walked away, down to the river, as far from the camp as I could get. I flung myself down and stared at the water, trying to untangle my feelings. Everything just... jangled.

“Hey, soldier,” a quiet voice came behind me.

I patted the ground beside me, and Karlach sat down and slung an arm around my shoulders, unasked. I leant into her, appreciating the extra heat. I hadn’t exactly been thinking *dress for warmth* when I stormed away.

“I got deputised as the least emotionally fucked up person right now,” she said, “Which is funny as fuck, when you think about it, and a real eye-opener about our little band, eh?”

I inhaled, relaxing into the hug. Her scent had a tinge of sulphur, like Wyll's... but a more acrid combination of burnt ash and something sweet. It was nice, in a *campfire in the hells* kind of way.

“Are they alright?” I asked.

“Stop worrying. They’re fine for today,” she said. “When you walked off, I think we all realised that you’ve been carrying the whole team for the last few days, and we acted like it was nothing because it’s just a few hugs, right? But it’s harder than that, or we’d all do it.”

Tears prickled my nose, then spilled out. “Shit,” I said. “I didn’t realise I needed to hear that.”

“Hey. We love you. Come here,” she said, pulling me into a proper hug. “You look wiped. Gale told us you stayed up all night with him. Wyll said you were up all night with *him*. Have you even slept this week?”

“I slept through the Gale thing. Sort of. It was a dream illusion thing,” I said, wiping my face.

“Doesn’t sound very restful,” she said.

“I guess not, if I’m sitting here crying now,” I said.

“Doofus.”

“Thank you. Not for calling me a doofus. For the hug,” I said, squeezing her. Karlach gave amazing hugs. “I should check up on everyone.”

“Nope. We have it sorted. Everyone has a buddy for the day. We’re going to be all sensible and mature and emotionally responsible for a few hours. Got it? Wyll is fine for now. Gale is fine for now. They’re looking after each other like good soldiers. Weirdly enough, so are Astarion and Shadowheart. They’re good.”

“Yes, but –”

“Nope. Stand down. Halsin’s going to bring down some blankets. You and he and I are going to hang down here, away from the emotional chaos. And you are going to do what you’re told. Understand?”

I blinked. Karlach had never ordered anyone around before. Especially not me. “Um...”

“I’ll take that as a *yes boss*,” she said. “You’re a dumbarse and you need to rest. It’s OK. I promise no one will explode if you take the day off. Then we’ll have a nice chill night, or a few people will feel the nastier end of my boot.”

“You’re sexy when you take control,” I said, chuckling.

“Don’t I know it, soldier!”

Karlach was as good as her word. She and Halsin provided a gentle, quiet bulwark against the emotional storms that had buffeted me all week, and Halsin lay down with me to sleep after breakfast.

“You don't need to lie down with me,” I said, embarrassed. “I'm just tired. You have things to do.”

“I was up late in the forest, exploring as my bear,” Halsin said, patting my arm. “I can do with the rest. I'm not as young as I once was. Besides – the curse drained me in ways perhaps only you would understand. A sleep with someone I care for might be renewing.”

I had a sneaking suspicion that Karlach was out running in the forest to burn off the energy she'd built up sitting around cushioning me from everyone else. But I shrugged. She'd be back in a flash if I rebelled, and it *was* nice to be looked after.

I lay down with Halsin and laughed. “I swear you could fit four of me for one of you,” I said. “You're huge.”

He chuckled, draping an arm over me. “And you are tiny – in body if not in spirit,” he said. “In spirit, you make the world quake.”

I fell silent, unsure how to respond to such outrageous flattery, and somehow fell asleep while trying to puzzle it out.

I woke as the sun set over the shadow-cursed lands.

“Oh, gods,” I said, sitting up. “Look at that.”

Halsin sat up next to me and took my hand. “Isn't it beautiful?” he said. “You did it. You freed Thaniel. The land can start healing. And this sky; the stars coming out one by one – what a beacon of hope it is.”

“Mmm,” I said, thinking about the stars in *my* sky. “It really is.”

“Hey, dear,” the very person said quietly, padding to my side. “I just wanted to check on you.”

I smiled up at Wyll, extending my spare arm. Halsin squeezed my hand and let go, standing to walk away. “Hi, love. Come give me a cuddle.”

He sat down behind me, wrapping arms and legs around me. I rested my head back on his chest, suddenly feeling better.

“I was just looking up at the sky, and missing *my* stars,” I said.

He kissed my forehead. “I didn't want to abandon you, but Karlach convinced us we were all emotional bibberbang fields waiting to blow you to smithereens.”

“Mmm. She might have pointed out to me that I haven't slept properly for a few nights, and am therefore not to be trusted with my own wellbeing anymore.”

Wyll laughed. "I'm sorry, love. I should have realised. Instead, I was so focused on just getting to the city..."

"Yeah. Selfish of you to not get over your crippling worry and grief in record time."

He snorted.

"You're alright?" I asked. "I know this is horrible. I know you can't actually be alright. But...ugh. You know what I'm trying to ask, right?"

He kissed the top of my head. "I'll always need you, dear. But I'm fine. Everyone's alright. Worried that our emotional dramas are driving you to distraction, though."

"I like looking after everyone. Especially my love."

"Mmm. Thank you for letting people look after you, dear. Even if it couldn't be me."

I squirmed around to wrap an arm around his waist. "Would you sleep with me again tonight?" I asked. "I'm not sure whose emotional comfort it would be in aid of. But I'd feel better with you in my arms."

He stroked my hair. "Dearest, I'm not sure I could ever bear to say no to holding you. Of course."

I smiled and closed my eyes, inhaling his familiar scent. I woke as he pulled a blanket over us.

"Huh. Fell asleep again?"

"Hmm. Have I ever told you that I love when you fall asleep hugging me like that? I should probably take insult that I'm usually halfway through a sentence; but I like that you trust me so much."

"Mmm. You have a very soothing voice, love."

"Dash? May I kiss you?"

Desire spiked through me. I reached for his face, to pull him closer and get his lips on mine. He kissed me slowly, thoroughly, stroking my face and neck as I traced gentle patterns on his cheek with my thumb. Pleasure built inside me with the kisses and light touches, and I realised with a start how much feeling the shadow curse had blocked. I drew away before it could overwhelm me, but stayed close.

"My darling," I murmured, and heard Wyll chuckle as I succumbed to sleep again.

Finally on the road again

I woke with Wyll clutching me tight, muttering something under his breath. He sounded scared; worried.

“Sweetheart,” I whispered. I cuddled closer, unwilling to wake him quickly lest his reaction hurt one of us. Not that people always react violently to being woken from bad dreams; but fighters like us often do. When you’ve been out on the road a while, you get in the habit of waking ready to hit something, just in case.

He shook his head slightly, and I stroked his chest, hoping it would slowly pull him out of whatever dream he was stuck in.

“Mizora – no!” he muttered clearly, face twisting, and pushed me away.

I sat up, frowning. I didn’t like the implications of that. Hrm. That was a later problem, though.

I took his hand. “Wyll, love,” I whispered. “It’s just a dream. You’re alright. I have you.”

Wyll’s eyes opened, and he stared at me for a second. “Oh,” he said, and smiled. “It’s you.” He closed his eyes and snored.

I chuckled. That moment had been oddly adorable. I looked around – there was enough light on the horizon that dawn must be soon. I might as well get up and start breakfast. Porridge today, I thought. Something nice and filling that would fortify us for a day’s walk.

I started it heating near the fire, and walked down to the river. I could go anywhere, with the shadow curse broken... but still, going deep into the forest didn’t seem the smartest of moves. I sat down and took a few deep breaths, letting the peace of the land move through me. It was so much easier now. The land was still grasping and hungry, like a desert after a drought, but it wasn’t hopeless or deadly anymore.

I let the events of the last few days unwind in my memory, just watching them, knowing that there was far too much emotion to sort through yet. I’d have to spend a lot more time doing this before I had them properly handled. For now, I could just watch, and take in the events, and wonder at them. Yurgir, Dame Aylin, Ketheric. Astarion, Shadowheart, Gale. Wyll and his father. Karlach and Halsin sheltering me from the emotional storms.

I sighed. Time to get back to the storms, and keeping an eye on everyone. I’d had a nice holiday, but people had to be near breaking point with some of the stresses this life was hitting them with. I stood up.

“My dear,” Wyll said softly behind me, and I turned with open arms. He knelt, smiling, to pull me into a hug. “Hmm,” he said, resting his head on my shoulder, one horn sliding over my beard in a rough caress. “Was I dreaming, or did I wake from a nightmare to find you watching over me like a guardian angel?”

I chuckled. "I woke you from a bad dream. That's all I'll take credit for."

"I felt safe," he said. "When I realised you were with me. Thank you."

I pulled away a little to kiss his forehead. "Anytime, love." I gazed at him, love overflowing in my heart. "You bring me such joy," I said thoughtfully. "Do I tell you that often enough? That your mere presence makes my heart sing?"

For once, he didn't duck his head to hide from the compliment; just smiled at me with heartbreaking sweetness and stroked my cheek.

"Back to the grindstone," I said, drawing away. "Are you going to meditate, or keep me company?"

"I'm yours," he said, standing and offering his hand.

"Mmm. I don't think I'll ever get used to you telling me you're mine," I said, holding his hand as we walked back to the campfire. "I meant to say: thank you for the poem, love. I got caught up with everything and forgot to tell you how much I loved it. How much it bolstered me right when I needed some extra strength."

He squeezed my hand and smiled down at me. We walked back to the campfire, and I finished preparing breakfast while he unpacked bowls and mugs for everyone.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Better," he said, thoughtful. "I'm worried, obviously. But we can do this. We've proven we can do this. We struck down the Chosen of Myrkul himself. And we live to tell the tale! Only two more to go."

"That's more like it," I said, ladling out porridge into bowls. "If we're smart about this, we can take out the Absolute cult and excise it from Baldur's Gate. We just need to be patient and very, very focused."

"And not run off with a half-baked plan and no thoughts in our heads?"

I laughed. "That would be handy. For my nerves, if nothing else."

We spent the day walking the road towards Baldur's Gate. We moved through streams of refugees, all trudging towards the city.

"Where the hells is the Absolute army?" Wyll asked. "Has it already come through?"

"Looks like it. Hopefully killing Ketheric slowed them down or disorganised them a little, though," Shadowheart noted.

"We should move off the road," I said. "We're all sitting ducks out here. The footing isn't that great, what with all the traffic. If we go off-road, I don't think we'll add too much time to the trip. Might be faster than travelling through this muck."

“Well, you are further down into the muck than the rest of us,” Astarion said, grinning at me.

I laughed. “Exactly. It’s muddy down here, folks. And it doesn’t smell very good.”

Once we were in the forest bordering the road, the footing was more solid, even if the way was more difficult to find. Out of the crowds, the day felt lighter; less oppressive.

“You seem happier, dear,” Wyll said, smiling down at me.

“Everything’s coming up green,” I said, taking his hand for a while. “New grass. New leaves. New *life* here where there’s been nothing but shadow for a hundred years. It’s pretty amazing.”

Wyll nodded and took in a deep breath. “It smells more like a forest now. Less like a dead, decaying thing.”

“*There’s always another dawn*,” I said. “I thought maybe that wasn’t true for this land. But look! Light from the sun shining down.”

“Is that a Lathandrian saying?” Wyll asked. “I’ve heard you say it before.”

“Mmm. I’m rather terrible at subterfuge, aren’t I?”

He laughed. “I remember,” he said, letting go of my hand to detour around a patch of thorny bushes, squeezing through a narrow gap. I followed. “You said that to me the morning after we fought about those goblin children. I thought you’d be so angry with me still. Instead you quoted that line and made me feel for a moment as though I’d done exactly what I needed to be where I was.”

I sighed. “It’s nice to hear that. I felt as though I utterly messed up a lot of things around that time.”

“I’d like to say I started to fall for you then,” he said, taking my hand again. “But I think it started when you yelled at me about your past. There was something so devastatingly engaging about you being so righteously angry at me, and baring your heart with such vulnerability at the same time. It utterly disarmed me.”

“Once you got over wanting to deck me?”

He laughed. “During, maybe.”

We didn’t get very far that day – nowhere near as far as we would have on a regular road, with regular traffic. But further than we would have on the current roads still, I thought. And when we made camp, we did it away from the crowds and their chatter and stink.

Gale started prepping a meal, and I lit the campfire. Wyll was off collecting wood; the others were busy setting up tents or organising their belongings.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him. “You didn’t explode. Do you have regrets about me asking you to stand down?”

Gale smiled, sliding chopped meat and potatoes into a pot. “No regrets,” he said. “I don’t know whether we did the right thing, Dash. But more time in the company of my friends, in the open air? Seeing the curse leaving this place, and life taking over? I can have no regrets right now.” He sighed. “Mystra will know by now that I defied her. A messenger might well be trudging his way to us as I speak. Or perhaps... she has abandoned me for the last time. Given up on me.”

I had no idea how to answer all that. Except... “I’m so glad you’re not dead, Gale. Even apart from not being dead myself. I would have missed you. A lot.”

He smiled. “It’s nice to feel loved,” he said quietly. “There’s a certain mortal quality to real love, isn’t there? Your eyes have real feeling in them when you tell me you’re glad I’m here. The gods... I’ve made love to a goddess, but I’m not sure she ever showed me a human emotion.”

“Would you like a hug?” I asked.

“Desperately. Just let me finish this.”

I sat and watched as he finished setting up the stew over the fire, then cleaned up the scraps. He came to sit next to me, and I stood to hug him tight against my chest.

“Mmm. The gods never hug, either,” he said, wrapping arms around my waist. “How odd.”

We embraced for a while, his head resting on my chest.

“Thank you,” Gale said. “I needed that. But thank you also for telling me you’re happy I’m alive. It feels nice that someone is.”

“We all are,” I said, stroking his hair. “We love you, Gale. Your death would have devastated us.”

He chuckled. “And yet, we all met purely by coincidence, didn’t we?”

I nodded absently. “Our lives are all entwined now, for better or for worse. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

His arms squeezed me for a moment, then he drew away. “Must continue with dinner,” he said. “See you soon?”

I nodded and went in search of Astarion.

“Hey, Astarion,” I said, sitting down nearby his tent. “How are you feeling?”

“Annoyed. Upset. A weird sort of jangling I can’t put a name to. All very unhappy emotions I wish would go away and leave me alone.”

“Would be nice if they worked that way, wouldn't it?”

“Huh. I thought that's what your whole monk thing was all about.”

“Common misunderstanding.”

“So why are you here?” he asked.

“Checking up on you. I figured Raphael and the whole reveal probably messed up your head,” I said.

“Ahh. Poor Astarion, the messy hot vampire,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Well, if anyone can make messy and hot work, it's definitely you,” I said, grinning at him. “But no. Not *Oh the poor messed-up man will lose the plot*. That's not what I meant. I meant... I could see how uncomfortable and unhappy you were at some points during all that. And I don't like seeing you feeling that way.”

He sighed. “Well, now you killed my diatribe.”

“Sorry.”

He snorted.

“It's just... I don't know what it is. I'm used to being touched. I'm used to people touching me when I don't particularly want it. It's not like it's *difficult*. Just breathe through it, let it happen. A brief moment of disgust, perhaps, and then you just let go.”

I nodded soberly. “Yes,” I said, thinking back to my life in Baldur's Gate. The times I'd switched off and just let someone do something to whatever was left. I looked up to see new speculation in Astarion's eyes.

“Hmm. You know more about that than I realised,” he said, eyes narrowing.

“My mother wasn't the only whore in the family,” I said, shrugging. Inside, though, something felt like a slow bleed, sapping every positive emotion slowly but surely. “But she was an artisan. *I* was just a cheap sewer whore.”

“Hmm. So you *do* understand, somewhat. Interesting that you end up with a duke's son, though. How on earth did you fool the prince of chastity into falling head over heels in love with a whore, though? That's a trick I never even considered trying to turn. Too rich for my blood; no pun intended.”

I shook my head. “Wyll knows the general outline,” I said, but deep down felt a stab of dismay. What if Wyll had actually misunderstood my halting, pathetic attempts to explain my former life? What if he was happily in love with a person he'd only constructed in his head? Wasn't that the most sensible explanation for our romance? How was a person who wanted a romance like that sung by the bards going to fall for a whore? Only in the worst of the tales. The object lessons.

“Hmm. Another surprise,” he said. “You really are full of them, aren’t you?”

I pushed away the worry and anxiety. “Always,” I said with a smile. “Astarion – if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you.”

He shook his head. “And to think I tried to stab you on first meeting, then tried to seduce you for protection.”

“Mmm. And then spent months trying to manipulate me ditto.”

He curled a lip. “Well of course I did. You were the obvious leader. But now I’m starting to understand why my charms didn’t do their usual job.”

I laughed. “Yeah, the manipulation of emotions starts early in a brothel.”

“Hmm. That’s what I get for underestimating you, I suppose.”

I reclined to look at the sky. There were a few more stars tonight, I thought.

“So you knew what I was trying to do all along?” he said abruptly.

I nodded, feeling suddenly tired.

“And you just... what? Kept being nice to me out of the goodness of your heart, even though I was clearly a manipulative arsehole?”

“Pretty much,” I said, watching the stars. “But you weren’t *just* a manipulative arsehole. You were obviously going through something pretty major.”

“I don’t appreciate finding out I’m essentially the group’s charity project,” he said, tone sulky.

I shrugged again. “You’re also funny, utterly chaotic, silly, and a surprisingly good fighter, for all you look like an upper class fop who’s down on his luck.”

Astarion guffawed. “Yes, but am I *pretty*?” he asked.

“Devastatingly,” I said to the sky, grinning.

“Fine. You’re forgiven.”

I needed to check on Shadowheart, at the least. Preferably Halsin, too, since our conversation yesterday had been minimal. But... first I had to talk to Wyll. That feeling of anxiety had returned, and it was crawling its way up and down my spine, curling around my insides.

I found him cutting wood in the forest close to camp, turning deadwood into kindling. He put down the axe and sat down with me, holding my hand, stroking my palm lightly.

“I need to ask you something,” I said. “But... this might get you angry, and if it does, I’m going to...” I waved my other arm randomly. “And I can’t really help it.”

“Hey,” Wyll said, brow furrowed. “Whatever it is, ask. I’ll do my best not to set it off for you.”

I paused my lumbering attempt at a pre-apology to stare at him. Tears welled in my eyes. “Thank you,” I said.

He smiled, still looking worried. “What’s on your mind?”

I took a deep breath and plunged in. “Did... you understand that it wasn’t just my mother that was the whore? That I was, as well?”

Wyll squeezed the hand he was holding. “I got that impression, yes. Why?”

I closed my eyes. A wave of relief and something like pain hit me. More tears fell.

“Dearest?” he said. “I don’t understand. Did Astarion say something to upset you? What’s the question you need to ask?”

I shook my head. “That was it,” I said. “I thought...”

“You thought I hadn’t realised from what you said, and... oh, my love. You thought I’d get *angry*?”

A sob escaped me.

“Can I *please* hold you, dearest?” he asked, plaintive. “This is hurting my heart.”

I crawled over to cuddle against him, and he wrapped his arms around me. I rested my head on his chest and started to relax.

“My darling,” he said quietly. “What the hells brought this on? Not that I mind, at all. I’m just perturbed that you’d think I’d care in the slightest for my own sake, let alone get upset at you.”

“Something Astarion said. That a duke’s son is romancing a whore, all unknowing. That... I don’t know. That was probably enough.”

Wyll’s jaw set. “I’m going to kill him,” he said.

“No, not... he didn’t mean it quite that way. I’m sorry. That was a terrible way to explain it. Just... we were talking about shared experiences, and...” I shrugged.

“And as it so often does when you talk to Astarion about sex, my name came up?” His voice was even, but there was an edge to it.

A light current of dread ran down my spine, and I tensed. Wyll loosened his hold on me, leaning back slightly.

“It’s alright,” he said. “Need me to let go?”

I breathed in, letting the fear dissipate. I shook my head, slipping my arm around his waist. “Sorry, love.”

“Don’t apologise,” he said, kissing my forehead. “I’m still confused, though. So Astarion said that, and...?”

I shrugged, realising that it possibly made less sense than I’d thought. “It sounded like you could only possibly love me if you didn’t know who and what I was. Who I am, I suppose. I don’t know. It all seemed very much the obvious answer.”

“Oh, dearest,” he said, his voice warm, “You are the silliest man.”

I looked up to find him smiling – almost smirking! – at me.

“I like that you have irrational moments,” he said, tracing the tip of a finger down my jawline. “It makes you seem far more mortal. You’re entirely too sensible most of the time.”

“Mmm. Would it be sensible to ask you to kiss me?”

“Never,” he said, grinning. “Come here, Dash. Tell me I’m yours. Make me shiver.”

Date of my dreams

“Gale?”

“Hmm?” Gale responded, finding a bookmark and marking his page in the book he’d been reading. Eventually he looked up at me.

“Do you remember that dream-world you invited me into, the night before we fought Ketheric?”

“Ah. Yes. That was a lovely creation, if I do say so myself.”

“How much ahh... effort is required to create something like that and invite other people to join you there?”

“Quite a bit; but I am running on full at the moment, thanks to getting out of the shadow-cursed lands.”

“Do you need to... umm... be in the world for it to exist and people to be there?”

“Well, usually yes, but I suppose... aha!” He crowed with laughter. “You want somewhere to take Wyll! With a tad more privacy than our humble camps usually offer.”

“A picnic, actually,” I confess. “I don’t suppose you could manage an orchestra?”

Gale chuckles. “Three musicians alright? Or will nothing but a full 86-person Baldurian band do?”

“I’m going to owe you a *huge* favour for this, aren’t I?”

“My dear gnome. You pulled me out of a rock. You invited me into your camp. You donated magical items of great value to my wretched Netherese orb. You’re my best friend. You want a dream world with a pretty sky so you can romance the devil of your dreams? You deserve it and more besides. I think Wyll could do with some cheering up, too,” he said. “Is tonight an acceptable timeframe?”

I nodded, and he swept away – presumably to prepare. Possibly just to drink tea. It *was* Gale, after all.

That night, as we all lay down to sleep, Gale caught my eye and gave a thumbs-up. Sure enough, when I drifted off to sleep, I found myself in that same dream world, starry sky overhead with the aurora lights floating in waves of colour. Then Wyll was walking towards me, eyes wide.

“This isn’t quite a dream, is it?” he asked. “I feel... like I’m thinking properly. I’m not rational in dreams.”

“Gale brought me to this dream world once when he needed to talk. I asked if we could use it.”

“Is Gale... here?” Wyll asked, spinning around.

“He says not,” I replied, and grinned. “I guess we have as much privacy as in camp; maybe more.”

“Mmm. That’s a fair point to make.”

I held out a hand, and he took it. I led him to the blanket in the forest glade, where the picnic and music were waiting. Gale had evidently decided that musicians were too much effort; instead, he had instruments playing themselves. A lyre, violin, and gittern played popular dance tunes, but quietly, to allow for conversation.

Wyll gasped. “This is just...”

I looked at him – he was struggling for words, but in a good way this time. Goal achieved. Gale would be thrilled. But enough thinking about Gale. I sat down on the blanket and patted the space beside me. Wyll sat down obediently.

“You didn't mention it was quite so... romantic,” he said. “I'm feeling a little jealous.”

I rested my head on his shoulder for a moment. “Be as jealous as you need to, love,” I told him. “But please remember me saying that my heart beats for you.”

He ducked his head and smiled. “Damn. That takes the wind right out of my possessiveness,” he said softly.

“If it helps, though,” I added. “There was no picnic or orchestra. I asked for those specially. I thought you might like to dance.”

“Oh, my dear,” he said, kissing my forehead. “This is perfect and you're wonderful. Ignore my silliness.”

I opened the picnic basket - five types of cheese, a bottle of wine, two gold chalices, a baguette, and berries. Hmm. Hardly a lavish feast, but quite attractive considering some of the fare we'd been swilling recently.

Wyll took the wine bottle, opened it with a twist and pull, and poured for us both. “Mmm...” he said, sniffing his chalice. “Gale's legendary wine taste comes through again. So, dearest – what brought this on? Not that I have the smallest complaint. I love it.”

“Well, partly pure hedonism,” I said, thoughtful. “I wanted to spend time with you somewhere pretty. It's been a while since we had the chance. But... you've also helped me through some rather major emotional crises lately, while dealing with your own worry and pain. And I wanted you to know that I appreciate it.”

Wyll sipped, looking thoughtful. “You understand that I'm only doing what you do for all of us, right? Especially for me. Or I'm trying to do it, rather.”

“See, I understand what you mean, but I'm not sure I could have done what you did. I've had years of training in helping people. You seemed to know instinctively what I needed and how to provide it.”

“Hmm. I thought I just listened to what you asked for.”

I blinked and started to think over the last few weeks. Had he really just done what I asked? And why was that idea so disconcerting to me?

“I can see thoughts whirling around in your head, but I don't know what exactly is happening,” he said.

“Umm...” I said, frowning. “I think I just got hit with the novel idea that I can ask you for something and you'll just... pay attention to me.”

“Ha! I'd laugh, but I suspect we're rather similar in that regard.”

I took a sip of wine and raised an eyebrow. “Wow.”

“The wine or the words?”

“The wine and the whole man,” I said, smiling. “Though I don't think even Gale's private stash could do you any sort of justice, love. It'll always be outshone.”

“Are you trying to make me blush?”

“Mmm. Trying to make sure you realise how wonderful you are – but I *do* like it when you blush.”

“Hells. You could discompose a statue, Dash.”

I laughed. “It's not hard, love. Just tell you how amazing you are, and you crumble.”

“Mmm. Would you come and kiss me? I want to hold you.”

I put down the wine and sat on his lap, and he wrapped his arms around my waist.

“You don't usually sit on my lap,” he said, kissing my neck. “I thought you didn't like it.”

“Usually not. Makes me feel like a doll, or a child. But... right now I just want to be close to you.”

“Mmm... no complaints here, dearest.” He nipped lightly at my neck, and I drew in my breath sharply. He drew back to watch me, then smiled. “Ah, I adore that look on your face, Dash.”

“The one that's me wondering why I want to burst into flames the moment you touch me, or the one where I thank all the gods you exist and are in my arms?” I asked.

I lifted a hand to his face to stroke his cheek, and he turned into it to kiss my palm. My breathing sped up, and he grinned.

“Gods, I love you,” I said softly.

His eyes widened. I felt a twist of anxiety – was it too soon? Had I misunderstood? Then his lips were on mine, and I lost interest in thinking for a while.

When I drew back, we were both breathing hard. “So I *haven't* told you that before, then?” I asked, trying not to smirk.

“In a thousand small actions,” he said, lifting my face to kiss me again. “But not those words, dearest. My heart is full to the brim. Hells, Dash. Beauty all around us, and none of it can come close to rivalling seeing your face as you tell me you love me.”

Heat flushed my face.

“You know you own my heart, Dash?” he asked, stroking my cheek. “I’m yours. All of me.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, overtaken by a wave of comfort and warmth washing through me. And relief. Quite a bit of relief, actually.

“You weren't sure,” he said, drawing back, his mouth straightening. “Oh, my dearest one. You’re so contained most of the time. It’s easy to forget you have the same insecurities as the rest of us.”

I made a face. “I suppose I like to pretend I don’t.”

“A useful trait in a leader. Slightly less so in a romantic partner, perhaps. Leads to me forgetting to tell you that I love you and why, because I think it’s so obvious.

“Hmm. Kind” he said, counting on his fingers, “compassionate, fierce as a dragon, non-judgemental, romantic as a bard. Silly, sweet, wise, encouraging, and quite appallingly trusting.”

I smiled and felt my face heating.

“And handsome,” he said, reaching out to pull me back into an embrace. “One look at you inflames me. Makes me think very impure thoughts. I looked at you across the campsite the other day, and Withers tsked and told me that having a bosom companion was proving to be a distraction I could ill afford.”

I chuckled as I relaxed into his arms. “That sounds like a very Withers-like utterance.”

“The day before, I heard him tell Astarion he should find a bosom companion.”

“I swear he’s just playing with us for fun,” I said. “But – thank you. For telling me how you feel.”

“I love you,” he said, his cheek rubbing against my hair. “I’ll happily tell you that anytime, dearest.”

“Mmm. I might just hold you to that, love. Would you dance with me?”

I’d thought that dancing couldn’t possibly feel as charged now that we were used to each other; used to touching and kissing every day. Yet our hands touched in the very first measure, and my breath caught, and Wyll’s face turned intensely focused. I felt every brief touch as a caress deep inside.

“Hells. I’ve danced with people from all over the land, and never been driven wild with desire like this,” Wyll said, smiling down at me. “My heart is racing.”

“Come lie down with me?” I asked, and we lay on the blanket, me on my back, Wyll fitting himself along my side, his arm under his head. I watched him with fond eyes – my devil, and the sweetest man I’d ever met. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I ask myself that every day,” he said. “May I kiss you, dearest?”

I pulled his face down to press my lips against his. He kissed me hard, tongue slipping into my mouth, pressing the length of his body against mine. Arousal flared through me. He drew away a little, watching me, and I reached out to pull him back.

“I want you,” I said softly.

Then his lips were on mine again. Usually they were soft, giving, gentle. Now they were demanding, forceful, and I pulled him on top of me. His tongue thrust into my mouth in a slow, graceful rhythm, and I answered it with every bit of my body that was pressed against his. My cock was hardening, pushing against his belly, and his answered, sliding against my leg. I made a sound of hopeless arousal into his mouth, and he pulled away to look into my eyes as he deliberately rubbed his body in long, slow strokes over mine.

The sensation of his cock on my leg; my cock stroked by his belly; the twin sensations were sending me over the edge where I could still make rational choices. I looked into his eye as my body flamed into heated desire everywhere our bodies touched.

“Gods, Wyll,” I murmured.

“May I,” he whispered, “touch your dick?”

My breath hitched. At that moment, I wanted all of him. Every touch, every part of his body. I wanted to let loose and allow these insistent urges to take us to a euphoric peak that was inching ever closer.

There’s nothing I wanted more, but... but there was something, wasn’t there. I wanted all of him, not only this physical bliss.

“I desperately want that, love. But are you sure?” I asked, looking intently into his face, looking for a flicker of hesitation and finding it. Laboriously, I pulled myself back from the

edge of pure desire I'd been about to dive into. "Wyll – I want to do this the way that will bring you joy. Is this what you want?"

Wyll sighed and rolled onto his side, off me. "Hells," he said. "You inflame me, dear. You make me forget myself." He met my eyes, and there was shame in his face – for what he wanted? For the constant push-pull of comparative chastity? I couldn't quite tell.

I reached out and stroked the ridges over his neck. "I don't forget you," I said. "I can't. You're far too precious to me."

He rested his forehead on my chest. "What did I do to deserve you?" he asked, voice muffled.

"Wrong question," I said, smiling, and trying to calm the raging desires still crashing about inside me. "*Who were you ? Yourself.*"

"Hmm."

"So, since we've come up against this before and I've inadvertently upset you, can I make something rather clear?" I asked.

"What's that?" he asked, raising his head.

"I'm holding onto the *very* last shred of my self-control, love. Everything about you makes me want to tear your clothes off and do very rude things to your body. Especially now."

He looked at me with new heat, and I felt a new surge of attraction. That confession might have been a bad idea.

"So if I were to start touching you," he said, voice suddenly husky, "you'd have no restraint left?"

He traced circles on my chest with a claw, and I closed my eyes, biting my lip.

"Mmm. I think I like this," he said, voice teasing. "May I kiss you, dear?"

I nodded, speechless, and his lips covered mine. I relaxed. If he wanted to kiss me when my self-control was at an all-time low, so be it. His tongue flicked over my lips, waking an answering echo lower down. I slid my tongue against his and felt desire wash over me again. Gods. This man was going to be the death of me.

He drew back slightly and smiled at me, eyes oddly satisfied. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Always," I breathed.

"Let go," he said. "I want to kiss you. I want to see you lost in my touch."

I'd already asked if he was sure what he wanted. I was sick of second-guessing him.

"Gladly," I said, and drew him down for another kiss.

This time when he drew back, I gazed at him with eyes gone hazy with desire. “Gods, love. Do you have any idea how good you feel against me?” I asked.

He shifted to slide his hard cock against my hip, and I lost the thread of my breathing. Heat pulsed in my loins and spread outwards, my cock chafing at its confinement.

“Do that again,” I said, and he obliged. A wave of pleasure spread through me, and my back arched. “*Fuck* .”

“Why does that affect you so?” he asked, watching me, eye gleaming.

“Don’t know,” I said, gasping. “Potential? Darling. Touch me? Please?” I turned to press against him, biting gently at his neck, and he groaned.

“Stop that,” he said, “or I’ll end up ravishing you right here.”

I bit his neck again, and he laughed, pulling away to tilt my face up.

“Savage,” he accused, and kissed me, his hand sliding down my back to my arse, moulding to it, pulling me closer.

I enjoyed the feel of his mouth on mine, his cock hard and demanding against my thigh, his fingers moving slowly over my arse and hip. I pressed into him, tilting my hips to let my cock move against his abs, and his claws dug into my arse.

I broke away from the kiss, gasping, and he stroked my face with his spare hand. “Hells, watching you lose control is my new favourite thing,” he said softly. “Even if... ohh...” as I moved against him, “... you make it *very* hard to resist you. I think you might be irresistible.”

“Clearly not quite,” I said, laughing. “Gods, Wyll. I love how you touch me.”

He kissed down my neck and slipped a hand under my shirt. I closed my eyes, revelling in the sensation of his skin against mine, his lips moving over me. I was regaining some perspective. Did I still want more? Always... but this was a bliss all of its own.

“Kiss me?” I asked, and those soft lips were on mine. His mouth still tasted of wine, with that ever-present hint of sulphur. We kissed for what might have been hours, while the aurora flamed overhead and the stars moved across the illusory sky.

Eventually we must have fallen asleep, because I woke in the real world, Wyll lying next to me with one arm stretched out, his hand on my waist.

I smiled and watched him for a while in the soft dawn light. *He loves me* . The thought filled me with a sense of peace I hadn’t experienced in years.

Wyll’s eyes opened, and he smiled at me. “My light,” he said, opening his arms. “Did we fall asleep? A pity we didn’t finish Gale’s wine first.”

I went to him, cuddling close, head on his chest. "I'm content," I said, "wine notwithstanding. Best date ever, if I do say so myself."

"Hmm. Certainly gives me something to live up to."

I chuckled. "Please tell me we're not going to play a game of one-upmanship until our every date consists of going out to the outer planes on a dragon and raiding other-worldly booze from other dimensions, then dancing amidst the very stars themselves."

Wyll laughed, his chest shaking. "I like that your idea of the ridiculously over-the-top date still includes dancing and wine."

"You've spoiled me, dear. Every date should include dancing and wine."

"Hmm. You're definitely my kind of man."

"Lucky, don't you think?"

"More serendipity, I'd say."

I grinned. "Come meditate with me, beloved?"

"Mmm. Love to."

Hearts and lies

I sat near our blazing campfire, staring into the flames. Another day, and we should be close to Baldur's Gate. In better circumstances, we'd probably be there already. But then, in better circumstances, would we even be doing this?

“Hey soldier,” Karlach said, sitting down on the log next to me.

I leant against her and slipped an arm around her waist. Other people, I'd ask or wait to be invited; but Karlach was always up for a cuddle. She was like a huge heated teddy bear.

“Hey, hon,” I said, as she slung an arm around my shoulders. “What's cooking?”

“My goose, I think,” she said. “Dash, this heart's beating out of my chest. Hurts like the blazes. I... I don't think I have much time left.”

I tightened my arm around her, looking up at her face. “Do you think you can hold on till we get to the city? Dammon might have thought of something.”

“Yeah, but it's just going to get worse if he can't, isn't it?”

I nodded, sombre. “If we don't get you back to Avernus, yes. I think so.”

“Not happening. I spent ten years trying to get out of there, Dash. I can't go back. Even if it literally kills me not to. At least I'm only dying in body now. Avernus... it kills my *soul*. I can't do it. I won't.”

“I think I understand,” I said. “I wouldn't want to go back to somewhere with nothing but horrible memories, either.”

“It's more than that,” she said, thoughtful. “Not just memories. Avernus... gets into you. Digs claws into your soul. It feels like hope burning to ash, just being there.”

I shuddered. “Like the shadow curse?”

“Like the shadow curse with fire and imps, but worse,” she said. “I can't do that again. I barely made it out with my mind intact.”

I sighed. “I don't want you to die.”

“I don't want me to die either, soldier. I guess sometimes we just don't get a choice.”

“We'll keep trying to find another way,” I told her. “We won't give up hope, even if Dammon is out of ideas.”

I felt her shake, and realised she was crying.

“Oh, honey,” I said, and knelt on the log to pull her into a proper hug. “Come here. I love you so much.”

She rested her head on my shoulder, arms clutching my waist, and shuddered. “I hate this *so much*, ” she said. “But gods above, it's good to have someone to hug.”

“Huh. I had the impression that you and Halsin were... hugging... now and then.”

She chuckled, sniffing. I pulled a clean hankie from my pocket and handed it to her. She blew her nose loudly. “We mostly go out into the forest and run,” she said. “There's friendship, but I don't think it could ever be love. Not like you and Wyll.”

“People like Wyll are hard to find,” I agreed, wondering what he was doing at the moment.

“And people like you, doofus,” she said, drawing away so I could sit down again. “Gotta admit, I'm a little envious. The way the big guy looks at you. Sends shivers up my spine.”

“Mine too,” I said, smiling.

“Can't say I really understand this old-fashioned *epic love story* thing you two have going on. Looks frustrating as fuck. Give me lots of loud sex and some mawkish drunken singing about love at 2am. That's more my style.”

I laughed. “We've noticed, Karlach. Especially about the loud sex.”

“Ha! Well, a gal's gotta get her boots knocked on occasion, doesn't she?”

I sat down next to her to cuddle in a bit more comfort. My knees weren't appreciating all the kneeling lately. “Yes, Astarion's noise complaints be damned,” I said, thinking back to some of the vampire's pithier remarks on the subject of *noises coming out of Karlach's tent*. “Can I ask you an entirely prurient and inappropriate question?”

“Have I ever taken Astarion out for a ride?”

I burst into laughter. Not the phrasing I would have picked. “Yes, that.”

“Let's just say, he finds me a little too strong and robust for his tastes. Something about friction burns in unmentionable places being unhealthy for vampires.”

“Oh no. Poor sweet innocent Astarion,” I gasped, howling with laughter.

“Wake now. I need assistance,” the dream visitor's voice said in my head. I sat up with a burst of adrenalin, Wyll jumping to his feet beside me.

“You heard it too?” I asked quietly.

He nodded across the camp, where three dark figures crept away from a portal.

“Shit,” I muttered, and ran towards them.

Shadowheart and Karlach got there before us, so I tackled the figure not currently engaged. A flurry of punches, and the shadows around it faded.

“Gith,” I said. “What do you want?”

“*Abomination*,” he hissed, and launched his own attack on me. I countered with difficulty, breathing hard. *I really must start sparring more often – I’m getting soft with all these weapon-lovers around me.*

“Not to talk, I guess,” Wyll said, and knocked him out with an eldritch blast.

“I still need your assistance,” the dream visitor’s voice said. “More are here. Come through the portal. We must prevail, or you lose your protection against the Absolute.”

We jumped through the portal together, and found ourselves... somewhere new.

“The astral plane,” Wyll said. “Gale will be annoyed at missing this.”

“I’d go back to get him, but I’m a little busy,” I shot back, ducking a gith’s open-handed blows. I *really* needed to practice more. I kicked out and connected firmly with the gith’s ribs just as Wyll hit her with an eldritch blast. The combination knocked her back metres.

“My hero!” I said, grinning, and raced to take advantage of the enemy’s fall. I heard Wyll chuckle as he fell in behind me.

“Where are we going?” Karlach asked when we’d dispatched the attackers nearby.

“Come to the skull,” the dream visitor said in our heads.

“Ugh,” Karlach said, holding her head. “I hate that. Well, let’s go then?”

We leapt from rock to rock, and I revelled in the long, slow glide of jumping in low gravity. This might be a very serious situation, and our lives might depend on defeating these gith invaders, but... this was also *fun*.

... I changed my mind a little when I saw what awaited us. Five gith warriors, a gith trapped in a bubble of energy and chained as the Nightsong had been, and a mindflayer. Where was our dream visitor?

“I am here,” the mindflayer said. “I know this will come as a shock to you. But I swear; I am the one who has helped you the entire time.”

Pieces fell into place in my head. I’d wondered why he looked different to different people when he visited. Comments about being trapped by this evil himself. About having *been* an adventurer like me.

“Of course our protector is a mindflayer,” Karlach yelled. “Couldn’t have anything going *right*, could we?”

“So this is why he was so adamant that we use the illithid powers,” Wyll said, grim-faced. “Well. We help still, I assume, and leave the recriminations for later?”

I nodded. The gith were almost on us, and they seemed to have zero uncertainty as to who *their* enemies were. They weren’t going to stop and have a discussion about it over tea and biscuits.

“Help the mindflayer,” I said. “We can talk about what the hells is going on later.”

Then the gith were on us, and we had no more attention to spare for moral dilemmas.

“Right,” I said, dusting myself off. “Explanations would be nice. As in, why you lied to us, what you think you’re doing, where the hells we are right now, and who the hells that gith is, and why you have him caged like a dog.”

“I came to you as someone I thought you would trust,” the mindflayer said. “I needed you all to trust me and listen to me. I didn’t lie. We need each other. You need me to keep the Absolute from turning you into illithid thralls. I need you to find and destroy the Absolute.”

“Where are we?” Wyll asked.

“Inside the astral prism – the device that protects you. It protects you because I am here, syphoning off power to act against the influence of the Absolute.”

“Who the hells is that gith?” I asked, pointing to the bound figure.

“Orpheus. Son of Gith, legendary mother of the githyanki people. He was defeated by Vlaakith millennia ago, and imprisoned here. He has powers, inherited from his mother, that allow him to resist and block telepathic communication from illithid hive minds.”

“So you didn’t imprison him,” Shadowheart said slowly.

“But you have *kept* him imprisoned,” Karlach said.

“Indeed. But you must understand; Orpheus is filled with ancestral hatred for illithids and those infected. He would not hesitate to strike down any of us, if he could. We are all infected and worse than enemies to him. He *hates* .”

“It goes against everything I believe to leave him here, trapped,” I said.

“He’s a gith,” Shadowheart argued. “His people conquer and pillage across dimensions. And he and his mother started them on that path. Is gaol such a terrible fate for one such as that?”

“Hmm. An interesting take, and one I’m inclined to agree with,” Wyll said.

“For thousands of years?” I asked. “Does the punishment even fit the crime, at this point?”

“Better than being stuck in the hells for eternity,” Wyll pointed out.

“If it were possible to release him,” the mindflayer said, “it would be your ruin. If Orpheus did not kill you on sight, you would still lose the protections I have so carefully woven around you all.”

“Fuck,” Karlach said. “So we all die or become thralls, and this dude does... what? Flies off to start another interdimensional war? Decides that our world looks tasty?”

“The point is moot,” the mindflayer said. “His bonds have held for millennia. They cannot be sundered. Old magic went into these. No one I know of holds the sort of power you’d need to break them apart.”

I sighed, looking at the bound gith. Assuming the mindflayer was speaking truth this time... this was something I needed to let go. But perhaps some further research would be a good idea, just in case.

“I suppose we’re done here,” I said reluctantly. “You don’t need us anymore?”

The mindflayer shook its head. “The crisis is over. You have my thanks for your timely intervention.”

“Anyone else have questions? Concerns?” I asked.

No one answered, so I led them through the portal and back to camp.

“Well. That was a shock revelation,” Wyll said. “Our dream visitor is an illithid – but a rogue one.”

“I’m making tea,” I said, and walked away to fill the billy. When I came back, conversation was raging about the implications of sharing headspace with a mindflayer.

“Nothing’s changed, though,” I said. “We might be taken aback by what we learnt, but – everything is just as it was yesterday.”

“Ah, but when you know more, it *feels* completely different,” Gale said. “Our perspective has changed. Dramatically!”

“True,” I said, putting the billy over the fire and stoking the flames. “I am rather annoyed at being deceived so cavalierly.”

“I suppose we were hardly going to trust it if it told us all upfront,” Gale said, thoughtful.

“I think Dash would have heard it out,” Wyll said, grinning at me. “He has a habit of listening first, even at the worst possible time.”

I laughed. “Fair criticism.”

I made tea and poured myself a mug, walking over to sit with Wyll. He lay down on his side and patted the ground in front of him, offering himself as a backrest. I sat down and leaned back on him, caressing his leg with my free hand.

“So let me see if I can catch up,” Astarion said. “We have illithid worms in our skulls. They make us subject to this Absolute. Which is the dead three. We’re being protected from the Absolute by an illithid. Who lives in the tiny box that’s protecting us. In which also lives a gith prince. He gives the illithid the power to protect us. From their little box.”

I nodded and sipped my tea. “That all seems about right.”

“Right? That’s *insane* .”

“Two things can be true, Astarion.”

Back to my roots

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: *Talk of historic domestic assault and rape. Panic attacks.*

This chapter might be tough reading for some. It... wasn't a huge amount of fun to write, although it was oddly cathartic.

You can skip this chapter without missing much in the way of story. Please look after yourself, first and foremost. You deserve the care. <3

Love, Rowan

“So. We’ll be in Baldur’s Gate in the morning,” Wyll said, looking out over the woods as though he could see the city through the trees if he just tried hard enough. “Hells, I’ve missed the place. There’s nowhere like it. The bustle. The culture. The people. The food. I love it all. And I’m so glad to be going back with someone who loves it too.”

I nodded. Baldur’s Gate was a tough place to grow up, but my travels had taught me new appreciation for the old city.

“What foods have you missed?” I asked, seized by an idea.

“Mm. Cinnamon rolls. Simple fare, I’ll grant, but bakers outside of Baldur’s Gate rarely make them. I haven’t had one for years. Something about the bite of the spice and the sweetness. A little like you,” he said, gently poking my arm.

I smiled. This light-hearted side of Wyll was nice to see. With his father imprisoned and infected with an illithid larva, there wasn’t much heart-lightening going around.

“Pork roll with dripping, from the cook at Sharess’ Caress,” I said, my mouth watering at the thought. Another thing I didn’t appreciate at the time.

“The *brothel* ?” Wyll asked, raising his eyebrows. “You’re a regular, are you?”

“Hmm... the jealous streak comes out to play again,” I said, pushing him gently with my shoulder. “My mother worked there.”

“Ahh. I forgot about that,” he said, putting an arm around my shoulders. “What was it like? Growing up there?”

“It was like having a dozen very absent-minded parents,” I said thoughtfully. “I was the only child, and my mother couldn’t care for me while working, so the other whores shared looking

after me. My mother was a good earner; I think it was in their best interests. But some of them cared about me too, I think.”

“That explains a bit,” Wyll said, kissing my forehead. “You’re surprisingly... stable? for someone with a childhood like that.”

“Ha! I appreciate the comment, although I’m not sure I see it. Being with me must feel like walking through a bibberbang field, some days.”

“Dearest... never. I might worry about blowing *you* up, but I’m never worried for myself. Besides... I think I have a lot of those moments waiting under the surface too. You’re more aware of yours, that’s all.”

“Mmm. You’re sweet, beloved.”

“But how did you go from Sharess’ Caress to a monastery? That’s got to be a tale and a half.”

“Not quite as interesting as you might think,” I said, mouth tightening. “Hmm... love, if we’re going to talk about this, I think I’ll require pillows, wine, and hankies.”

“Ahh, the sadness protocol,” he said, smiling. “Can we? I don’t want to push you to talk about painful things. But I would like to hear about it.”

“I think I’d like to tell you, too,” I said, leaning into him for a moment. “Let’s get fortified, hmm?”

A while later, we curled up together in a nest of pillows. “I like this,” Wyll said. “This tradition we’ve developed for comforting each other. It feels... intimate and safe. All from a few soft furnishings.”

I put my head on his chest and inhaled, taking in his scent. “Love, the first time you did this for me, I almost crumbled entirely. The idea that you’d just drop everything to hold me when I was hurting. It utterly flabbergasted me.”

“I’d say that was silly of you, but I’ve been there.”

“Mmm. I know, love. We’re both silly.”

He chuckled, his chest moving under my head. “Tell me what happened?” he asked.

I sighed. “My mother died,” I said. “Just one of those winter illnesses. We had a healer come in, but too late – she was sick but alright one day, then her lungs filled with fluid fast, and before we could get a healer there, she was fighting for air. And then... she wasn’t fighting anymore.”

Wyll wrapped his arms around me. “Gods, that must have been such a shock,” he said.

I nodded. “More so because the proprietor kicked me out,” I said. “Which... I would have seen coming, if I’d been thinking. Which I wasn’t, at all. I was 16; I’d just lost my only

parent. And she booted me straight out onto the street because my mother was no longer earning her money.”

“Ouch. Some kindness wouldn’t have gone astray.”

“Kindness is a commodity to be purchased, in a brothel,” I said. “If I’d had the coin, I’m sure she’d have been as kind as kind could be.”

“Your mother didn’t leave you anything?”

I frowned. “You know, I think Jurgen probably took it,” I said slowly. “I’d never quite put it together. But she earned good money. There had to be a nest egg. The brothel owner – she was confused and annoyed when I said I had no money. Huh.”

“Bastard,” Wyll muttered.

“So, I was out on the streets, and I took to living with Jurgen and his friends. We had hideouts throughout the Heapside. Sewers, docks... abandoned basements all over the place. Except, we were always low on cash. And I needed to earn my keep.”

“Oh, my dearest one,” he said softly.

“He said they were desperate. That a friend offered to pay them just to spend some time with me. That they needed money so badly because they’d had to look after me for weeks. I... was naive, I guess. I went on the ‘date’ with the friend, who then explained that he’d paid for sex and planned to get it. I... let him do it. And then Jurgen came back and screamed at me for betraying him with his friend. And I felt so, so terrible. It took me a long time to realise how carefully he manipulated me through that.”

“I want to hug you very close right now,” Wyll said. “I just don’t want to set off any emotional bombs, either. What would you like?”

“Stroke my hair? I asked, and his fingers combed gently over my head. I relaxed against him, letting go of some of the tension I’d built up.

“So, the next time they wanted money, Jurgen explained to me that I was already a cheating whore – they might as well profit from it. But... every time, he’d fly into a jealous rage afterwards. Once, the guy beat me... and Jurgen screamed about how worried and upset he was while I lay there bruised and bleeding, then held me down and fucked me while I screamed in pain.”

My breathing turned shallow, and I tensed up, lost in the memory of the physical pain and the sense of utter betrayal – and the shame of feeling like I deserved every last beating.

Wyll loosened his embrace, fingers stroking my back lightly. “My sweetest love,” he said, voice unsteady.

I gathered my courage and looked into his face, knowing that he’d be disgusted and ashamed for me. He was crying, but his face showed only empathy.

“You’re allowed to be repulsed by this,” I said. “It’s... not pretty. I understand.”

“I might be repulsed by Jurgen and his friends, dearest. Never by you. You’re the most precious thing in my life.”

“Ha. A precious thing from the sewers.” My voice was bitter.

“Hey. I love you. I know this is hard to talk about. But please don’t say things like that about yourself, Dash.”

I sighed and sat up to pour a goblet of wine. I sipped, grimacing.

“Gale’s finest, it’s not,” Wyll said, smiling at me. “How did you come to leave?”

“I... fought back, eventually” I said slowly. “Told him I didn’t deserve such treatment. He... yelled that I was nothing, that he’d stayed with me and helped me only out of pity. And he left. It was a thing he’d do if I wasn’t obedient enough. Just clear out and leave me by myself, no food, no money. Except this time I didn’t panic. Something inside just snapped. I thought... there had to be something better out there. I knew I’d starve anyway... so I decided to walk to a monastery that Dawngreeter Patric once told me of. Turned out, surviving on the road is actually easier than surviving in Heapside.”

“My brave darling.”

I smiled at him. “That you can hear this story and call me brave instead of names...” Tears overwhelmed me suddenly. “Gods,” I said, putting down the goblet and burying my face in my hands.

Wyll sat up. “I want to hold you,” he said, “but I think maybe you don’t want that right now?”

“I don’t know what I want,” I wailed.

“It’s OK,” he said softly. “I have you. Whatever you need.”

I tried to breathe deep and calm myself, but a familiar thread of panic was unfolding inside. “Shit. Don’t... don’t hold me.”

Wyll nodded, watching me. “I’m yours,” he said.

I closed my eyes. Something about the familiar words grounded me. The panic was still there and overwhelming, but... I had something to hold onto through it, at least. I held out a hand, and Wyll held it in his, stroking my palm lightly.

I shuddered.

“Gods. I’m getting sick of these reactions,” I said. “I thought I was over this.”

“Healing’s not a nice, simple process, is it?” Wyll asked.

I shook my head. "Ugh. I hate it."

"I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's for the best, I suppose, as long as I haven't forever changed your opinion of me," I said.

"Only for the better, dearest."

"See, I don't understand how that's possible," I said, watching his fingers play on my palm. "This is all so sordid."

"Can I share something similar?" he asked, sounding hesitant. "It might help explain better than anything else."

I nodded.

"When I first pacted to Mizora... we got along fairly well. I mean, she's a devil, and I'd just lost my city and my father, but... she wasn't unkind. Then I messed up a mission. She sent me to kill a devil who was trying to evade Zariel's people. I almost took him out, but he downed me and escaped. Mizora... wasn't happy at my failure. She gave me to friends of hers for the night."

My heart twisted. I knew how this story was going to go. I put my spare hand on his knee.

"They filled me with false desire, Dash. I wanted them so badly, I could barely think. They whipped me, and I screamed for more. They fucked me, I fucked them, in one long orgy, and *I loved it*. All while a part of my mind was shrieking with horror and fear, knowing it was wrong and not what I wanted, but gods, Dash. It was so good. Until the spell wore off and all I had left was memories, shame, and pain."

"Oh, my love," I said. "That sounds terrible."

He looked up to meet my eyes, and sighed. "And you're not at all disgusted, are you?"

"Of course not, beloved. None of that was your fault."

He grimaced. "I could have negotiated a better contract."

"You were 17, love. I'm surprised you had enough sense to protect yourself as well as you did."

He sighed.

"Can I hug you?" I asked, and he pulled me into a tight embrace.

"Sorry," he said, voice muffled in my shoulder. "I didn't realise..."

"How much the old wounds hurt?" I said, wrapping my arms around his broad shoulders.

“Hmm.”

“I love you,” I said, kissing the top of his head. “Thank you for sharing with me. It means the world.”

“Hells. How do you do this? Share these stories, then... deal with the emotions that come bubbling to the surface? This is the hells all over again.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it? I don’t know. I just... try to wade through the feelings. Face them head on.”

“I hate it.”

“It gets easier, I suppose. Once I pushed through most of the emotions I’d saved away and refused to face. At first... it felt like an avalanche each and every time I confronted a memory.”

“Huh.”

“My love,” I said softly, and felt dampness on my shoulder. Gods. My poor Wyll.

“Aren’t we a pair?” he said, drawing away. “Gods, Dash. It hurts to talk about this. I feel dirty and ashamed. But... I never thought I could be in love. I thought this would always shut me out of a normal life. I never thought I’d meet someone like you.”

A cheap whore? I wanted to answer, but bit my tongue. “I feel raw,” I said instead. “Can we try something that might be soothing, love?”

He nodded, face curious.

“Skin healing magic,” I said. “I don’t know how it works, or why. But I’ve seen it. All we need to do is take our tops off, and lie down together, skin pressed to skin. I think we’ll feel better, faster.”

“Hmm. If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you just wanted me out of my clothes.”

I smiled a bit. “You know I’d just ask, right?”

He pulled his shirt off over his head and lay back on the pillows. “Come, dearest. I don’t care if this is the forefront of modern medicine or some hedge-wizard’s woo. You won me over at *skin pressed to skin*.”

I stripped off my shirt and cuddled close to his side, head nestled into the hollow of his shoulder. I sighed as a peace slowly flooded me.

“Well, you just relaxed,” Wyll said, arm circling my shoulders and squeezing gently. “I must remember this.” He pulled a blanket across over me.

I inhaled. “Gods. Your skin scent soothes me all by itself.”

“Oh? What do I smell like?”

“Salt. Musk. A hint of sulphur. And a touch of something earthy... like oakmoss, I think.”

“Can’t escape the hells even with my scent, it seems.”

I shook my head. “Odd sometimes, the things that brand us. But I love your scent.”

“Mmm. You told me that I smelled like home once. Did your home really smell like sulphur, though?”

I chuckled. “You misunderstood me, love.”

“Oh?”

“I meant that your scent feels like home. That this,” I stroked his chest, “is my home. You.”

“Oh, my dearest one. That’s suddenly become my favourite memory.”

“I don’t remember it very well. Just feeling all... wrong... and then being in your arms, and one thing seemed right. You.”

“Not to cast aspersions on your sovereign remedy, dearest – but I think hearing that did more for me than anything else could,” he said, stroking fingers down my bare back.

“Mmm...” I said, closing my eyes. “Keep doing that, love? It’s very soothing.”

He chuckled and continued, kissing my forehead as I let myself drift off.

Finally in the city

We reached Baldur's Gate around noon, with the sun shining brightly overhead.

“By Mystra's tresses,” Gale swore. “All these people. Just camped here? How long have they been here?”

“A good while, I'm guessing,” Wyll said, his voice grim. “They must have closed the gates to the lower city.”

“And what? Left the refugees to starve?” Gale asked.

I nodded. “Looks that way. Seems the Absolute is sowing chaos where it can.”

“But Baldur's Gate has always welcomed refugees!” Wyll burst out. “How can they *do* this? How can they betray everything the city stands for? It has always offered shelter to the downtrodden of the Sword Coast!”

I winced. My beloved had moments of utter naivete.

“If the downtrodden have enough coin, they're always welcome,” Astarion pointed out. “If they're *too* downtrodden, they're welcomed only as grist to the mill, darling – chewed up and spat out, defeated and dead.”

Wyll scowled.

“Oh, do stop pouting, rich boy,” Astarion said. “You forget. Cleansing the streets of the prettiest of the downtrodden was my job for centuries. Nobody cared. They still don't.”

“They *should*,” Wyll said.

“And if I'd come knocking on your door, years ago,” Astarion asked, “asking for help and succour against my vampire master – would you have dropped everything to help?”

“I'd like to think so, yes.”

“Then you would have died.”

“What's your point?”

“That life is more complicated than you want to admit, Wyll. Sometimes trying to help others just destroys lives.”

“This really isn't the place for an in-depth philosophical discussion, guys,” I pointed out. We were getting quite a few stares from the people around us.

“That's a devil,” a man in robes said to Gale. “You can't bring a devil into the city! It's bad enough all these tieflings wandering about. Be off with you! Back to whatever cesspit

spawned the lot of you!”

“Shit,” Wyll muttered. “We'd best make camp, before I start a riot.”

Wyll was sitting slumped by the campfire, looking distinctly morose.

“Are you alright, love?” I asked, sitting down next to him.

He started. “I've been better,” he said. “I just realised that my appearance – I've grown used to it. I'd forgotten that I'm a figure of fear now.”

I leant against him, and he wrapped an arm around my waist. “I'm sorry,” I said. “That was pretty brutal.”

“I'll need to become accustomed to it,” he said, mouth twisting. “We're in the wilds no longer. Appearance is everything, now.”

“Mmm. City people can be vicious about such things.”

He sighed, and I watched him, troubled. I was used to the prejudices and petty jabs that life in Baldur's Gate offered to many. He wasn't. When he was last here, he was the son of arguably the most powerful man in the city. Being reviled in the streets, rather than being treated with deference and respect, would be a shock – and he'd find it a lot more difficult than I would because of the contrast.

“I love you,” I said, slipping an arm around his waist.

He looked down at me and smiled a little. “I know, dearest. Thank you. I'll be alright. I'm not filled with self-loathing. I just need to take a few moments to recover.”

“I'm so proud of you,” I said, a wave of affection filling me. “My gorgeous man.”

He smiled for real. “I can never stay melancholy with you looking at me like that,” he said. “Will you kiss me? And then I suspect you have things to be doing, instead of worrying about me.”

I rose to my knees to lay my lips against his, and spent a very enjoyable few moments lost in the sensation of his mouth under mine. “Mmm...” I said, drawing away. “I want to see if I can find some of the tieflings we met along the way. Hopefully they made it into the city, but that doesn't seem too likely. They might need a hand.”

“And you're straight back to looking after everyone,” Wyll said, chuckling. “Off you go, dearest. I'll be fine.”

I found Umi first – one of the kids in Mol's little gang.

“Hey Umi,” I said. “You made it! How are you doing?”

He shrugged. "It's alright. I like not having to walk all day. But I miss Mol."

"Oh?" I asked. We never did find her after she was taken from Last Light. "Did she get here alright?"

He nodded. "She's in the city," he said. "She's been sneaking people in, but she says she had to go slow. Bribing guards is expensive."

"I'm glad she got out of Moonrise and found you," I said, feeling a pang of guilt. We should have tried harder to find her. "Do you have everything you need?"

"I'd like a job," he said, melancholy. "Can't buy anything without money. But no one's hiring kids out here. I'll have to wait until Mol gets me in."

I told him where our camp was. Worst case, he and his friends could always come get a meal with us. Gale would be happy enough to have someone else to feed. Wyll would be ecstatic to see the tiefling kids again. Astarion and Shadowheart would probably be appalled, but they should be used to us picking up strays by now.

A couple of the adult tieflings were nearby. They seemed in relatively good spirits, considering.

"We'll get in," Cerys said. "Bex and Danis already made it. So did Dammon. We're helping each other to get jobs and get out of this refugee camp. It might take weeks, but we have the time now. We don't have the Absolute army snapping at our heels."

I nodded. "Best of luck, folks. I know you can do it. You're some of the most tenacious people I've ever met."

They smiled and waved farewell as I headed back to camp.

"Hi. Umm... have you seen my mum?" a little voice asked behind me.

I turned to see a young blonde girl with shaggy hair staring hopefully at me. She was dirty and thin, and my heart sank. This didn't feel like it would be a case of tracking down a parent who'd had a few too many at the local tavern.

"I don't know," I said. "When did you last see her?"

"Almost a tenday ago," she said. I could see the awful knowledge in her eyes, but she still wanted to pretend it wasn't true. "She wasn't feeling well, so she went out to pick some herbs. But uhh... she hasn't come back yet."

My heart broke, looking at the brave kid who knew deep down she was an orphan. "I haven't seen her," I said gently. "But hey, have some food. And come see me in my camp if you need more, alright? If your mum doesn't show up. Ask for me or for Wyll. He's kind of scary-looking, but he's really sweet. He'll look after you if I'm not around."

"Thanks, mister," she said, eyes focused on the food in her hands. She was clearly hungry enough that only good manners stopped her from gulping it down immediately.

“Take care,” I said, and walked away, ignoring the wrench from my heart. I *couldn't* take in every orphan we came across. If nothing else, we were living a dangerous life that wasn't conducive to childcare. And more importantly, we could all die any day. It would be self-indulgent to take in children and leave them worse off if we all got ourselves smashed to pieces by one of the two gods still against us.

“I found Umi,” I told Wyll. “He said Mol is in the city somewhere, trying to get the other kids in.”

“Hmm...” Wyll said. “That sounds good, but...”

“Given Mol's criminal tendencies? Yes. Could be a recipe for disaster. I'm not sure the grove really readied them for your average citizen's attitude to stealing.”

He nodded.

“I also told a little orphan kiddy to come find you or me if she's in trouble,” I said.

He laughed. “Why am I not surprised?” he asked, kissing my forehead. “I have a sneaking suspicion that if you had your way, our entire camp would be filled with orphans and strays.”

“Guilty as charged, love.”

I lay by the fire, thinking. It was a warm night in Baldur's Gate; wispy clouds obscured most of the stars, but a few of them peeked through. The moon hadn't risen yet.

We had so much still to do. We had one netherstone – just one. We needed two more. And one of the people holding one was in charge of the entire city. His inauguration was in a couple of days. How the hells were we supposed to get him out of power without raising the entire city against us? And where was Wyll's father in all of this? Was he really in Baldur's Gate? Or had we followed false rumours here, planted to put us off the scent? Could we actually help any of these refugees clogging the outer city? And what could we do? Would removing Gortash help, or just plunge the entire city into chaos? If we succeeded, would we be heroes or terrorists?

“Want company?” Wyll asked, padding softly towards me from the shadows.

I turned my head and smiled at him. “If it's you – always, love.”

He laid down beside me, fitting his body next to mine, stretching an arm out above my head.

“Mmm,” I said, resting my cheek on his chest, “this just made my night tenfold better.” I breathed in deep, then released it, letting go of all the tension I'd been building up with my endless unanswerable questions.

“You know,” he said, sounding thoughtful, “I think that's been the most surprising thing about us.”

“What’s that?”

“That there’s such... comfort, such joy in simple touch. I feel like a starving man who didn’t know I needed to eat.”

I tilted my head up to look at his face and stroked his cheek gently.

“Mmm. See, that’s perfect. You fill a void I never even knew was there,” he said, and turned his face into my hand to kiss my palm.

I felt a surge of lust as his lips moved over the sensitive skin, but ignored it. Not the time; not the place.

“Your father wasn’t affectionate?” I asked.

“He was... loving. And very involved in my education. But... hugs and kisses? No, he was not the sort. My mother...” he trailed off.

“You rarely mention her,” I said.

“Mmm. I don’t remember her. And when I was older and asked about her, it was as though my father never stopped mourning her. I think I stopped talking about her for fear of upsetting him.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I suppose so. I’d like to ask him about her, if I get the chance. If we succeed in what we’re doing. If he’ll even talk to me again.”

I pressed myself into him, offering comfort the only way I could think of. Gods knew words would fail me.

“But I’m glad you asked for *all the circles*,” Wyll said, moving away from the subject of his parents. “Given the only choice, I would have been playing the lonely knight – isolated, alone, fortified with an occasional kiss or dance. I... didn’t realise what I was missing. What I *needed*. I thought there was chastity or fucking; nothing in between. I didn’t realise that I could just reach out and *hug* people.”

“I don’t think I could live without hugging people,” I observed.

He laughed. “I’ve noticed! But seriously... I’ve come to realise how much love and comfort can be exchanged with simple touch. You cuddle with *everyone*. And not in a carnal way. Hells, I kept myself so aloof from other mortals for so many years. I never realised how much bonding we can do with a touch.”

“Mmm. I’m glad you get to discover it now, at least.”

“Even if it does come with the occasional challenge.”

“Like?”

He shifted against me, and his cock pushed, hard, into my hip.

My breathing hitched and my face heated as my thoughts switched very decisively into another mode.

“Oh. And seeing you react like this to me...” Wyll stroked fingers down my chest, but his hand was trembling.

I looked up at him, letting him see the desire in my face. “Love, may I kiss you?” I asked.

He laid soft lips on mine, and it felt like a line of fire travelled down my spine to my loins, setting me aflame. I bit his lower lip lightly, and the kiss turned rougher, my tongue shoving into his mouth, until he broke away, breathing hard.

“Hells, Dash,” he said. “I know we need sleep. But I want to lie down with you and kiss you while I go wild with desire.”

“Mmm. There’s an invitation that’s impossible to resist,” I said, smiling at him. “Come on, love. Let’s go to your tent.”

We lay down in the dubious privacy of Wyll’s tent, and he held out his arms. “Come kiss me?” he asked. “I want to taste your lips again.”

I cuddled close and kissed him, sliding my tongue into his mouth, feeling a jolt of arousal straight to my loins as his forked tongue flicked against mine.

“May I touch you, love?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Please,” he said, kissing me.

I pushed myself up on an elbow and slid a hand down his back, kissing down his neck as he arched against me. I let my fingers drift slowly over his arse, enjoying the swell of hard muscle under my hand. I kissed the hollow of his throat, tasting the sweat on his skin.

Wyll’s breath sped up, and I smiled. “Gods, I love seeing you like this,” I told him. “You’re so beautiful.” I slid a finger over the cleft of his arse, following the seam of his trousers, and he groaned. “You like me touching you this way?” I asked, and he nodded. “Would you rather have my cock sliding over your arse like this?” just stroking with that single finger.

“Hells, Dash,” he murmured. “Feeling your dick against my arse...” he trailed off, eye unfocusing.

“Mmm. I want to nestle my cock in this lovely crevice,” I said. “Move against you while I dream of fucking you.”

His breathing turned ragged.

I moved back up to his mouth, kissing him slowly, and he clutched me close. I stroked his cheek and bit his bottom lip gently. I drew away a little to watch him.

“Come back and kiss me,” he said, eyes closed. “Hells, Dash. I want you.”

I grinned and kissed him again, pressing close so he could feel how aroused I was. His claws slid over my back as I pushed my tongue into his welcoming mouth, and I slid a hand to the back of his neck, holding him in place so I could kiss him harder.

“My Wyll,” I said softly, and he sighed, opening his eyes to smile at me.

“I feel drunk on your kisses,” he said. “So much sweeter than wine, my darling.”

I bent to press my lips against his again, and lost myself in the sensations of kissing him.

A while later, he fell asleep, an arm over me. I lay next to him on my bedroll, oddly restless. Usually I could let go of the arousal and desire built up from kissing him, touching him. Tonight though... maybe it was the talking that had elevated the difficulty. My cock was still hard and aching, and it was utterly uninterested in standing down. I could still smell his scent around me, and it was driving me to distraction.

I wriggled out from under his arm and crept out of his tent. I went looking for a quiet place, in the dark shadows behind the tents. I set my cock free from its confining undergarment and stroked it slowly, thinking of Wyll, his arse under my fingers, my cock sliding against it, shoving inside as he called out my name... my seed spurted over the grass as the climax took me, and I groaned quietly. Gods, he was testing my control.

“Oh, is our prudish Wyll still not putting out?” Astarion drawled.

Shit.

I put myself to rights, and tried to pretend to some dignity.

“You know,” Astarion said, leaning against the fence and looking up at the stars, “I would have fucked you *whenever* you wanted.”

I took a very deep breath. I wanted to tell him that what Wyll and I had went far beyond fucking. But... hmm.

“You know...” I said. “I get it. I do. But this manipulation you do around sex? I find it really uncomfortable.”

Astarion was silent.

“I had someone manipulate me into playing the whore, once,” I said abruptly. “When you say things like that, it... doesn’t leave me feeling at all good.”

“You really are a touchy little soul, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “Guess I am,” I said.

“Ugh. You’re no fun,” he muttered, sliding away into the shadows.

The next morning, Wyll and I were the first ones to stir. As usual, I started breakfast, then walked away a little to meditate. Wyll joined me, as he often did, sitting facing me, eyes closed.

When I sighed and opened my eyes, Wyll smiled at me. “I need to ask you something,” he said, hesitant. “But... I have a bad habit in this regard, and I don’t want to be... worrying?”

I frowned. “Whatever you need, love.”

“After we kissed last night. You stole away from the camp. And then you returned later, sated... and so did Astarion.”

I thought back to last night and how the sequence of events might have looked to someone else. “Oh *no*,” I said, and covered my mouth with my hand. I was torn between severe embarrassment and laughter. Then I remembered that the man sitting calmly in front of me had a wide jealous streak... and seemed surprisingly unbothered.

“I suppose I never asked you to be faithful to me,” he said, looking thoughtful.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I said, heart full. “Would you like to hear what happened, or would you like to talk about exactly what you are to me?”

“What happened, please. I’m trying to be calm and sensible about this, but...”

“Mmm. I’m starting to realise how it looked to you. Alright. Let me gather my thoughts,” I said, and took a few breaths. “You and I kissed,” I said slowly. “And Wyll... gods, I wanted you so badly. I felt like every nerve ending was aflame. So I went to find a quiet, dark place to...” I screwed up my face in embarrassment... “touch myself. To let it out. And just as I finished, Astarion came along with his usual excellent timing, and...”

“Decided to make things as awkward as possible?” Wyll finished drily.

I nodded, face hot with mortification. “Wyll, we talked. And I’ll happily share what we said with you. But there was no... touching.”

Wyll chuckled. “Dearest, how do you keep getting in these ridiculous situations?”

“An utter disregard for propriety?”

“Mmm. That must be it. Will you tell me what was said?”

“Please don’t take it badly?”

“Oh,” he said, mouth downturned.

I winced. “He... told me he would have fucked me any time I wanted. And I... look, I thought about defending your honour and telling him off. But I didn’t. I told him I didn’t like the manipulation attempts. That they made me uncomfortable, not horny.”

“Ah. I half expected to hear that you hugged him half the night and told him you loved him.”

I glanced up to Wyll's face, to see an unexpected smirk building. "You're not angry?" I asked.

He laughed, shaking his head. "I think maybe hearing that you love me calmed my anxious heart a little, dearest. But – some reassurance wouldn't go astray, regardless."

"Mmm. Will you hold me while I tell you how I feel about you?"

He shuffled over to sit beside me and pulled me into his arms.

"You are," I said, resting my head on his shoulder, "the stars in my night sky. The person I look to for beauty and light in my darkest hours. Constant, steady; a guide when I'm lost. You fill my heart. Thoughts of you fill my head. I suppose I've never told you I'd be faithful to you because it never occurred to me that I hadn't already. Love, when we agreed to court each other... I pledged myself to you, body, heart, soul. I made a choice back then. I want *you*. It's you that makes my heart beat faster with a smile. It's thoughts of you that can warm a lonely night and fortify me against any foe. And it's you that drives me wild with desire."

I looked up at him. His face was soft, his mouth curved in a smile. "Dearest, may I kiss you?" he asked, and I drew him down for a gentle brush of lips.

"Are we alright?" I asked.

"Better," he said, smiling. "Thank you. You listened. You told me everything I asked. And you reassured me. I needed that. But I don't think I deserved it."

"You silly man," I said, stroking his chest. "I know this was difficult for you. I know how much work you must have put in to reach the point where you'll calmly ask me for details instead of losing your temper. How can you not deserve my respect and consideration?"

Wyll let his breath out in a long sigh. "I think you're the first person who's ever said something like that to me."

"That you deserve my respect and consideration?"

"Mmm."

"It's true."

"I was motivated to improve, dear. Gods, the look on your face when you were fighting those memories – I realised just how much pain I could cause you with what I thought was harmless jealousy."

"It's hardly your fault, love."

"If I hurt you, knowing what I'm doing? Of course it is. And what you shared with me last night... I think I understand how I managed to set you off so badly. I don't want to do that again."

I relaxed against him, thinking. I wasn't sure I liked him changing because of my personal weakness. "I'm not sure how to respond to that," I said eventually. "But I appreciate the care you're showing for me."

"You'd do the same for me," he said, kissing my forehead.

Love and other circuses

“Come to the circus with me,” Wyll said, taking my hand. “I want to see Dribbles the clown again. I think the zoo will fade in comparison to the monsters we've seen – but I haven't been for so long.”

I smiled at the almost childlike excitement in his voice. The circus didn't hold the same good memories for me, but I'd have to be hard-hearted indeed to refuse him. We walked in the gate, and that's where the first issue started.

“Smells bad. Don't like! Don't like!”

Was the guard... thing... talking about Wyll? No, it seemed to be cringing away from *me*. Hmm. Maybe the illithid parasite made me smell odd to some creatures.

“I promise, we have no ill-will towards anyone in your circus,” I told its handler. “I just want to take my partner to the circus and have some fun together – nothing nefarious at all.”

“Wellll, alright,” he said, looking doubtful. “I suppose you're fine. You look respectable. In you go. Any trouble, tell 'em you snuck in!”

We entered, and started to wander around the booths. I took Wyll's hand in mine, and he smiled down at me.

“You know, this is the first time we've been alone without a gaggle of adventurers or a... a maladroit of mad malcontents following us around,” he said. “It's just a little bit magical.”

“Maladroit of mad malcontents?” I said. “I'm stealing that phrase. It's perfect.”

He laughed. “Hells, I feel like a teen again – walking this circus, flirting with a gorgeous man at my side. Except I never had the gorgeous man when I was a teen.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I've seen both your forms, love – I find that very difficult to believe.”

“Ha! Well, I had some offers, it's true. But the son of a duke needs to be careful what he does in public, and with whom.”

My eyes flicked to our entwined fingers.

“Ah. The disgraced, exiled, nearly-unrecognisable son of a deposed grand duke? I think he can do whatever he damn well pleases. Besides – these people might not know who you are yet, but they will. And they will *love* you.”

“So, in private?” I asked lightly. I hardly had grounds for jealousy on that score, after all.

“There were... a few...” he admitted, brow furrowed. “But I was young, just figuring out life and love. Most of them wanted the duke's son, not Wyll.”

I squeezed his hand. “Fools. Pulling out the diamond to get to the gold ring.”

“You’d call me a diamond?”

I smiled. “In value? Perhaps. But... hmm. Diamonds are colourless, hard, brittle. That doesn’t sound right for you at all. No, I think I’d call you an opal.”

“Ouch. That one hits hard. I’m an omen of bad luck? Fitting, I suppose – but still. Ouch.”

“What? Gods, no. Is that how your people think of opals? As bad luck stones?”

“I think they’re supposed to be good for carrying curses. Deathstones, and the like.”

“Huh. I hadn’t heard that. No, rock gnomes mine a lot of gems for sale – but we mine opals for ourselves. We value them above all others. Have you ever looked at one? They have hidden depths and patterns. You can think you know a stone, only to pick it up one day in a certain light and see a fleck or glimmer of colour you’ve never seen before. And they’re so beautiful. I love the black opals – they’re dark, with flashes of green or red or yellow. Some call the dark ones with red flashes fire opals, for the way they... flash like sparks, I suppose. That’s you. A fire opal. Beautiful, with hidden depths, very worth getting to know. The fire opal of my heart.”

I looked up at Wyll, and he was smiling shyly.

“That has to be one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said to me,” he said.

“Like I said: fools. There are so many nice things to be said about you.”

The zoo was new since I last visited, and it was... odd. These animals in tiny cages were wild and dangerous – why were they in the middle of the city? But every other visitor was treating them like a fun spectacle, so maybe I was just too attuned to danger.

Nearby was a little stage with vines and flowers all around. It looked – and smelt – far more inviting than the troublesome zoo. A little like a cross between a druid’s grove and a wood nymph’s bower. “Do you know what that is?” I asked. “I don’t remember it, but it doesn’t look like the sort of attraction I’d have been interested in when I was younger.”

“Mmm... no idea. Let’s look.”

The proprietor welcomed us. She seemed dreamy – as though she was in a trance of some sort. Drugged? No, her eyes were clear and focused – just her movements and voice were slow and a little dislocated from the bustle around us.

“Ahhh... you have much pain. But also devotion, blazing fiercely. You’re in love.” she said to me.

I lifted Wyll’s hand and planted a light kiss on it. “I am,” I answered with a smile.

“Ah, and wise to admit to it,” she said as if in a dream. “Vulnerability is your armour; truth your sword; trust your shield. Come; test your love. I can tell you if your love is eternal, or

doomed.”

I looked at Wyll and quirked an eyebrow. “Sounds like it might be fun?”

He smiled slightly. “I’m game.”

I paid our fee, and suddenly we were – elsewhere, a forest glade, each at a different end of a log bridge over a stream. Wyll and I went on guard. “This is all part of the magic of the test,” Zethino said. “Don’t worry, ‘tis merely a potent illusion. All is well. Now. Stand at ease. I shall ask three questions of each of you.”

We relaxed, glancing at each other.

“Ahh. Wyll. A courageous heart tormented by the infernal. Dash: in his darkest hour, what would make him smile?”

I looked at Wyll, and a fond smile found its way onto my face. “At the risk of sounding self-absorbed: thinking about our first kiss on the beach, at the druid grove party.”

Wyll smiled, more genuinely this time. “Indeed. You were a light in the darkness, in more ways than one. Still are, in fact.”

My feet took an involuntary step towards him.

“Ahh, Dash. A gentle heart filled with secret sorrow. Wyll: how does Dash find comfort when life brings pain?”

Wyll looked at me with love and nostalgia in his face. “In my arms,” he said.

My nose tingled with the start of tears. “And a wonderful comfort they are,” I said softly.

Wyll took a step towards me.

“Dash. Who does the Blade of Frontiers most admire?”

Well, that was an easy one. “His father, Duke Ravengard,” I said.

Wyll nodded, sober. “He’s a great man, and a true one. And his focus has always been on serving the people of Baldur’s Gate. There’s truly no one better.”

I took another step towards him.

“Wyll. What does Dash hate to do?”

Wyll’s eyes narrowed in thought. “Judge someone before they have a chance to prove themselves,” he said slowly.

I smiled. “It’s true.”

Wyll took another step towards me.

“You have found comfort and inspiration in each other. Your bond grows brighter. But a strong bond is one that can endure the dark recesses of the heart. Dash. What is Wyll’s biggest regret?”

I closed my eyes. Talk about digging up old wounds. “Leaving his father and his city behind,” I said quietly.

“True,” Wyll said with a sigh. “I often think I could have done things so differently. Convinced him. Made him understand. Maybe I would have been with him when he was taken. Maybe I could have stopped it. Saved him.”

I took another step. We were within arm’s length of each other now.

“Wyll: What does Dash most fear?”

Wyll frowned. “Being hurt by someone he loves,” he said.

My eyes widened. I didn't think I'd ever explicitly said that to him. “It’s true. How do you see me so clearly?”

Wyll took a step towards me, then knelt and enfolded me in his arms. “Dearest one, all I had to do was open my eyes.”

“Oh, your bond is true,” Zethino said. “Two hearts beat, but one rhythm is all that is heard.”

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around Wyll’s shoulders, just enjoying the feeling of being loved and known. When I opened my eyes, we were back in the circus.

“Well,” Wyll said. “That was certainly worth the money to boost the mood!” He kissed my cheek and drew away, standing but taking my hand again. “Thank you for suggesting that, dear. I feel warm and loved.”

“I’m glad,” I said, stroking his thumb with mine. “Is that Dribbles?”

Archduke Gortash

We sat around the fire in camp in Rivington, staring at an invitation to Gortash's inauguration.

"Right," I said. "How are we going to handle Gortash?"

"Bust into his inauguration and blow him to smithereens?" Karlach asked. "Except I want the final blow on that smarmy git. I want to smoosh his face into the floor all by myself. Wyll, you can help though, I guess, given everything that he's done to your dad," she said in an aside to Wyll.

I repressed a chuckle. It would probably be funny to the two of them in the future – but a long time in the future, I suspected.

"If the grand duke's there..." I started.

"We can't go in with spells blazing," Wyll said. "My father's tadpole-controlled. He won't understand. God knows what they'd make him do. They could blow him up on the spot. Make him attack us."

"Shit," Astarion said. "So you think we can't attack because of hero boy's daddy. What *can* we do? Go watch Gortash become archduke and applaud politely as the Steel Watch haul us away to prison?"

"Huh," Wyll said. "I just realised something. I think I know a way out of Wyrms' Rock prison."

"You what?" Karlach asked.

"When I was a boy, I used to go fishing from the cliffs around there. My father hated it. I'd get a tongue-lashing every time he caught me. But once, I found this crevice in the wall of Wyrms' Rock, behind a heap of berry bushes. No idea what I was doing there – probably hiding from guards my father sent to find me. Anyway, I snuck through, and found myself in the storeroom of the prison."

I blinked. Being able to get out of the city's most formidable prison would be a handy advantage if we were about to piss off the soon-to-be archduke.

"And the big guy comes through with the goods!" Karlach crowed. "If that's still there... all we have to do is get out of our cells. Maybe take out a few guards."

"Let's find out," I said. "If it is, maybe we can leave a few supplies nearby, just in case."

"That's assuming Gortash even arrests us," Wyll said. "He might just kill us on the spot."

“True,” I said. “But at that point, we’ll just have to fight back, I suppose. We could try knocking out your father and bringing him back here. Perhaps our dream visitor could extend his protection to him and sever the connection to the Absolute.”

“And if he can’t, or won’t?” Wyll asked.

I sighed. “I have no idea. Anyone?”

“I suppose we could charm him, for a while at least,” Karlach said, looking dubious. “Or just find somewhere to stash him until we figure out how to turn him back to us.”

Wyll frowned.

“We’ll figure something out, love, if it comes to that,” I said gently. “We won’t just abandon him. But we need to be smart about this.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “I *know*. I just don’t like it. Any of it.”

“We need to take Gale with us,” Wyll said.

“Why Gale?” I asked, frowning.

“You’ll see,” he said with a grin. “I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“You seem in unusually good spirits,” I said, putting a hand on his arm. “You seemed more upset earlier.”

“We’re *doing* something,” he said, shrugging. “I need to act, Dash. All this waiting around and thinking about what might happen – it’s frustrating. Doing something feels as though we’re finally making progress.”

I wrinkled my nose. *Doing something* and *running headlong into danger* seemed too closely aligned for my liking, but I could understand the impulse.

We stood on the balcony of an unremarkable building, overlooking a very nice vista... and Wyrms’ Rock.

“Gale, would you please cast Feather Fall?” Wyll asked.

Gale looked around – at the guards standing at the nearby checkpoint, and down at the steep drop from the balcony. “You’re sure this is a good idea?” he asked, sounding dubious.

“Trust me,” Wyll said with a smile.

Gale shrugged and cast the spell. I shivered as a feeling of lightness tingled through me. Then Wyll just... jumped. Out into space, then landed on the other side of the cliff face, on the Wyrms’ Rock side. Ahhh. I could understand what he had in mind now. I took a deep breath

and followed. Funny that I could jump into a deep dark hole with nary a thought, but jumping from a great height in broad daylight gave me the jitters.

“My old fishing spot,” Wyll said as Gale and Astarion landed. “Father used to hate me coming here. I sort of see his point now. But back then... I loved it. Never caught anything, except a cold. I didn’t care.”

I smiled at him. “Nice to know your fishing has improved, love.”

Wyll chuckled. “Come on, this way.” He led us around the base of the looming stone fortress, and through a large patch of berry bushes. “Oof. No one’s cut these back for years. I hope there’s something to find, or we’re going to be scratched half to death for nothing.”

We pushed through carefully, trying to avoid leaving a trail. Sure enough, hidden by bushes, there was a wide crack in the wall. Inside was a rough basement-style area... and a boarded-up doorway. Astarion crept over to the old doorway and listened, ear against the boards. He nodded and glided back over to us.

“Voices on the other side,” he said quietly. “Looks like devil man’s intel is good. Interesting tidbit, though: I heard someone say *It could be worse; she could be down in the Iron Throne*. Wasn’t that Sarevok’s stronghold, back in the day?”

I frowned. Why would they be talking about the Iron Throne? It had been sunk in the depths of the Bay of Balduran for a century. Unless Gortash was exploring it for some reason. A relic of power left in the underwater stronghold, perhaps? What could be worth sending divers into the deep?

I shook off my musings. We needed to get out, not sit around thinking about old history lessons. “Right. We leave the supplies here, I guess,” I said. They weren’t much – spare armour and weapons for four people, lockpicks, and a bit of cash. Just enough to keep us going in case everything we carried was confiscated, and we had to start from scratch. Nothing we couldn’t survive without.

We were walking back to camp when Wyll stopped dead in his tracks. A man was staring at him – not an unusual occurrence. But Wyll was staring back.

“Dillon,” he said.

“It can’t be. Wyll Ravengard?”

Wyll nodded. “Somewhat changed since we last met.”

“Gods. What did you *do* ? I knew your father exiled you from the city – I never dreamed you’d turn to the hells in retribution. Your poor father; are you the reason he went into hiding?”

Wyll’s mouth hardened. “Never, Dillon. I might have done some incomprehensible things – but I’d never harm this city or my father.”

“That would be easier to believe if you weren’t out parading through the streets in devil form, scaring all the citizens, with a gang of cheap thugs backing you up.”

“Excuse me? *Thugs* ? Worse, *cheap* ?” Astarion spluttered. “How dare you, you upstart little pipsqueak!”

“*I* am a patriar of this fine city,” the man said, drawing himself up. “Wyll, for the sake of our old friendship – please, leave our citizens alone. Take your devils and your goons out of our fine city. Go befoul some other place.”

“Say the word,” Astarion muttered to Wyll. “I’ll poke him full of holes myself, and we’ll see how high and mighty he is then.”

“Stand down,” Wyll murmured. “Dillon,” he said more loudly, “this city is in danger. My father is in danger. I came to help; not to harm. Can’t you see your old friend in me, though my outsides have changed?”

The man shook his head. “Leave, Wyll. Baldur’s Gate is no place for the likes of you.” He sneered at the rest of us and strode away.

“Shit,” Wyll swore, his expression tormented. “That’s torn it. Let’s get back to camp. Might be an idea to lay low tonight.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked, sitting down next to him.

“Fragile, I think would be the best word. Angry. Sad. Despairing. Even people I once cared for – people I thought cared for me – think the worst of me, Dash. How can I ever be the person I want to be with this... reputation... hanging over my head?” He was huddled in on himself, like some vital part of himself was injured and needed protection.

“What can I do to help?” I asked, putting a hand on his arm.

He turned his head and smiled a little at me.

“Having you touch me helps, dearest,” he said. “Can we find somewhere a little more private?”

A little more private also meant *cold*, of course, so I hunted up the usual pillows, bedrolls, and blankets, and we set up a cosy nest in the old chapel next to the camp area. I laid down and held out an arm to Wyll. He joined me under the blankets, curling himself around me.

“Mmm...” he said. “Why does just touching you make me feel better?” His shoulders relaxed, and his face... didn’t clear, exactly, but he looked less brittle and closed-off.

“You already know you have the same effect on me,” I said, looking up at him with fond eyes. “Gods, Wyll. Just being with you makes me happy.”

A shy smile flitted across his face. I smiled to see it, remembering his bashfulness after I kissed him for the first time.

“What?” he asked.

“Just remembering the look on your face the first time I kissed you,” I said, reaching up to stroke his cheek. “You were so flustered. It was the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I always pride myself on my poise in difficult situations. You kiss me, and I go completely to pieces,” he said, voice warm. “You must have thought me such a fool.”

I laughed and rubbed my cheek against his shoulder. “Love, I was captivated. I think you underestimate the value of losing your composure once in a while.”

He kissed me on the forehead and tightened his arms around me, in silence.

“Tell me about Dillon,” I said.

He sighed. “I’m trying not to think about him,” he said.

“I know. But that’s hardly going to help you excise his words from your heart.”

“Ouch! But true, nonetheless. I know you’re right. Hells. Dillon... we were friends. From an early age. Our fathers were dukes... we shared tutors. Went to the same parties, the same balls. When we were older... well, feelings stirred. I kissed him. We... lay together, and then he told me that he needed to aim higher in life than the son of a blacksmith.”

I sucked in a breath. “That’s... brutal,” I said softly. “My love...”

“Well, he was right. He needed to marry to cement a trade alliance, not moon over someone. I didn’t want to follow in his footsteps, but I could hardly fault his logic.”

“Hmm. I could definitely fault his timing,” I said, scowling.

“Fierce protector of my heart,” Wyll said, the corner of his mouth lifting. “You’d do battle with any who hurt me, wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely,” I said, tracing that almost-smile with gentle fingers. “I don’t take your love lightly, beloved. It’s my greatest treasure.”

He closed his eyes. “Hells. Balm to a wounded spirit. Dearest, I can’t stay lost in self-loathing when you look at me that way.”

“Good,” I said, smiling. “Tell me more, love.”

“Not much more to tell, I suppose. We stayed friends... a year later, my father left on a trip, and I pacted myself to Mizora. I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye. I just... left.”

“That’s sad.”

“And now... he thinks me a monster. Cares nothing for the friendship we once shared.”

“Or perhaps thinks it best to distance himself from the disgraced son of Ravengard and the clear enemy of Gortash?”

“Hmm. You mean it was all a show? That seems overly cruel.”

“You know the man better than I,” I said. “It... didn’t seem outside the realm of possibility, to me.”

Wyll just sighed.

The next morning, tension woke us all nice and early. I had company while I made breakfast, and Wyll joined me for my morning meditation. I could feel him almost vibrating with impatience, but breathed through it to ignore him as best I could. I needed focus today.

When I was done, I opened my eyes and reached out to Wyll. He rested his forehead on my shoulder, and I stroked his back slowly.

“How are you feeling, love?” I asked.

“Stressed. Worried. Fearful. I don’t know what I’m going to find in that audience hall, Dash. I just know... I’m probably going to hate it.”

I nodded, cheek rubbing against one of his horns. “You’re right. It’s probably going to be a pretty horrible day. I’m sorry, love. Especially if I have to bargain with him. It’s... going to be tough for you, but...”

“... you need me to shut up and let you work?” he asked, drawing back.

“You know I’m usually open to feedback,” I said, trying to feel my way through the difficult conversation. “But this... it’s going to be a storm of emotions at best. You might thoroughly dislike me before the day’s out.”

He took a deep breath. “As long as we keep my father alive and well,” he said. “I can’t lose sight of that. Just... please don’t get him killed. I couldn’t live with myself.”

I nodded. “I’ll do my best, love. You know that.”

He stood to leave, and I sighed. A kiss would have been nice. Oh well – tensions were high. Maybe afterwards. A big maybe.

After breakfast, I sought out Halsin.

“What do you need?” the big elf asked.

“Someone calm who can physically wrangle two angry, emotional people,” I said quietly. “Halsin... I need to take Karlach and Wyll to this inauguration. Whatever happens, they need to see it firsthand. But I can’t have either of them running off and doing something ill-advised because emotions are running high and they’re not thinking clearly. This whole thing is a smokepowder barrel ready to explode. And they’re the sparks.”

“And you think they might do something?” he asked. “They both seem reasonable and rational people.”

I sighed. “They are. But... this situation would drive far calmer people to rash acts.”

He nodded. “You want me to come, and sit on them if need be.”

“Exactly. Will you?”

“Gladly. For your sake, but also for theirs.”

“Thank you,” I said, holding out my arms. He knelt and carefully enfolded me in a hug. I wrapped my arms around his chest, rested my head on his shoulder, and relaxed for the first time in a day. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“My pleasure,” he said, rumbling a laugh. “Shall we go soon?”

I nodded. “Let me just round up Wyll and Karlach, and we’ll be on our way.”

We arrived at the inauguration a little late – Gortash was in the middle of a speech. I’d planned to slip in discreetly and stand near the back, complete lack of view be damned, but Gortash paused his speech the moment he saw us.

“Ahhh!” he said. “Wyll Ravengard, the grand duke’s son, come to watch his father pass the flame to a new incumbent! Wyll. Your support, as always, is greatly appreciated.”

Wyll tensed beside me, but said nothing, just nodded stiffly.

“Welcome, slayers of Ketheric Thorm, general of the army threatening our beloved city,” Gortash continued. “Thank you for blessing this inauguration with your august presences.”

A guard led us to places at the very front, where no one could help but notice that the son of the incumbent grand duke was observing – and presumably approving.

I bit my tongue, recognising exactly what Gortash was doing – grandstanding to win popularity points with the audience of patriars and nobles. And using us to do so.

Karlach growled on my other side. “Fucking *dickhead*,” she whispered. “Give me one good reason not to rip his head from his body and piss down his neck *right now* !”

“Wyll’s dad,” I whispered back, seeing the man walk out onto the platform. Halsin put a hand on her shoulder, and I saw him wince. She must be running hot today. That wasn’t a good sign. “Keep it together, folks. Please.”

“Father,” Wyll whispered, and reached for my hand. I grasped his, squeezing it with what I hoped felt like reassurance. “Gods, what have they *done* to him?”

The man walked like an automaton, stiff and the smallest bit jerky. Did that mean he was fighting the influence of the parasite? Impressive, if so – I hadn’t seen anyone manage that

feat yet. He led Gortash through the inauguration, handing over his own authority – and more besides. I carefully relaxed my jaw, to stop grinding my teeth. Watching this man grab near-ultimate power in what had been a partial democracy was infuriating and demoralising both. This *archduke* appointment was unprecedented – dukes had always been elected by their peers; grand dukes elected by the patriars. This went against everything Balduran had tried to instil in the city.

Then it was finally over, and Gortash motioned to us to approach. The patriars dispersed. “We have much to discuss,” he said.

“Gortash,” Karlach said, venom dripping from the word. “How fucking dare you.”

“Ahh, Karlach,” he said. “How very lovely to see you again. I thought you had moved away for good.”

“You *sold* me, you utter piece of shit,” she hissed. “How *dare* you stand there and greet me as though it’s been a couple of months!”

“Goodness. Such a fuss to be raising,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “And on such an auspicious day!”

Karlach growled, and again Halsin put a hand on her shoulder. He whispered something in her ear, and she subsided. Somewhat. Thank all the gods I’d thought to bring him. Astarion probably would have cheered her onwards. Possibly Gale would have, too.

“My father,” Wyll said. “What have you *done* to him?”

“He’s fine,” Gortash said, flipping a hand dismissively. “Look. He’s so happy, basking in the warm glow of the Absolute.”

I could see Wyll tensing to attack beside me, and I grabbed his arm. He didn’t relax – but he didn’t try to strike Gortash down where he stood, either.

Gortash proposed an alliance, and I frowned, confused.

“Look. Orin is... an unpredictable ally. She is chaos incarnate. And she’s decided that you and I should die. As you might imagine, I find this idea rather distasteful. However – if you and I worked together, we could take her out of the equation. That could only benefit the people of this fine city. We don’t need her attacking people willy-nilly. I want to *protect* Baldur’s Gate. She knows only death and destruction.”

“And what assurance have we that you’d honour your agreement?” I asked, deeply sceptical.

Wyll hissed in taking a breath, and I groaned inwardly. He was close to an eruption. *Shit*.

“The same as I have with Orin now,” Gortash said. “A blood oath, binding to all. Precluding any violence to each other. I will not be able to attack you, or bring you any harm whatsoever.”

“And in return?” I asked.

“In return... you assist me in controlling the netherbrain,” he said. “An illithid empire rising in Faerun is not desirable.”

“You might have thought of that before *enslaving an elder brain!*” Karlach said.

I sighed. I didn’t want to make an alliance with this slimeball; but I didn’t want to antagonise him, either. Both options were terrible. “I’ll consider it,” I told him. “I’m not a dictator. I need to talk to my team.”

“And two of them are in favour of removing me from existence, I see,” he said. “Wyll. It’s been an age since you saw your father. Why don’t you catch up? I’ll be in my office when you’ve had a chance to think. Bring Orin’s netherstone.”

He stalked away, and I breathed a sigh of relief. No deaths so far – a good start. But Wyll was walking towards his father, the ex-grand duke. At least, I assumed Gortash’s ascension was a demotion for Ulder Ravengard. Come to think of it, I really didn’t know as much as I ought about the governance of Baldur’s Gate. I hurried to catch up. This could turn messy fast, like the rest of the day.

“Father,” Wyll was saying, his voice anguished.

“My boy!” the duke said, beaming. “Archduke Gortash told me you would come to me. And look – here you are, bathing in the light of the Absolute, just as he said.”

“I’ve come to help you,” he said. “Councillor Florrick sent us. Father, we can leave now and _”

“Florrick? The traitor got in your ear, did she? Worry not – she will die soon; a death befitting her betrayal.”

“Shit,” Karlach muttered behind me.

“Come, son,” the duke said. “Come and celebrate the dawning of a new age – one in which the Absolute brings peace and prosperity to all!”

I felt the artefact in my pocket stir, and the duke’s face showed confusion for the first time.

“Father, they’ve mind-controlled you,” Wyll said urgently. “Dash, help him!”

“Ahh. I’d hoped you had come home to me,” the duke said sadly. “But you – wait. Wyll?” His eyes cleared, and he stared at Wyll. “What... what’s happening?”

“Father, I’m here for you,” Wyll said, taking his father’s hand. “I’ll help you somehow, I promise. Come with us.”

The man’s eyes glazed over again. “I’m content here,” he said. “Shed this nonsense. Join me in the divine light of the Absolute, son. Let us be a family again.”

Wyll sobbed. Guards walked up, and the duke followed them, away to Gortash’s chambers.

I laid a hand on Wyl's arm. "What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Kill everyone here and kidnap my father," he muttered savagely. "That's what I want. But we have to go. You were right. This is too risky."

I sighed and led him away.

Bitch queens of sea and land

“Right,” I said back at camp. “Gortash is archduke. That gives him a lot more control over the city – and a lot more power to work against us. We’ll need to act fast if we want to take him down.”

“Do we want to chase up the underwater lair?” Gale asked. “Who would know?”

“The Sharrans might,” Shadowheart said slowly.

“Hmm. I’d prefer not to try relying on the people hunting you to give us accurate information. Any other ideas?”

“Temple of Umberlee?” Gale suggested. “If anyone knows about underwater installations, surely they would. Don’t their priestesses swim in the harbour?”

“Two suggestions of evil goddess worshippers,” Wyll said. “This seems like a bad omen.”

I squeezed his hand gently.

“On the bright side, Umberlee probably doesn’t have anything against us, yet.”

“Hmm. She doesn’t like Selune, so maybe keep Shadowheart away just in case,” Gale said, thoughtful. “Who else? Umberlee doesn’t have any major issues with Lathander or Mystra, that I’m aware of? Besides, I’m not exactly in Mystra’s good graces – she might like me.”

“You *are* charming when you want to be,” Shadowheart said, looking sidelong at him. “Goddess charming a specialty, I’m sure.”

Gale made a face.

“Perhaps don’t take Halsin or Jaheira,” I said. “Druids might be a sore point too. So me, Gale, Wyll... maybe Astarion?”

“If Gale’s charm doesn’t work, Astarion’s should,” Shadowheart pointed out.

“Thanks heaps, Shadowheart. Lovely to know that I’m not at all charming,” I said, grinning at her. Wyll chuckled for the first time that afternoon.

“You and Wyll are a little too... bonded... to be charming,” Shadowheart said. “Don’t take it badly. The other boys just get more practice at luring people into falling for them.”

Gale snorted. “My charms seem sadly lacking lately, if you look at the evidence.”

“Hey, don’t blame me for your obliviousness,” she shot back.

“Ooh! Pot and kettle!” Gale exclaimed. “I’m not the one with a hot tiefling eyeing me during off hours.”

Shadowheart blushed and fell silent.

Umberlee's servants were in the middle of a funeral when we arrived at the temple.

"This seems an inauspicious time," Gale murmured. "Perhaps we come back later?"

"Join us," a priestess said. "This is a joyful occasion. One of our own has joined our mistress of the sea. Praise be!"

I frowned, but stood near the back of the crowd to observe the rite. It was simple enough; some singing over the body, ritual anointing with sea water and oils, and wrapping it in sailcloth.

"What happens now?" Wyll asked me quietly.

"Cremation and ashes returned to the sea, from memory," I whispered.

The rite ended, and the priestess who welcomed us approached. "Welcome! We don't see strangers very often, but the lady of the sea welcomes all who wish to pay homage to her or request her favour."

"Thank you!" I said. "We wanted to talk to someone – preferably the high priestess, if she's free?"

"Hmm. You look like adventurers," she said, eyeing our gear. "There's something you might be able to help with. If you're willing, she might grant you an audience."

So we walked into the high priestess's office, and she presented their problem. Something was trespassing in Umberlee's domain, polluting it. A machine of some sort, leaking oil into the water of the harbour, disturbing the fish and sahuagin. They suspected it of hitting and killing the priestess whose funeral we'd just attended.

"Will you help?" she asked. "Umberlee's favour is not to be underestimated."

Wyll snorted behind me, and I saw out of the corner of my eye that Gale was laying a hand on his arm. Good – I was finding all the babysitting tiring, regardless of its necessity.

"We certainly can try," I said carefully. "It sounds as though your problem and ours might overlap."

"Oh?" she said, raising an elegant eyebrow.

"We're seeking information about an underwater installation," I said. "It sounds as though it might be where this machine is going."

"You think the Iron Throne has been recommissioned?" she asked. "Well. It would explain a few things. The sahuagin driven mad and up onto land. The disappearance of oyster divers who go too far out into the harbour. You might be right. Unfortunately."

I felt my heart sink. If this woman was allied with Gortash, I might have just overplayed our hand badly. “Unfortunately?” I asked.

“The Iron Throne was filled with unnatural magic,” she said, looking thoughtful. “Even a century later, it would not be a place to go lightly. Though... to tweak Gortash’s tail, if he’s caused the deaths of our own, and trespassed on our lady’s domain...”

“Help in traversing your lady’s realm would be a benefit to us both, it seems,” I said. If I were still a praying man, I would have prayed for divine assistance in carrying my argument at this point.

“Well put,” she said. “I think we might do something of the sort. If you can find out where this machine lives, and who controls it. And destroy them.”

“Right,” Gale said once we were free of the temple. “All we need to do is find some sort of underwater machine, somewhere in Baldur’s Gate.”

“Oh, easy!” Astarion said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “And then let’s get coffee and watch a show!”

I laughed.

“Hang on,” Gale said, pulling a pamphlet from his pocket. “I picked this up somewhere. Rebel propaganda. It gives a summary of Gortash’s early life as an arms dealer, and... yes! Here we go. Gortash Flymm. That was his name. According to this random piece of paper with *zero* peer review, at least.”

“I’ve seen that name somewhere,” Wyll said slowly. “Astarion, you’ve been around the Lower City much more recently than I – do you remember seeing that name?”

“The shops are usually closed when I’m out and about, dearie,” Astarion said. “But... shops. Maybe it’s a shop? Rings a bell of some sort.”

Wyll nodded. “Could be.”

“Let’s go shopping!” Gale said, perking up.

We searched half the lower city before we found the right shop. A shabby, small, two-storey affair, it looked like it sold to the poorer people of the area.

I walked in, and my tadpole tingled. What? A woman stood in the centre of the shop; a man was working on a shoe at a bench, sewing carefully.

“How can I help you?” the woman said. Her face smiled, but her eyes were vacant.

“I’d like to see your wares,” I said, mentally reaching out to her to test for a mind link.

Her eyes widened suddenly.

Oh gods. You can hear me. You can hear the real me. HELP ME.

What did Gortash do to you? I asked.

I don't know. That worthless son of ours. Selling him to a warlock was the best thing we ever did for him.

“What’s happening?” Astarion asked, shifting impatiently.

“Shhhh,” Wyll said. “They’re... talking.”

I blinked as I tried to absorb this information. *You SOLD your son?*

You don't understand, she thought irritably. He was a horrible little child. Always wanting. Always taking. Never giving. So much trouble he gave us. No love. He was incapable of the finer feelings. Giving him over to the warlock was a blessing. And it paid off our debt; paid for this shop. A better life for all of us.

Except the son you sold and abandoned, of course, I couldn't help but think. That was... monstrous.

Pfft. You would have done the same, or suffered for it, she thought. He would have dragged us down into poverty, that child. The warlock was the best thing to ever happen to him. Look at him now! And he has the gall to be angry at us!

I clenched my jaw. This mind link felt like wading through raw sewerage.

We need information, I thought. I assume you don't mind betraying your dear son a little more?

We know nothing of his operations, she thought, her mind dulling. He tells us nothing. He never did. Spent all his time at that wretched cargo warehouse, instead of helping us in the shop. I wouldn't have minded if he'd shared the wealth with us. But no – he said we had already received all the help from him that we were going to get. Ungrateful little runt.

Thanks, I guess, I thought. We need to go.

Wait! she thought, clutching at my sleeve. *Help us! Free us from this torment!*

“The only way I can free you,” I said out loud, so that my companions had an idea what was going on, “is to kill you. That thing in your brain? It can’t be removed. It can only turn you into a mindflayer.”

There must be another way, she begged. You're infected. You're not controlled as we are. Why can't you help us?

“Because we’re just... different,” I said, finding myself wanting to be gentle despite my horror at her actions – and her attitude towards them. “I can give you mercy; that’s all I can offer.”

Her face twisted, and she and the man attacked in unison.

“Bloody hell,” Astarion said, knifing the man. “What the hells is going on?”

The man dropped to the floor, and I hit the woman hard in the throat, feeling a crunch. She gasped and fell to the floor, and Astarion finished her off.

“Why,” he demanded, “are we killing shopkeepers? Not that I mind, you know, but it’s a little outside this group’s usual modus operandi. If we have new rules that allow indiscriminate killing, I’d rather like to know about them.”

“They were infected,” I said, pointing to the tadpoles crawling out of their ears. “Let’s grab those, by the way. Could be useful.”

I related the story of Gortash’s childhood as we explored upstairs. Old mementoes of Gortash’s early life, mostly, and a few newspaper articles about – bingo. Flymm's Cargo. Obvious name, really. We probably didn’t need to come here to figure *that* out.

“So Gortash’s parents sold him to a mysterious warlock and just abandoned him without a second thought?” Wyll asked. “I never thought I’d find myself having a smidge of sympathy for the man, but that seems a horrible childhood.”

“Oh boo hoo,” Astarion said. “So he has a tragic history. Join the club! Look at us. Sex slave vampire spawn, ex-whore gnome, devil’s plaything, and a... I don’t know how to classify Gale, but *tragedy* certainly fits.”

“Thanks,” Gale said drily.

“So, Flymm's Cargo?” I asked.

“Ugh. Can we *rest* any time soon?” Astarion asked.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s go check it out quickly; see if we can find any leads. Then back to camp for the night. Fair?”

Astarion rolled his eyes, but followed as I walked out, locking the door behind us, leaving the corpses where they were. With Orin running riot in the city, two more dead bodies probably wouldn’t get much attention.

“If it’s cargo, it’ll be by the docks,” Gale said. “Which *would* be an ideal place for some sort of submersible vehicle, wouldn’t it?”

I nodded.

Sure enough, we found a basement entrance to an underground facility in Flymm’s Cargo, and in it, a strange vehicle that was clearly designed for underwater travel.

“Bingo,” I said quietly. “And the driver is probably responsible for hitting that priestess. If we confront him now, we risk tipping off Gortash that we’re sniffing around.”

“Murdering his parents might have already given that impression,” Astarion pointed out.

“I don’t think he visits daily for tea and cake,” Wyll said.

We snuck out of the facility, and headed back to camp. Where, of course, all hell broke loose. Well, a very small part of it, anyway.

Watery deaths imminent?

Back in camp, Mizora appeared. My jaw clenched involuntarily. This devil was really starting to get on my nerves.

“Wyll!” she said cheerfully, and my heart sank. She had something he wanted. She looked... triumphant. *Fuck* .

“What do you want, Mizora?” Wyll asked, chin up. He was on edge – because of what he’d just witnessed, but possibly also because he sensed the same triumph I did.

“Now, now, pet,” she crooned. “You’re still under contract, remember? So play nice. Especially since I have something nice to offer you.”

“I don’t want it,” Wyll retorted.

Two lesser cambions appeared in circles of hellfire. “Witnesses,” Mizora said, waving an airy arm at them. “Here’s what I’m offering. I know where Gortash is keeping your father, Duke Ulder Ravengard – and I can get him out. Your father’s life for a renewed contract, Wyll. Or – you can let him die, and I end the contract now.”

Wyll’s face twisted in anguish.

“He needs time to think,” I said, stepping in.

“No time. His father could die while Wyll is thinking over the value of a life. I need a decision, Wyll – and I need it *now* .”

He looked up at me, torn with indecision and heartbreak.

“You can’t enter another contract. You *can’t* sell your soul again, Wyll. Not even for your father,” I said. “It’s not... there’s no balance there. *Your father wouldn’t thank you for it.* ”

He closed his eyes.

“Oh, does the lover want to kill off daddy? Does he think that will make pup love him more?” Mizora crooned.

“Wyll,” I said urgently. “You deserve your freedom. You’re not 17. You’re not alone. And you’re not facing the deaths of thousands if you say no.”

“It’s my *father* !”

“Do you serve your father, or the people of the Sword Coast?”

Wyll stared at me with an angry sneer. “They need Duke Ravengard!”

“No, they need a strong, courageous leader. One who can think. And do. You saw your father last time we spoke to him. He was a puppet. His mind might never recover. And what will the Sword Coast do then, with your father a babbling fool and you in service to Mizora?”

“I can still serve it under pact to Mizora.”

“With her pulling you away to attend to her pet projects whenever she pleases?”

Wyll stiffened. I’d clearly hit on some historical sore point.

“Wyll... please.”

Wyll scowled and nodded.

“Say it,” Mizora whispered, ecstatic.

“Don’t help us get my father out,” Wyll said, hoarse. “No new contract, Mizora.”

“Agreed and witnessed,” Mizora purred. “My my. Pup’s all grown up. What an excellent watchdog you’ll make for the city. Utterly unprepared, of course. Totally hopeless with politics. I’m sure it will all be *fine*, though. By the way – you’ll keep your powers until this wretched Absolute business is dealt with. I want payback against those scum. Once it’s done – we’re *done*.”

Mizora and her witnessed disappeared, and Wyll fell to his knees and sobbed. I knelt beside him and touched his arm, but he threw my hand off.

“Don’t *touch* me! You just killed my father. He’s dead, and you just stood there and talked me into letting him die. I can’t – I can’t even look at you. I can’t *ever* forgive you for that.”

I closed my eyes as my heart broke into shards. There was brutal truth in his words. He would never forget or forgive me urging him to take freedom over his father, no matter how logical, no matter how right I was. Pain washed through me. Should I have let him repeat the youthful deed that had shaped his adult life? And for what? The life of a man who Mizora would probably allow to die not long afterwards, just for kicks? Or save as a mindless slave?

Hang on. *Devils don’t lie in contracts, but they rarely tell the whole truth.*

“FUCK,” I swore. “Gale. Astarion. What did we learn about the Iron Throne?”

“It’s an underwater enclave where Gortash seems to be keeping... someone,” Gale said, “But I – OH.”

Wyll didn’t seem to have heard a word.

“What do we think the chances are that Gortash moved the duke to the Iron Throne to keep him out of harm’s way, once he realised Wyll’s in town?”

“And that incredibly sexy devil just informed us that he’s still alive,” Astarion put in.

“And it’s possible to rescue him,” Gale crowed.

“What?” Wyll said, raising his head and staring at us. Tears streaked down one side of his face.

“I know you’re very, understandably, angry with me,” I said, gently. “And this day has been a royal shit-show so far. But can we put this aside and make a long-odds, probably-gonna-die attempt to find your father and pull him out before Gortash has him killed? *Now*?”

Wyll’s jaw firmed, and he pulled in a shaky breath. I saw the Blade of Frontiers persona settle over him. “Let’s do this,” he said grimly. “There’ll be plenty of time for grieving if we fail. But *we can’t fail* .”

We ran from camp to Flymm’s Cargo, and downstairs. No creeping through shadows this time – we needed speed, not stealth. I approached the dwarf kneeling near the craft, adjusting something with a small screwdriver.

“New inspector,” I said. “What’s the status – she seaworthy?”

He nodded and stood up. “Another one? Gortash change inspectors more often than I change underpants. Alright – lemme see. She’s fine – I just had to check a few points. Hit one of those blasted Bitch Queen worshippers the other day. They will *not* stop swanning about that bloody harbour. I didn’t even swerve this time, I was so irritated. Should’ve. Could’ve done some damage to the craft.”

I exchanged glances with the rest of my party. This was the person Umberlee’s high priestess was after, alright.

“Hmm. You realise Umberlee’s out for blood, right?” I asked.

“What are you *doing*?” Wyll muttered to me. I stepped backward to step on his foot.

“Ahh, those priestesses are toothless on land. Unless...” he eyed us thoughtfully. “They sent you after me, didn’t they? Shit.” He charged Astarion, who might have looked like the weakest link.

Astarion sliced him a couple of times, and I punched him hard in the throat. Gale finished him with electricity, and we stood over the dead body of the person in charge of the underwater vessel.

“Fuck!” Wyll yelled. “What have you *done*? How do we drive this thing now?” His face was twisted, jaw set. He was close to blowing. *Shit*. I needed everyone focused.

“Hey,” I said. “Rock gnome, remember? We might not be as focused on world-ending inventions as the deep gnomes, but I’ve never met a piece of machinery that I can’t get along with. It’ll be fine. Besides, he was clearly a terrible driver.”

Wyll glared at me, face hard. “You better be right.”

“Deep breaths all round, I think,” Gale said.

Wyll turned the glare onto him. “Fuck *off*.”

I was ready to follow the deep-breaths advice, though. Having Wyll so angry – and at me – was threatening to send me into a panic attack. That was something I couldn’t afford right now. I took a breath, trying to quell the threatening tears.

Gale moved between us, placing a calming hand on my shoulder. The contact helped me to centre myself, and I patted his hand gratefully.

“Right,” I said. “Last check. Anyone need anything? Weapons? Potions? Pee break? Everyone have a speed potion and a stack of healing potions? We don’t know what we’ll find down there.”

Everyone nodded, so I led the way into the submersible and closed the hatch. I checked the controls. They looked fairly basic – the stick would take us up or down, left or right. Whether pushing it up would take us up or further down... well, that would be a matter of experimentation, I supposed.

I started the engine, and it turned over and started smoothly. The mechanic had cared about his craft, at least. I pushed the stick up – the craft started to sink. Good; I had a basic understanding of steering. The display lit up, and I crowed in triumph. It had an inbuilt map, so I could get to and from the Iron Throne. That would be much easier than cruising the harbour looking for an out-of-place underwater stronghold.

We got to the Iron Throne, and I spied a docking orifice. I’d need to line that up with the one underneath the craft – annoying, but doable with a bit of finesse.

Then the display lit up with Gortash’s face.

“Shit,” Astarion muttered.

“*Gortash*,” Wyll hissed.

“Evening, archduke,” I said. “What can we do for you?”

“You can leave my private business alone, for a start,” he said, looking at his fingernails like he had not a care in the world. “This is not a fight you want to start, adventurers. You dock, and I blow the place to smithereens. Do you *want* the lives of dozens on your head?”

Wyll growled behind me.

“So you have dozens of prisoners here, do you?” I asked. “That’s interesting. Who’s down here?”

“None of your business,” he said, sneering delicately. “Be on your way. I don’t know how you commanded that vessel, but it will be your deaths if you continue.”

I docked the vessel, and Gortash raised an eyebrow. “Recalcitrant, hmm? Well, I tried. I suppose the city – and control of the netherbrain – rests on me and Orin now. A pity. You seemed so much more rational earlier. A simple miscalculation, I suppose. Farewell, adventurers.” He theatrically held up a small device and pushed a button, and the screen went blank. A shudder ran through the vessel.

“Shit,” Astarion said. “We just docked at an underwater facility that’s about to blow up. We’ve done some stupid things and survived, but I think this one might be our last hurrah. Watery deaths imminent, darlings.”

“I hope everyone knows how to swim,” Gale said, grim-faced.

Wyll just strode to the hatch to pull it open. I followed, jumping down the ladder steps and cursing tall manufacturers who failed to take short legs into account.

“Right,” I said. “Split up. Gale, right. Astarion, straight ahead. Wyll and I to the left.” I didn’t feel much like being alone with the tower of rage beside me, but someone needed to stick with him. Besides, we were partners in everything, including the tough times. I wouldn’t abandon him now.

I pulled out a speed potion and chugged it, then raced down the left corridor. Wyll followed, silent. The others took off in their assigned directions.

I quickly realised that Gortash hadn’t lied – there were a number of prisoners down here. I could hear them banging on their cell doors, demanding to know what was happening. Water was seeping onto the floor. Structural integrity was broken. I didn’t know how much time we had, so we’d have to make it count. Try to find the duke first; worry about releasing the other prisoners second. It was harsh, but we needed priorities. I glanced back; a deep gnome was running for the ladder. Gale or Astarion had started releasing people.

Sahuagin stalked towards us, and Wyll hit them with eldritch blasts as I punched, hard. Two down; no more in sight, for now. And in front of us, three doors. One of them with a familiar face peering out, looking hopelessly confused.

“Father,” Wyll sobbed. “We’re coming.”

He headed for his father’s cell, so I went to the other cells to pull the door releases. The inhabitants ran for the submersible, calling out thanks behind them.

The duke staggered from his cell, looking around him, dazed. He’d been beaten, by the looks of him.

“Shit,” I muttered, and threw a couple of health potions to Wyll. “Get those into him quickly,” I said. “We might not have much time to get him to safety.”

He poured the potions into his father, and explosive spiders appeared all around us.

“My little pet,” Mizora said behind us. “I thought you might show up. How... entertaining of you.”

We turned, Wyll raising his rapier.

“Now, now...” Mizora said, placing a command spell on the duke with a flick of her wrist. “You know what happens if you kill me, pup. Enjoy the little present. Courtesy of our agreement, you know. You *did* want your father dead, remember.”

She disappeared, and the spiders started to close in. *Shit*. Any we hit were likely to explode – and the duke still wasn’t looking too good.

“Meat shields,” I said to Wyll. “It’s his only hope.”

He nodded quickly.

I stood close to the duke, shielding him with my body, and kicked at the nearest spider, sending it sailing across the room to explode against the wall. Wyll did the same with his eldritch blasts, and while a couple survived long enough to explode near the duke, he was still upright when we cleared the room.

“Fucking Mizora,” Wyll said, face twisted in anger. “That *arsehole*. Her days are numbered after this.”

Great. A vengeance quest. Just the thing to round off a shitty day.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out here.”

I gave the dazed duke another health potion for good luck, and started running for the submersible, pulling him along with me. I realised partway that using a speed potion on him would have been smart... but the water was only knee-high. Unless something catastrophic happened, we might make it.

The walls groaned and creaked around us. The place was definitely about to collapse. But the ladder was in sight now, and I could see deep gnomes and random others racing up it. I just hoped the vessel would carry everyone.

Wyll raced ahead, taking out two sahuagin rising from the water, now up to my hips. *Shit*. Being short has definite disadvantages at times. But the addled duke forged ahead, seeming to recognise Wyll as someone safe in a nightmare landscape. I waded forward doggedly, watching Wyll and the duke get up the ladder safely, Gale and Astarion not far behind. Astarion extended a hand to me, pulling me onto the ladder as the water level started to rise suddenly.

We tumbled into the submersible, panting.

“*Shit*, that was close,” Astarion said. “Let’s get out before the thing blows. Quickly! Hop to it, shorty.”

I snorted and took the controls, releasing the hatch just as a deep rumble spread through the vessel.

“It’s going to –”

An explosion ripped through the water underneath us as I started the engine and pulled the lever towards me. The submersible bucked and tilted hard to the right, sending people sliding into walls, but moved forward. I gritted my teeth and wrestled with the lever, getting control back slowly as we moved further away from the doomed facility.

“Holy hells,” Wyll said softly. I turned my head to check on everyone – they seemed fine, so I turned my attention back to driving through the murky water. “Father,” I heard him say, but only silence met him. I guessed the duke wasn’t in a chatting mood.

Back at the dock, happy deep gnomes thanked us for the rescue. The duke simply stood, head hanging, ignoring everyone. I eyed him, sighing. It looked as though my predictions on his state of mind had been upsettingly accurate.

We got the duke back to camp, and lying down on a bed, covered in blankets. I checked him over – he was bruised and battered even after the healing potions. He was nearly catatonic; the tadpoling experience had not been kind to him. Hopefully, in range of the dream visitor’s device, he would start to come back to himself. We could always hope.

Hope. Such a tease, Raphael’s voice echoed mockingly in the back of my mind. I shook my head. No. I *would* help Wyll’s father. We’d bring him back. I’d do everything in my power and then some. For Wyll’s sake, if not the city’s.

Betrayal and death

Chapter Notes

Hi folks,

Buckle up - we're in for a bumpy ride these next 2-3 chapters. No content warnings, check tags if the story starts to worry you, and just... look after yourselves, hey?

Love, Rowan

I walked over to the campfire to give a status update. Everyone was sitting, Gale and Astarion exhausted and looking it – except Wyll. He was pacing, gripping his rapier, fretting.

“He’s not well,” I said. “But with some quiet and calm, and a lot of sleep and decent nutrition... I’m hopeful he’ll recover. Especially if the artefact protects him from further influence from the Absolute.”

Wyll nodded. “Thank you,” he said, quiet but with something bubbling under the surface.

“Wyll...” I said, putting a hand on his arm.

He moved away from me, and my heart cracked all over again.

“No,” he said, vicious anger laced through his words. “You... you sabotaged this at every point. You wanted him *dead*. You killed that mechanic with no idea whether you could drive that thing. If it weren’t for you, he wouldn’t be lying there near death. You damn near killed my father, you... dick!”

I stepped back. “Wyll, we just risked death to save your soul and free your father. What the *hells* is your problem? He’s alive. We did it. Mizora probably would have let him die just after the contract clause was complete. You *wanted to trust a devil*. Again! We just got you free of the last contract, for crying out loud.”

“At least Mizora can be trusted to be what she appears,” he shot back, sneering. “You? What the hells are you? The worst kind of power-hungry traitor. I thought you loved me!”

I stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I know he’s alive, and I should be grateful to you,” Wyll said. “But all I remember is you telling me to let him die. I’m so angry. I can’t look at you without seeing the person who wanted my father dead. It was selfish, and it was wrong, and it was only luck that we came out of it as well as we did. I’ll never forgive that. I *can’t* forgive that.”

I closed my eyes as I realised it was over. He might be a group member still, but he'd never love me again, would he?

"I can't... I need to be somewhere else," Wyll said, and fled.

I sat on the ground, head in my hands, shaking. I felt like a monster, remembering the look of betrayal and anguish on his face.

"Hey, that sounded... rough," Karlach said, padding over to me and sitting down. "Wyll seems pretty torn up that his dad's alive and he's free of his contract."

"I pushed him to betray everything he stands for – and he'll never forgive me for that."

"Hey, don't be silly," she said, slinging an arm around my shoulders. "Come here, mate, you look like you need a damn good hug."

I leant into her. Oof. Even with her infernal engine cooled down, she ran *hot*. It was comforting, in an odd way. It reminded me of Wyll. But with that thought, I sobbed.

"Shit, he's just all messed up at the moment," she said. "Devils fucking with your mind will do that to you. He'll come around."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then he's a fucking idiot," Karlach said, patting my back. "That was the neatest bait and switch I've ever seen, you silly galoot. Mizora's going to be pissing herself with rage. Wish I'd thought of it myself. Never was good at outthinking devils. I'm more the smashy-smashy type."

"He won't come around," I said dully. "I've messed things up beyond repair."

"You know what we need?" Karlach said, jumping up.

"Timewalking boots?"

"Do those exist? That would be amazing. No," she said. "Boatloads of alcohol, and some food to wash it down with."

I curled into a ball, staring into space. I'd ripped apart our relationship and blown it sky-high. All because I'd thought I'd known better what Wyll needed than he did. Now I was alone, and I was going to be alone forever. He'd never forgive me for this. I'd lost my love; thrown it away into the sea. He was gone. Tears streaked slowly down my face.

The next day, Wyll was still gone. I woke, alone, and shivered. It was surprisingly cold without his warmth to cuddle next to. The bedroll felt empty, and so did I.

I stretched and sighed. Staying in bed was tempting in the extreme – preferably with a stack of hankies. But Gortash knew now that we wouldn't take his deal, and soon his Steel Watch and the Flaming Fist would be all over us whenever we stepped outside of the camp. We had

to get moving to take him down. That meant dealing with the Steel Watch. If we could take it out, Gortash would be hamstrung. The Flaming Fist was full of mercenaries; he couldn't rely on their loyalty. If Wyll were still with us... I felt a stab of pain, and backed away from that thought. Not now.

I checked on Duke Ravengard. His colour was better, and he seemed to be sleeping normally rather than unconscious.

"Halsin?" I asked, hesitant.

"What do you need?" he asked, giving me his immediate attention.

"Someone to look after the duke," I said. "I can do the healing side of things, but we need to go after Gortash, now. And the duke needs someone to check on him every hour or so – make sure he drinks, get him up to wash and toilet, that sort of thing. I wouldn't leave it to someone else, but..."

"You have world-saving to do, and you need to delegate," the big elf said, nodding. "You can trust me. I'm at your beck and call. I'll look after him. If there are any big problems, can I ask someone to call you using the parasite?"

I frowned. "Huh. We've never tried doing that sort of thing at a distance. I don't think it'll work. Feel free to try, I guess. Otherwise... healing potions are probably your best bet if you're stuck."

He nodded. "Leave it with me," he said, and turned to check over the duke.

"Thank you," I said, walking away. One problem solved. Uncounted hordes still to go.

Breakfast was a sombre affair. Everyone was killingly aware of the absence among us; no one wanted to pry open the wound to talk about it. I ate slowly and mechanically, staring into space.

"Right," I said when everyone was done. "We need to get into the Steel Watch foundry. But there's a hitch. The deep gnomes I talked to yesterday said that they were being held ransom to keep their relatives in the foundry under control. We've freed them; but they probably couldn't get in to let their loved ones know they're alright." I felt a pang of pain and shoved it down. *Later*. "So we need a way to make contact with the Gondians; give them a reason to work *with* us, not against us."

"Easy," Astarion drawled. "We'll just sneak into the foundry, wander through completely undisguised and unmolested, find the leader, and have a friendly chat, right?"

I made a face at him. "I'm hoping there's a way into the foundry," I said. "Gods know there seem to be cracks and crannies in half the public buildings in the Gate. Almost as though freedom fighting against oppressive regimes isn't a new thing."

"I suppose we are freedom fighters, in a sense, aren't we?" asked Gale. "That's rather thrilling, really."

“That’s... one word for it,” I said. “So. We head to the foundry, see what we can find, hopefully without setting the whole place against us. But I suppose we should be ready for a fire fight, too. Gale, Astarion, Karlach – are you up for doing this?”

“Fuck yeah,” Karlach said. “Anything that might piss off Gortrash is good for me.”

The other two just nodded.

“Off we go, then.”

We skulked around the foundry, avoiding the Steel Watch sentries. We found a vent.

“Hmm,” I said, looking through it to the space beyond. “I think I can fit through there.”

“But then you’re left with no backup if you’re discovered,” Karlach pointed out. “I don’t think I like this plan, soldier.”

“Alternatives?” I asked.

“Go in the front, spells blazing?” Gale asked. “I’m old-fashioned, I know, but it’s a favourite strategy of mine.”

“Favourite strategy is zero strategy,” Astarion muttered. “How you ever get laid is beyond me.”

“Yes, me getting laid *is* beyond you,” Gale answered, a slight smirk hovering around his mouth.

I snorted. “Guys, please. You’re embarrassing Karlach with your lack of game.”

Karlach made a noise that sounded like a hastily-muffled laugh.

“Right,” I said, making up my mind. “I’m going in. If I’m not out by the time those fisherfolk unload their boat, come in the front with spells and blades blazing. Sound good?”

“In a terrible sort of way, sure,” Astarion said, scowling at me.

The others nodded, and I squirmed through the hole. I found myself in a dark, deserted room. Handy. I crept up a ladder and peeked through a doorway. It led to a catwalk above a factory floor. Down on the floor, someone was arguing with a deep gnome. The gnome wore an odd collar around her neck.

“We can’t work any faster,” she said, wiping her forehead. “We’re putting in 18-hour days as it is. Exhaustion dulls the mind. We need to be able to *think*, not just work.”

“You know what else dulls the mind?” the supervisor asked, taking a device out of her pocket and inspecting it idly. “Grief. Terrible thing, grief. Strikes at the worst possible times.”

The gnome stiffened. “We have a new idea we’re looking at. Should boost speed and performance; cut down on those communication delays. I’ll get the lads working more hours.”

“Better,” the supervisor purred, putting away the device.

Damn, I thought. They’re sleep-deprived and overworked. That’s going to make things more difficult.

I snuck slowly along the catwalk, keeping close to the wall to minimise the chances of being seen from the factory floor below. There was a door on the other side, and it might lead to a research lab or something. I had no idea who to look for; I’d have to settle for trying to find a gnome on their own, and hope they were the sensible type.

As luck would have it, I found the Gondian leader in his lab, tinkering with a device. A large screen, looking similar to the one on the submersible, loomed on one wall, but blank and silent.

“Excuse me,” I whispered from the shadows. “I need to talk to you.”

He spun around. A bandage covered his eyes. A blind inventor? Interesting.

“I’m a friend,” I said. “I have a message from Obelia.”

His face lit up.

“She’s safe,” I said. “Holed up here in the city somewhere. Along with some of the other hostages. We couldn’t save everyone; I’m sorry. But those we could... they’re out and free.”

“They can’t hold the hostages over our heads anymore?” he said. “I thought the worst when the screen stopped broadcasting from their cells. Usually we could hear everything going on there. They... liked to motivate us by torturing loved ones if we weren’t fast enough to obey a command.”

“Gortash blew up the facility,” I said. “It’s gone now.”

“Thank Gond himself,” he said. “Thank you. But what now?”

“I need your help disabling the Steel Watch,” I said.

He nodded, jaw firming. “You have it. But...” He motioned to the collar around his neck.

“These are a problem. One of those guards can end us all with the push of a button. Not dead-man switches, at least, but still.”

“Damn. Can’t take them off without setting them off?”

He nodded. “They need to be disabled using the controllers.”

“Shit. Alright. Warn the others what’s happening. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

Next day, we walked in the front gate of the foundry. We'd talked about strategy; all we'd come up with was *take down the guards in one hit whenever you can*. Hardly an intricate and well-thought-out battle plan, but sometimes winging it is just the best approach. We just had to hope that this one didn't end in a pile of gnomish corpses.

A long, tiring battle later, most of the Gondian workers were alive, if battered and burned. And free of their collars, to their great relief.

"Shit. That was hell," Astarion said, dropping to the foundry floor. "What in the nine hells did they think they were doing? We spent more time pulling those ridiculous creatures out of harm's way than smashing Baneite skulls."

"Sleep deprivation," I said. "Makes your thinking all fuzzy." I took out a hankie to wipe my face. The foundry was *hot*.

"OK," I said to Zanner, the blind leader. "What now? How do we deactivate the rest?"

"Through the big doors," he said. "There are other Steel Watchers in there. Tougher. Bigger weapons."

I raised an eyebrow at Astarion. "Yes, yes, I know," he said, putting his hands up. "Come here, you annoying creature."

He cast Greater Invisibility over the two of them, and they snuck through the doors. I tensed, ready to run to the rescue if they tripped an alarm, but instead heard a loud clatter as the Steel Watch automatons simply... fell over.

"Oh, thank Mystra and the Weave," Gale said softly. "I thought we'd be stopped at the very last second."

"Well, there's still Gortash to take down," Karlach pointed out. "Maybe that one will go horribly wrong instead."

"Thanks, Karlach. You're a very wellspring of positivity."

Gortash was next on our list, and we needed to move fast. When the Steel Watchers dropped, he must have known exactly who to blame. So he'd be ready for us.

Using Wyll's little trick for accessing the cliffs around Wyrms Rest, we found a climbable path up the walls.

"You know, this so-called fortress is about as secure as a block of cheese," Astarion said, hauling himself up the rope. "No wonder city leaders keep dying. They have no idea how to keep something safe. A little bit of hot oil and these stones would be impassible."

"Competent guards would also be handy, I suppose," Karlach said, panting. "All hail the Fist, I say. Gods bless your ineptitude at anything but grifting."

I wondered how Wyll would react to that analysis, and shoved the thought away before grief could take over. I needed to focus. That meant I needed to avoid thinking about Wyll entirely.

“Oh hells,” Astarion said, peering through the doorway. “He’s in his office, and he’s alone. Is he really that cocky?”

“Gods bless stupidity, if he is,” I whispered. “Gale. Hold Person spell? Strongest you have. Karlach, here’s your chance to get out some of your anger.”

She grinned, pulled a soul coin from her pocket, and slotted it into her chest. We heard a rumble, and flames wreathed her body.

“Oof. Hot stuff,” Gale muttered.

“I heard that, soldier,” she shot back, grinning.

“Let’s go,” I said.

In the end, it almost was that simple. Gale threw his Hold Person spell over Gortash. Karlach swaggered in. I swore quietly as two guards moved out into the light – Astarion had missed them. No matter – Gale and I took one down while Astarion handled the other from the shadows. Karlach was still yelling at the immobilised archduke. Then she started hitting, and it was over fast. The dying, that is; Karlach kept walloping him with her axe long after he became a corpse.

“FUCKING GORTASH!” she yelled. “You fucking bastard. You... you took away everything from me. *Everything*. I don’t get to live because you were a selfish asshole. You treated me like a fucking ox you didn’t want anymore. I trusted you! I *trusted* you, and you gave me to a devil. Ten years. Ten years of *shit* so you could get some fucking tech from Zariel. Evil bastard!”

She kicked what remained of the corpse, and the flames wreathing her wavered and died down.

“What do I do now?” she asked me. “I... I thought killing him would make me feel better. But he’s just... dead. He’s no sorer now than he was before. This isn’t a healing moment. He’s dead, and I’m dying, and FUCK what is even the point?”

I held out my arms, and she knelt so I could pull her into a hug. “I’m so sorry, honey,” I said. “Let it out. You’ve been holding this in for too long.”

“I *don’t want to die*, ” she said. “I want to live. But that’s not going to happen, is it? I can kill all the evil bastards I want. I can fight the good fight. And it’s still going to lead me to certain death. I’ll be worm food. Or I’ll be stuck in the afterlife twiddling my thumbs for eternity. All because that asshole didn’t have a loyal bone in his body.”

She sobbed, and I held her tight. “I have you,” I said, squeezing. “I know it’s not much. But I love you. I’m here for you. I’ll be with you, no matter what happens. If you need to go to Avernus – I’ll be at your side.”

Karlach shook her head. “Never going back. I’d rather die. I’m going to die. *Fuck*. I can feel my heart giving out, Dash. I won’t last much longer.”

I sighed, completely lost for words. What could I say to comfort her, when there was no comfort to be found? Empty platitudes wouldn’t help. I stroked her hair, wincing. Hair shouldn’t be that hot. “I don’t want you to die, Karlach. I love you, honey.”

“Thank you,” she said, shuddering. “Thank you. Gods, after ten years of loneliness... at least I can get a hug. He couldn’t take that from me forever. I need to go. Scream at the sky. Let some fire out. I... I’ll see you later, OK?”

I nodded, and we watched as she ran from Gortash’s office.

“Poor Karlach,” Gale said. “If there were only something more we could do. Some spell to bring her old heart back. *Something* .”

I rubbed my forehead, which was starting to ache.

“Well,” Astarion said. “We’ve killed the leader of the city and the peacekeeping automatons, and left a huge power vacuum. Let’s see, former council: one dead, one family clearly traitorous thanks to that Elturel scam, one currently asleep in our camp. The last one has rumours of being devil-possessed. What exactly does the city do now?”

I blinked. Somehow, I’d utterly failed to think this far ahead.

“Well. That puts a dampener on the celebration,” Gale said, sounding grim.

“Councillor Florrick,” I said. “She’s in the prison here. We need to get her out.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Astarion said. “These noble quests just bleed into each other, don’t they? Can we have a quest for sleep, already? I’m exhausted. My shoulders hurt. I’m hungry. I need rest, not a bloody jailbreak.”

Loss

Gortash was finally dealt with. I could stop, sit down, and open the lid on the feelings I'd been pushing down for the last two days. I shuddered. This was not going to be pleasant.

I collected hankies and a water bottle, and up floated memories of other times I'd done this, to lie down with Wyll to give or seek comfort. This time there was no Wyll. There would never be a Wyll in this *sadness protocol* ever again. The yawning darkness started to grow in my chest, and this time I didn't push it back down; just let it rise up. Before it could take me over, though, I went to find Gale.

"You don't look so well," Gale said, eyeing me, looking concerned. "The events of the last few days are finally starting to hit, are they?"

I nodded.

"Well. At least I know what to do here," he said. He sat down on cushions in the lounge area and held out his arms. "Come get a hug, Dash. Cry all you need. I'm yours for as long as you need me."

The *I'm yours* echoed through me, and I sobbed. Gale gestured impatiently, and I sat down beside him, leaning into him as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

"I can't imagine how you're feeling," he said. "No, wait. Maybe I can. I've been abandoned by an angry lover, too. It's not a pleasant experience at all."

"He didn't come back," I said. "I thought... I don't know. That he'd care about the mission, if not me, I suppose. I thought if he heard Gortash was dead, he'd know we were fighting on. That he'd come back to fight with us."

Gale just patted my back gently.

"He hates me. It's... he hates me so much, he'd rather just be out there by himself. Away from the artefact's protection. Not fighting for the city. I've driven him away from everything he valued. Even his father. Shit, Gale – it's over, isn't it? He's gone. For good."

"He doesn't hate you," Gale said, squeezing my shoulders. "He couldn't. Wherever he is, I'm sure he's just sorting out his own feelings. He'll be back. If nothing else, you're caring for his father."

"He won't come back for my sake, though." I lost the battle for self-control, and tears slid down my face. A deep, painful darkness swam in my chest. My light was gone. A sob ripped through me.

"Hey," he said. "You did a good thing. He'll realise that when he calms down. Don't give in to these doomsday thoughts just because we're facing down the end of the world everywhere else we turn."

I shook my head. “He’s never going to forgive me for what I said, Gale. And rightly so. I made him give up his father. I *knew* what the duke means to Wyll. And I still did it.”

“Yes, to save him from stupidly selling his soul in the worst deal I’ve ever heard of, and I’ve heard of some appalling devil deals!” Gale said. “You were right to push. It was tough love, perhaps, but love all the same. Have some faith.”

“You didn’t see that look on his face,” I said dully. “Like he’s utterly disgusted by the mere thought of me. You might be right that he’ll come back. But he and I are over.”

Gale sighed. “Your heart must be broken into a thousand pieces,” he said. “I wish there were more I could do.”

“Just holding me helps more than you know,” I said, letting the stubborn tears flow unimpeded. “Thank you.” I curled against him, sobbing, feeling that moment of heartbreak all over again, when I knew our bond was severed, gone. Gods. I could live through this; I had to. But right then, I didn’t want to. I wanted to dissolve away into the aether; let go of the pain and torment.

Gale kissed my forehead. “I’m yours for the hugging,” he said gently. “Whatever you need.”

Karlach bounced up from the other side of the fire. “That’s it,” she yelled. “I have *had* it with that... that dick!” She stormed out of the camp.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“Just... Karlach energy and her being worried about you, I think,” Gale said. Evasively, I later realised. “So. Let me distract you a little? How about some tales of my misspent youth, and the creatures I summoned to my mother’s house, much to her dismay?”

I tried to smile. “I don’t know how much attention I’ll pay, but that sounds good regardless.”

“Oh! Nice to know I’m not the only one who likes the sound of my voice. Well, did I ever tell you about the time I wanted to summon a tressym friend for Tara, except when I originally tried to summon a cat, I got a tressym, so when I tried to summon a tressym, I ended up with a wyvern instead?”

“In your bedroom. As a child.”

“Indeed! It let out an earth-shattering roar, and my mother raced up to find out what on earth could possibly be happening...”

Gale chattered on, and I closed my eyes, slowly relaxing as the flood of words flowed over and around me. I inhaled, but Gale’s scent of soap and vanilla seemed more wrong than comforting. I wanted Wyll’s sulphur and salt scent in my nose. Another thing I had to get used to not having. Gods. How was I supposed to adjust to this? How had I let him become such a large part of my life that it felt like an amputation to lose him?

I woke sometime later, with a blanket over me. Someone had carefully put me to bed. Still alone, though. At the thought, I felt the void open inside me, dragging my attention and every positive emotion into itself. I closed my eyes, gritting my teeth. Gods. I had to get through this and out the other side. But how? For the first time in a long, long while, I couldn't see a future or an end to this. Just a hope that the sharp, sucking pain would eventually fade into a dull, despairing ache. Letting him become so important to me had been a mistake.

"I told him to get the fuck over himself, already. Man, I love the dude, but I almost smacked him across the room. Stupid asshole. I ripped him a new one twice over. I think he got the hint. Nice use of my Gortrash rage."

"Who are we yelling at?" I asked sleepily.

"No one important," Karlach said. "You want some soup, soldier?"

I sat up and groaned. Too much crying and too little water-drinking, then sleeping, had given me a hangover – without the alcohol. "Please," I said. "Is Gale around?"

Karlach shrugged. "I think he went out. Said something about needing supplies. If you ask me, that means shopping."

"How are you feeling?" Shadowheart asked.

"Like I drank goblin hooch and fell asleep under the table," I grumbled.

"Grief will do that to you," she observed. "No wonder so many go to Shar for comfort instead."

"Small comfort," I said. "But yes, I take your point. Some oblivion and the loss of a few memories wouldn't go astray right now."

"That's hardly your usual ethos, is it?" she asked. "You seem to be all about moving through the pain, not avoiding it."

"Mmm. I *am* a hypocrite," I agreed.

"Not at all what I meant," she said, smiling. "I think I understand, though. Some pain is like a creek – easy enough to wade through, even if it's uncomfortable and the footing is uncertain. But other pain is more like an ocean during the height of a storm. You can't simply face it and move through it – you have to accept that you'll be tossed around and slammed a few times."

"That's... surprisingly accurate," I said. Tears welled in my eyes, and I decided to just let them fall. No one here would be at all surprised to see me cry. Why was I bothering to act like the tough guy leader now?

"I'm sorry, though. I know it hurts," she said, reaching out to hold my hand.

I took it, surprised and touched. Karlach and Gale would hug me at the drop of a hat these days, but Shadowheart rarely reached out for human touch. "Thanks," I said, and squeezed.

“Stop being all mushy for a moment and eat something, you silly dude,” Karlach said, handing me a bowl and spoon.

I sniffed the bowl. It smelt good. I started to eat, and Karlach breathed a loud sigh of relief.

“Thank all the gods,” she said. “Thought you were going to waste away to a shadow. Eat all of that – Gale worked hard on it. Besides, we still have Orin to take down. We need the heart of our group at full strength.”

“Aww,” I said.

“Stop awwing. Keep eating,” she chided.

“I should check on the duke,” I said, looking over at his camp bed.

“Halsin has everything under control,” Shadowheart said. “I think you forget he’s a healer in his own right, Dash. You don’t have to do everything.”

“Especially if I mess up everything I touch,” I said.

“*Eat,*” Karlach said. “Come on, soldier. Buck up long enough to get some strength into you. I know you’re all broken-hearted, but everything looks worse when you’re hungry.”

I sighed and turned back to the soup.

Filling the vacuum

When I woke up the next morning, I was alone again. I suppressed the surge of loneliness and devastation. Gods, I was going to have some serious meditation work to do when I could stop and think for a bit. And feel. It was going to be brutal. Now, though, I had other work to do.

I walked over to the duke's camp bed. He seemed to be sleeping comfortably; at least he wasn't having night terrors or sleepwalking yet. The continual sleep would be concerning, but he'd been rushed from place to place and probably tortured at all of them for months. Uninterrupted, quality sleep was possibly the most healing thing we could offer him right now.

I sighed and went to the campfire to make tea and breakfast. Something bracing for the tea, so I could give it to the duke too. For breakfast... well, we had access to the resources of the city, now. I added strips of bacon to a frying pan, and started slicing a loaf of bread. For fruit, apples that had seen better days. I sliced those too, tossed them in a little flour, and set them aside.

The billy was almost boiling, so I added the herbs and pushed it away from the fire a little. The thick slices of bacon would take a while to fry, so I closed my eyes for a quick meditation session. Grief smashed down on me, and I reeled but kept my focus... for a few moments, until the pain got too hard to deal with. I opened my eyes and sighed, frustrated. One bad breakup and I couldn't even meditate properly anymore. A poor monk I made.

Oh well. I'd deal with it later instead. Not generally a great idea, but forgivable in times of life and death struggles, I figured. Sometimes mind health has to take a back seat to not dying.

"That smells amazing," Karlach said, sitting down next to me. "How you going, soldier?"

I checked quickly on the bacon – nowhere near ready – then sat back down to lean against her. "I think the technical term is *shithouse*," I told her.

She threw an arm over my shoulders and hugged me closer. "Ugh. That's horrible, babe. I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Forget that – how are you holding up? You had a pretty big meltdown back there. Got out a lot of stuff that must have been bottled up for a long time."

"Yeah, I guess. I feel... lighter," she said. "Nothing's changed. Nothing probably will. But you know what? I can sit around whining that my life isn't how I want it, or I can get out there and live every day like it's my last. I might not live long, but I can at least strike fear in the hearts of a few evil bastards while I'm here. A legacy of sorts."

I felt a spark of warmth in my heart for the first time in days. She was right. I had a similar choice in front of me: lie down and cry that my love was gone, or work to appreciate what I had left. My friends were right here, loving me, hugging me, making sure I was alright.

Wasn't that far more than I'd had only six months ago? Of course I still had to mourn Wyll. But maybe I needed to spend a bit of energy looking for the good, too.

"I love you," I said. "And you're wiser than I give you credit for." I knelt to kiss her cheek, and checked on the bacon. It was starting to crisp up nicely, so I broke some eggs into a bowl and started to whisk. By the time the bacon was done, I could pour the eggs straight into the leftover fat.

"Oh. Omelette. You awesome man," she said. "I could really go an omelette today."

"Lucky," I said. "The menu's not a large one."

She snorted.

"So, rescue Councillor Florrick today?" Gale asked.

I nodded. "At least we have a way in," I said. "I'm hoping we can use Astarion's sublime sneaking and thieving skills to get her out with minimal issues."

"Why, thank you, darling. Always nice to be appreciated."

"Astarion – you can only cast Greater Invisibility once a day or so, right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Hmm... so we'll need a few potions to get ourselves in and out, as well. Greater Invisibility on Astarion, I suppose. Me to talk to her, in case she's hesitant to trust someone she doesn't know. Gale and Karlach waiting nearby in case the guards spot us?"

Karlach snorted. "Those guys are about as alert as a deep rothe after a good shag," she said.

"True," Gale agreed, "but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. I suppose worst case scenario, we kill the guards?"

I nodded. "Knock them out, if you can – although that might just leave them with head injuries and make them wish they were dead. With Gortash out of the picture, we might be able to get the Fist back on side... *if* we have Florrick alive and well."

"Or Wyll," Astarion pointed out. "He's the son of their old commander. Sure, he's a little horny now, but that's hardly a problem to a bunch of mercs, surely?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, lost in memories of Wyll. Then I pinched my leg firmly. *Useful thoughts only.*

"What?" Astarion asked, as Gale and Karlach glared at him. "Ohh. I said the W word. Apologies, Dash." He sketched an elaborate bow. "Carry on."

The duke was looking better. Each time I saw him, he seemed more aware; better able to do more than just shuffle to the chamber pot or drink soup.

“You’re the healer,” he said as I poured his tea. “But... I saw you in my dreams. Why did I see you in my dreams?”

I smiled over my shoulder at him. “Those probably weren’t dreams, exactly,” I replied. “You were under Gortash’s control. We’re getting you free, slowly, but you’ll have some trouble distinguishing dream and hallucination from reality for a while still, I think.”

He nodded slowly, ponderously sitting up. “So you’re not just a healer, then? You rescued me from... somewhere. But... did I hallucinate my son? As a devil? And the devil that used to haunt him? It’s all so confusing.”

I brought the mug of tea to him. “It should all resolve eventually,” I told him, suppressing concern that it actually might not – that he might be stuck forever between waking and dreams, with only brief bouts of lucidity. I’d seen it before, when minds were pushed too far, and I didn’t know how to tell which ones would recover and which would not. “You didn’t hallucinate Wyll. He’s in the city. I’m sure he’s very worried about you.”

He shuddered. “Gods. The depths to which I’ve fallen.”

“Drink your tea,” I told him. “It will help a little. And it will keep you hydrated – important if we want you to heal up. Which we do.”

“You’re not... working for devils, then?”

I shook my head, smiling. “I’m a monk,” I told him. “No devil contracts here. I’m a healer and a fighter, that’s all. Any headaches?”

He shrugged. “A little. I feel fuzzy, like a peach. It hurts, but not much.”

“Halsin? Do you mind brewing up a headache tea for him?” I asked. “I can’t think of anything specific we should avoid.”

“Valerian should be fine,” Halsin said. “although the sleepiness effects are perhaps to be avoided for the daytime. Willow bark... I know of no brain injuries made worse by it, though if there were a bleed, perhaps...” He shrugged.

“I trust your expertise,” I said. “I’m sorry, by the way, that I acted as though you were a mere helper. I was...”

“You were in pain,” he said, laying a hand on my shoulder. “You and I both know that pain clouds our thinking; makes everything more difficult. You said nothing offensive. We have much to learn from each other. Please. I have this under control. Go to your work.”

I clasped his hand for a moment. “Thank you,” I said. “You ease my mind.”

He smiled down at me. “Good. Go.” He turned back to talk the duke.

Back in the storeroom of the prison, I took an invisibility potion, and Astarion cast his spell over himself. I checked my supplies; I had a few more invisibility potions. Should be plenty even if someone messed up.

Astarion and I crept out to the main prison area, and past the guards. Florrick was in the second-last cell, sitting on the floor, looking hopeless.

“Quick,” I whispered, and a faint scratching noise came from the door’s lock. We snuck into the cell and closed the door behind us. I winced at the slight creak – someone hadn’t been oiling hinges.

“Who’s there?” Florrick said, looking around.

“The same guard who’s been guarding you all bloody day,” the dwarf outside said, sounding distinctly irritable. “The same guard who’d rather be at home with an ale and a steak.”

Florrick snorted, and the guard stalked away.

I paused. It hadn’t occurred to me that she *wouldn’t be able to see me*. Brilliant plan. Go along with Astarion so that she’d have a familiar face to talk to. Completely forget that I’d need to show her that face. Gods. What a bumbler.

“It’s Dash, Wyll’s friend,” I said. “We’re breaking you out of here.”

“What’s the point?” she said, looking at the floor. “They took me in front of Grand Duke Ravengard. He’s naught but an empty shell, parroting whatever the Absolutists want him to say. He’s a puppet. There’s nothing of him left.”

I shook my head, then remembered that *she couldn’t see me*. Gods, I was not thinking well today. “You’re wrong,” I told her. “He’s in there. We got him away from Gortash. He’s safe. When he’s awake, he’s... almost himself, I think. He’s still not well, but I honestly think he’s on the mend.”

She looked up, hope flashing across her face. “You’re serious? How the hells did you get him away from Gortash?”

“Long story, short time available for *gaol break*,” Astarion pointed out. “Let’s go, already. Leave the history lesson for outside.”

Florrick’s mouth firmed with resolve. I handed her an invisibility potion, and she disappeared.

Outside, in the light of day with visibility restored for all, I explained the events of the last few days. That we’d rescued the Gondian gnome workers’ families, and pulled Ravengard from a death sentence at the same time. The Steel Watch foundry. And killing Gortash.

“You killed Gortash,” she said, stunned.

I nodded. “Unfortunately, we left the city with a serious power vacuum, and we need someone to take over for a while. Someone trustworthy. We would have done our best to get you out anyway, for the duke’s sake if nothing else, but...”

“... you need me now,” she said, nodding. “I can’t disagree with your assessment. How long until the duke is back on his feet?”

“I don’t know. He might never be capable of leading the city again,” I said. “His mind received serious trauma from all of this, I think. A weaker person would be near-mindless by now.”

“Well. One problem at a time. I’ll do my best to take the reins, and see if I can bring together some allies to back me up.”

“Thank you,” I said, genuinely grateful, despite not particularly liking the woman. The way she’d treated Wyll when I’d seen them together... damn. I had to stop thinking about him so much. This was torture.

“I can’t do this forever, though,” she said abruptly. “People like the duke and Gortash; they like wielding power. I don’t. I don’t want to be the face of this city. I’m a support; not a despot. You can tell the duke that his position is safe with me.”

“I think he knows,” I said, smiling at her despite myself.

Back at camp, I checked in on the duke.

“You’re the healer,” he said. “You’re Wyll’s friend, aren’t you?”

I nodded, feeling encouraged. He was starting to put facts together more quickly. That had to be a good sign. “I am,” I said, reaching for his arm. “May I take your pulse?”

He thrust his arm into my hands, and I checked his pulse quickly. Strong and slow; about what I’d expect for a man who was active and sparred regularly. Better than I’d expected for a man who’d suffered months of torment.

“I heard someone talking earlier. Did you... kill Gortash?”

I nodded. We’d had this particular conversation before. He kept picking up bits of information from conversations around him, holding onto them for a couple of hours, then forgetting them. Oddly, I found this reassuring – his long-term memory was probably working well enough; he just needed to get his mind making connections to it again. That was better than only remembering something for a few minutes, in my experience. That would mean that making long-term memories wasn’t working at all.

“We took out the Steel Watch with the Gondians’ help,” I told him. “Then hit Gortash in his office. He was... displeased. But very dead.”

“Wonderful to hear. But are you planning to take over the city yourself? Who’s in charge?”

“Councillor Florrick,” I told him. “She seems quite capable, although she was adamant that this is a short-term appointment only. She doesn’t crave power, that one.”

“She’s not dead? I didn’t sentence her to death?”

“You did. We pulled her out of the prison before her execution, though. She’s fine. Worried about you, of course.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank Helm,” he said fervently. “I thought I killed her. It all seemed so clear. She seemed the worst kind of traitor.”

“Our minds can do strange things when we’re operating on faulty information,” I said. “Don’t worry. You’re amongst friends, and everything is fine.”

“Hmm,” he said, handing me his empty mug. “Thank you, young man. I think I might sleep now.”

I nodded, and he stretched out on the bed, eyes closing.

Halsin drew me aside. “He would do better indoors, I think. This sort of environment is not very conducive to healing.”

I sighed. “But where would we find an affordable place to stay, in a city brimful of refugees?”

He produced a flyer. *ROOM TO RENT*, it proclaimed. *SUITABLE FOR LARGE GROUP OR PEOPLE WHO LIKE THEIR SPACE. BARGAIN RATE FOR A LIMITED TIME!*

“Shadowheart found it,” he said. “There was a murder. Duke Stelmane. She used to stay at the Elfsong. So, according to Shadowheart, they’re having a little trouble filling their vacancies, even with the city in crisis.”

“She’s seen the rooms?” I asked.

He nodded. “She said they were adequate, barely, but more comfortable than sleeping on the ground, at least.”

“Right. Let’s do it, then. I trust her judgment,” I said, then reconsidered. If we moved... Wyll wouldn’t know where we went. But then... would he care? No, he wouldn’t. But maybe... maybe he’d come to talk to his father. Surely. “What about Wyll?” I said. “If we move camp...”

“I can send him a message,” Halsin said, gentle. “By bird, if I can find one here, or rat, if I’m desperate. He’ll know where we are.”

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s do it. Thank you, Halsin.”

“I told you I was here to help however you needed,” he said. “I meant it.”

I went in search of my bedroll. Gale was probably cooking dinner, I knew, but I didn't want to eat. I wanted oblivion. Or, failing that, I needed to wallow in misery for a bit.

Lying down, I sighed. It had been a huge week, even without the emotional upheavals, and I was bone-tired. I closed my eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

... Only to wake, a while later, hearing someone getting into their bedroll. I rolled over seeking Wyll, then memory came back like a knife through the gullet. I curled into a ball and let the tears flow, holding back the sobs. I didn't want to wake people; they'd spent enough time tending to me as it was, when it was my job to look after them instead.

"Hey," Astarion whispered. "I'd ask if you're alright, but it seems rather obvious that you aren't." He crept over to lay a hand on my shoulder.

I shook my head, not knowing what to say.

"Would you..." he said, then stopped and sighed. "Would you like me to sleep with you?"

"Astarion, I –"

"Oh gods," he said, smirking. "No, darling, not like that. I know you feel better having someone to sleep with when you're sad. That's all."

I blinked. *Astarion* was offering to cuddle with me, with no interest in sex? What the hells was happening to this group? I felt deeply confused, but touched. The vampire wasn't the friendliest of souls; our moments of actual connection had been few and far between. For him to reach out to me like this when I was hurting – it was a comfort all its own. But was a night-time cuddle with Astarion something I wanted? He wasn't my first choice of comforter... but he was offering, and I was sad and lonely and, if I were honest with myself, in desperate need of a hug.

"Thank you," I said. "That, umm... would be nice."

Astarion curled around me, one arm over my chest, and his breathing steadied and slowed. Unlike Wyll, he didn't put out much body heat. I lay in his embrace, tears sliding down my face still, appreciating the comfort but heartachingly aware that he wasn't Wyll. And gods, I wanted my Wyll.

Prodigal son returneth

Chapter Notes

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

When I woke, Astarion was gone. I chuckled a little to myself. He wouldn't have wanted to be caught doing something *sweet*. Gods forbid.

Right. Check on the duke, make breakfast, meditate. Then we had to figure out what to do about Orin.

The duke was awake.

“Good morning,” he said. “Dash?”

I grinned. Seeing his memory return was amazing. “Yes, that's me,” I said. “How are you feeling this morning? You're up early.”

“I always rise early,” he said, casting an eye over the rest of the camp. “Your compatriots don't seem quite so inclined.”

“Well, we're adventurers,” I said lightly. “Sometimes we have to fight at night too. Waking early sometimes just makes people more tired.”

“Hmm. I hunger. Might I eat something solid, for once? I weary of these soups and teas, tasty though they are. Better than I expected, in a camp like this.”

“I can imagine military food being rather... bland,” I said. “We have a great cook. I do breakfasts, though. I don't have the same touch, but we muddle through. But yes. I think we can try you with solids. Just keep your meals light for the first couple of days. Give your innards a chance to adjust.”

“Where's Wyll?” he asked.

Pain twisted through me. “I'm not sure,” I said. “He's in the city somewhere, though, and I'm sure he'll come by soon.”

“Well. For the best, perhaps,” he said, looking down.

“I think we should take a day or two to rest,” I said. “We've had a big week. Maybe it's a good idea to wait a while before charging off to kill Orin too.”

Gale nodded, sombre. “We're definitely not at our best,” he said. “I doubt she's going anywhere.”

“Can we at least take out Cazador?” Astarion asked. “I know, I know, fate-of-the-world stuff, but that bloody vampire is a knife at our throats. If he takes me back...” He shuddered.

“Soon,” I said, touching his arm. “We won’t let him take you, Astarion. We have your back.”

“And a nice back it is too!” Karlach said, guffawing.

“Tsk. Inappropriate banter,” I said, smiling at her.

Astarion snorted. “She’s right, though. I might not be able to see my own face, but I can catch glimpses of my arse. I know what I have.”

I chuckled, and they grinned at each other. Hmm. What was *that* about? Were they getting together now? That was a combination I’d never have expected.

“Right. How about we move to the Elfsong, then, and take the rest of the day to relax in the Lower City?” I suggested, to universal acclaim. Seems the gang was keen to get back to something akin to civilisation.

I felt a pang as I surveyed the now-empty campsite. This was the last place I saw Wyll. It might be the last place I ever saw him. But... we had to move on. If he wanted to, he could find us. Even if Halsin’s bird didn’t find him, we were hardly a discreet, easy-to-miss group. A few questions in the right ears, and he’d know exactly what we were doing.

No. I couldn’t leave the campsite like this.

I pulled quill, ink pot, and paper from my pack.

W,

I’m sorry. Please come find us.

- D

It didn’t express a tenth of what I wanted to say, but... given that anyone might find it, I needed to keep it vague. I placed it near the fire, under a rock. I looked around the campsite again, then walked away.

The Elfsong Tavern was... odd.

“What do they even use this room for?” Gale asked, surveying the many plush beds around the walls and the spacious common area in the middle. “Mercenary companies? I can’t imagine many staying here. It’s a little... upmarket for most.”

“I think it’s meant for the retinues of travelling dignitaries,” Astarion said from the bed he’d claimed as his own. In the corner, which I thought seemed quite appropriate. “The noble stays in the private chamber where Stelmane died. Their flunkies sleep in here. Servants have no need of privacy, after all. That’s only for their betters.”

“Hmm,” Gale said. “I can see that, I suppose. What an odd arrangement, though. So much space. So many beds. Nothing else.”

“Well, if you’re a servant, that’s about your life,” Karlach said. “Eat, sleep, serve. Pretend like you’re deaf and blind when not actively serving.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t know. We always *had* servants, not... were them.”

Karlach muttered something and stalked away to her bed.

“Come on,” Gale said to me. “Let’s go out. Go shopping. Have a coffee. Have a glass of wine that we don’t have to strain the gnats out of.”

I smiled at him and shook my head. “I need to process some things,” I said. “But have fun.”

I sat down on my bed and closed my eyes, wincing. This was not going to be pleasant. I consciously relaxed muscles, slowing my breathing, pulling in light, releasing darkness. And gods... there was so much darkness. I felt it coiling through every fibre of myself. Pain, regret, desolation, misery. Hopelessness. Like black smoke imbuing every part of me.

I pulled in light with every inhale, and on the exhale, let myself feel every emotion. Tears streamed down my face, but I continued, letting the flood of sorrow wash over and through me. *I can do this. I’m tough. I’m strong. Godsdammit, I’m me!*

A while later, I opened my eyes. The light in the room had changed significantly; I must have been at it for hours. I felt hollow inside, and very, very tired. I might have just been sitting there, but the work had been draining.

Downstairs. Food. They must have a kitchen here. I soon discovered that they did, and the food was... acceptable.

“Tastes better with lashings of alcohol,” Karlach said, grabbing a few bites. “Ever noticed that the drunker you are, the better everything tastes?”

“You should try being high,” Astarion said, pouring a mug of tea. “It can make every mouthful feel intensely beautiful.”

“Is this pre- or post-fangs?” Karlach asked, eyeing him.

Astarion snorted. “Post, darling. I can barely remember life before fangs. Nine-fingers’ bartender offers quite the selection of quaint little powders.”

I frowned. He’d always spoken as though Cazador controlled him too tightly for him to have any fun. Ahh... he’d been indulging *recently*. “Maybe we can save the drug use until after we defeat the Absolute?” I suggested. “Keep from scrambling our brains more than necessary?”

“Pfft. You’re no fun,” he muttered.

I went to bed early that night. I felt a familiar twist of pain as I stared at my lonely bed, but I wasn’t drowning in pain, for once. A flare of guilt went through me – I *should* be more miserable. I couldn’t just turn my back on the love of my life this easily; could I? Ugh. What

a ridiculous conundrum I was tying myself up in. Be eternally lost in a misery of pain, or feel guilty that I wasn't lost in said pain. I needed to move through this, which meant healing. Even if that felt weirdly like a betrayal. I fell asleep still mulling over the dichotomy.

I woke to someone kneeling down beside me, and my hand went to the knife under my pillow.

“It’s me,” Wyll said, a hand lightly on my shoulder.

I sat up fast, eyes wide, and stared at him. I wanted desperately to hug him, ask if he was alright, apologise over and over... but none of those things were my prerogative anymore.

“Hi,” I said quietly.

His mouth dropped into sombre lines.

“I... needed time to think,” he said, twisting to sit down. “I’m sorry I left you all to fight without me.”

I shrugged. “We understood. You had a lot to feel and think about.”

He covered his face with his hands. “Hells, will you stop being so godsdamned understanding? Why won’t you yell at me and tell me when I’ve been a horrible arsehole?”

I frowned. “I’m not going to yell at you for being angry that I told you to let your father die.” I felt like I was feeling my way through a very crowded, dark room.

He barked a bitter-sounding laugh. “You know, I had visits from half of our little group here. All of them came to yell at me and tell me to get the hells over my little *temper tantrum*. That I’d been an utter fool and hurt someone they cared for deeply, and they were *not happy*. But then Karlach gave me a hug and told me she loved my dumb arse too.”

I smiled a little at that last. It sounded exactly like something I’d expect Karlach to do.

“I was angry,” he said abruptly. “But I was mostly angry at myself for wanting *exactly what you told me to do*. If my father was dead, I didn’t have to face him looking like this. I didn’t have to see the disappointment and loathing on his face. And I could be free for the first time in so long. No devil constantly looking over my shoulder, muddying the waters, messing up everything I touched.”

I nodded and listened. That was all I trusted myself to do. At least it sounded like we could finish things amicably, I supposed. Since we were committed to taking down the elder brain together, that would be... something.

“I think... the new contract felt like a chance at redemption,” Wyll explained. “As though this time, he had to see and understand that I acted out of love. That he had to *approve*. And then you... ripped it out from under me. You made me see the fragile fantasy. And it felt as though you were trying to destroy everything I ever worked for.”

I felt a wave of sorrow, imagining his pain in that moment when I told him that his father was mindless, not worth saving. “That must have been so tough,” I said. “You’ve put together a lot of insight about it.”

“Ha! Half of it rammed into my thick skull by our loving friends,” he said, looking rueful. “I’m sorry I turned that anger onto you. You did your best to get the best possible resolution – my contract nullified and my father alive and well. I was the one jumping hastily into assumptions and half-baked agreements. I was panicking and heading for disaster.”

“I do feel I pushed you far too hard. I don’t feel good about that.”

“You had good reason, I think. My heart still tells me otherwise, but... rationally? I think you were right. Sacrificing a soul for a life... it’s not a scenario that ever ends well in the tales.”

I nodded. I knew we needed to talk this out. Part of me was content to sort through the shards of our relationship with him, knowing that healing would come faster because of it. Part of me was crying out that *no, this is too hard and I want to hide now*.

“Thank you for looking after my father,” he said. “I know you would have done it regardless. I know you’d care for him simply because he needed it. But... I walked out on you *and him* without a backward glance, and you still looked after him. You could have sent him elsewhere. Hells, you could have gotten someone else in to care for him. But you did it yourself, when I wouldn’t.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, looking at the floor. I couldn’t bear looking into his face. “You’re right, though. I would have done it regardless. He needed us.”

“Ouch. That leaves me feeling worse about walking,” he said. “Fairly so.”

I shook my head. “You needed to think. I understand that.”

Wyll looked at me wistfully and sighed. “Have I broken us?” he asked.

I frowned, confused. “What?”

“You’re holding yourself so carefully. As though you’re scared to move incorrectly, or say the wrong thing.”

I twitched my mouth into a half-smile, but my chest felt full of ice, crackling inexorably outwards. This breakup was too hard; I couldn’t keep my composure much longer. My lips trembled; I pressed them together.

“Thank you,” I said, playing with my fingers, staring at them. “For the apology, for coming to talk to me. For remembering that I asked you to do this in person if you ever needed to.” I looked up, telling my rebellious facial muscles to *get it together already*, to see Wyll looking stunned and – dismayed?

“Do you want us to be apart?” he asked. The sadness on his face nearly broke my heart the rest of the way.

“Does it matter?” I asked. I closed my eyes and tried to just... breathe.

Wyll frowned. “I can’t tell if you’re breaking up with me, or think I’m breaking up with you.”

I opened my eyes to stare at him. “You’re not trying to break this off?” I asked. “Everything you said sounded like...”

“Hells, Dash. *No*. If you want me to go and never come back, say the word. But otherwise... I’m trying to come *back* to you. Not leave you.”

Relief and pain twisted together inside me.

I sighed, hands still shaky. “Gods, Wyll. I missed you. I understand why you left. But... I was so worried and heartbroken.” I looked at him, searching his face, hoping he’d understand. “Wyll... I thought you’d stopped singing.”

He looked confused for a moment, then his face crumpled. *If you were a song, I’d never stop singing*. He sobbed. “Dash.”

I rested my forehead on his shoulder, so it was the only point of contact between us. I didn’t want him to see the hot tears rising in my eyes.

“Hey,” he said. “You’re hiding from me. Hells. We spent months tearing down walls between us and I just built them back up again, didn’t I?”

“I’m still here,” I offered. “So are you.” But I didn’t want to look up. I wiped my traitorous eyes, trying to be surreptitious.

He sighed. “I hated being away from you. I was angry, but... I wanted to punish myself, too, I think. By taking myself away from the person I love. Hells, that sounds stupid.”

“You still love me?” I asked, leaning back to look up at him, still filled with uncertainty.

Wyll closed his eyes, brow furrowed. “Oh, Dash. That look on your face. I never thought I’d see you unsure of my love ever again. It’s like a knife to my heart.”

“Is that a yes?” I said, with a shaky smile. I was fairly sure it was a yes.

“*Always*,” he said, fierce. “Dearest... I’m sorry I made you doubt it.”

I closed my eyes and breathed. I wasn’t sure whether I felt relief or the aftershock of the sorrow I’d expected. I’d had too much emotion recently. It was all starting to merge and feel the same.

“I’m sorry too,” I said abruptly, meeting his gaze. “I feel guilty. I pushed myself into a decision of yours and *made* you take the one that I knew would give you nightmares. Even though I knew it was the right one. Even though I still do think that. I can’t even think of a better way for me to have done it, save through making some sort of deal with Mizora myself instead. But even if that was the best thing I could have done, I still regret pressuring you so

hard to make the decision I wanted. That still feels like it was wrong. Regardless of the outcome, it feels like a horrible thing to have done to anyone, let alone someone I love.”

Wyll opened his mouth, shaking his head, then stopped.

“I know it’s a bad apology, because I’m saying I’d probably do it again under those circumstances, but – I did something rather nasty to you,” I said. “So I’m sorry.”

Wyll sighed and ran a hand over his hair. “You’re right... it was, I suppose. And maybe that’s part of why I was so angry.”

I felt something inside me loosen, and I could breathe more easily. “I don’t exactly blame you for reacting so badly to any of it,” I confessed. “I don’t know. I wish I could have been a better support for you through it.”

Wyll chuckled. “You literally freed me and my father in one fell swoop, and now you’re apologising for not handling it smoothly enough.”

“I... don’t think I can see the light side of this just yet,” I said.

“Dash,” Wyll said, touching my face. “I feel bruised inside. And the look on your face is still hurting my heart. Can we lie down together, out in the lounge area? I’d like to spend some time in your arms and see if we can chase away some of these shadows.”

So we walked out to the lounge, and he lay down. I fitted myself along his side, head in the hollow of his shoulder, and tried to relax. It was difficult, because I could feel him watching me, troubled.

“Can I ask you something?” he asked.

I nodded, tilting my head back to see his face.

“You’re so closed off from me. Is it because you don’t trust me, or because you’re worried I’ll feel bad that I’ve hurt you if you show how you’re feeling?”

I thought about that. “Mostly the last, I think. With... hmm. Some history around angry shouting people still... reverberating, I suppose. You were so angry with me.”

“Shit. Did I set off a panic attack and not even notice?”

I shuddered, getting a flashback of his face, snarling at me in pure rage. “Not quite. I couldn’t give in to it then. What we had to do... it was too important.”

“So what? You just shoved all the panic and fear back inside and soldiered on?”

I nodded, breathing through the echoes of the irrational fear, making myself relax.

“Hey,” he said, stroking my arm. “You’re feeling it again, and you’re pushing it away.”

“Maybe.”

He sighed. “Hells, Dash, if you wanted to break my heart, this would be the perfect way to do it. I’d much rather you let loose with torrents of tears, avalanches of abuse... anything that reminds me of the vibrant man I fell in love with. This fragile self-control, when I see you shaking but you won’t let yourself be honest about your feelings... words can’t express how angry I am with myself just now.”

I took a deep breath, taking in the scent of his skin and sweat, and thought about what he’d said. *Words can’t express how angry I am...* Ahh. I might be emotionally exhausted from worry, guilt, and grief, and getting aftershocks of panic... but underneath it all, there was a core of something else entirely.

“I think I know what part of the problem is,” I said. “I mean, apart from expecting you to be breaking things off, and not wanting to cry in front of you when you did it.”

I felt him wince. “Tell me.”

“I’m angry with you. Not for needing time, exactly. For leaving me. For making me think...” The tears came then, and I let them slide onto his chest as he stroked my hair. “But... you had some good reasons for being angry and upset, and it all got confused, I think.”

“And you felt you had no right to be angry if you were also in the wrong?” he asked. “I think I understand that. Tell me. Tell me about being angry with me, dearest.”

I frowned.

“I’ve spent enough time around you to know how this works,” he said. “If you don’t get this out, it will fester. I’d rather hear upfront what I did to you, even if it breaks my heart into more pieces. I want this healed, Dash. I know it won’t happen overnight. But we need to start.”

I sighed. He was making good points, and I knew it. But I didn’t want to do this. Why? Fear coiled through me. “I’m worried you’ll leave again if I do,” I said. “I...”

I shuddered. I was stuck, wasn’t I? Between shutting Wyll out, and the fear that he’d leave if I expressed any displeasure with his behaviour. *Shit*. He’d triggered memories from my time with Jurgen. Once I realised the issue, I relaxed a little. I could do this. It was still Wyll, here with me, holding me close. He had come back. This wasn’t history repeating. Was it?

“I’m not going anywhere – unless you tell me to go,” Wyll said, gently wiping tears from my cheek. “Talk to me.”

I inhaled shakily. “I let down so many of my defences, Wyll. I thought it was safe. I thought... you and I had the sort of love I could depend on. That you’d made a commitment to be here, with me. You’ve been so... all in... the whole time. I felt safe in just letting go of all the ways I protect myself. And then you yelled at me and left, and... I was left with no armour against the world. I thought you were gone for good. That I’d destroyed everything. I just... sank into despair. Except that I kept reaching out to you for comfort without thinking about it, and *you weren’t there*. Our first big fight, in a sense, and it was all over. Like I’d

been right to have defences up. Like I should have known that I'd never measure up. I should have been waiting for it to happen."

Wyll took a shaky breath. "So I took everything you've worked so hard on, all of the trust we built between us, and broke it to pieces?"

"Not sure I'd logically blame it all on you."

"I think I would. But... why were you hesitant to say that? I don't quite understand."

I moved closer, and his arms tightened around me.

"Tell me if you need me to let go, dearest," he said softly. "I just... I want to hold you very close right now."

I took a breath, trying to find comfort in his familiar scent. "One of Jurgen's favourite tactics, if I started showing signs of independent thought. Manufacture a fight; in the heat of the argument, storm out. Take everyone with him. Leave me with no money and no food for days on end, so I could think about what I'd done. I was never sure if he'd come back."

Wyll made a strangled noise. I looked up him, drawing away a little to do so, and he looked like I'd stabbed him through the heart. "Hey," I said, lifting a hand to his face. "What is it?"

"Don't you *dare* comfort me right now," he said, voice savage. "I just realised what I did to you, and I'm devastated. I *knew* what he did. I knew how much it hurt you. And I made history repeat itself in the worst possible way. *Shit*, Dash, how do I even start to make that up to you?"

I sat up to take a handkerchief and blow my nose. "I think we have a fair amount to make up to each other."

Wyll snorted. "You were trying to save my soul, dear. I was trying to exorcise demons by running away from them. We're hardly on the same level here."

I shrugged. I had no answer for that.

"Thank you," he said, more calmly. "For sharing with me. For opening up to me again when every instinct must be telling you to stay safe by hiding everything away. Dearest, you *always* reach out to me, and I forget sometimes how much that can cost."

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath and let it out. My chest muscles were relaxing – they weren't hurting every time I breathed. "Thank *you*," I said. "For helping me figure that out. Pushing me through it. For listening, when that can't have been a pleasant experience."

"I'm so sorry for leaving you, dearest one," he said, putting a hand on my knee. "I was trying to keep you out of the blast radius, as Gale might put it. I didn't want to unload *all* my anger and guilt and pain onto you, and I didn't realise I'd already unloaded quite enough. It never occurred to me that you'd assume we were over. I was far too absorbed in my own pain to think about that."

Tears filled my eyes, and I let them flow. Wyll reached into his pocket, pulled out a couple of clean hankies, and handed them to me. “Or use my shirt,” he said. “I’ll consider it the best possible use of it, given the circumstances.”

He held out his arms, and I lay back down beside him. He held me close as I cried, and I felt him shaking with his own sobs.

“Hells,” he said a while later. “My head hurts and my nose is clogged. But my heart feels better than it has in days. How are you feeling, dearest?”

I stretched and wiped my face with a handkerchief. “Better,” I said. “Gods, that was... not a fun thing to do.”

“By Balduran’s helm,” he said. “I thought I’d done something I could never even start to fix. It felt as though I was locked outside a castle made of ice. And I could see you inside, freezing to death, but no matter how I bashed at the walls, they never cracked.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling oddly sleepy. “Everything must be alright. You’re spouting poetry.”

He laughed. “My dearest,” he said, kissing my forehead.

I closed my eyes and put my head on his shoulder, relaxing. Everything wasn’t magically back to normal, but it felt like we’d built a bridge over the chasm we’d opened between us. We were together. We had love. We’d purged the worst of the rot that had infected us. It was enough for now. I let myself drift off to sleep.

“Wyll,” Gale said. He sounded the unfriendliest I’d ever heard him.

Plates clattered, and I could smell meat – he’d brought dinner from downstairs. I was still cuddled against Wyll’s side, and I was too drowsy and comfortable to move just yet.

“Gale,” Wyll replied, sounding surprisingly meek.

“You apologised, I take it?” Gale asked. “And Dash, blast him, just forgave you in an instant, didn’t he?”

“He did,” Wyll said.

“You didn’t hold him while he slowly lost faith in you for most of *a tenday*,” Gale hissed. “You didn’t watch his heart break and crumble into pieces because the man he loved vanished into thin air. Damn you, Wyll. He might have forgiven you, but I’m not sure I ever will.”

I fought my way to full consciousness. “Hey,” I said, sitting up. “Gale...”

“Don’t defend me, dearest,” Wyll said, a hand on my arm. “He’s right. I did a shitty thing and I hurt you deeply. Everyone loves you – and right now that means they need to hate me. I feel the same way.”

“Good,” Gale said, nodding. “Dash – I brought up dinner. Have something to eat.”

I sighed. There was a deep rift in our camp now, and I had no idea how to fix it. For that matter, the rift between Wyll and I wasn't going to be fixed with a heartfelt conversation and a few hours of cuddling, either.

"Where's my father?" Wyll finally asked. "Shadowheart told me you were trying to bring him out of the muddle he's been in since we saw him at the coronation."

I nodded. "We turned that section of the suite into a healing chamber. He's doing better, and we might have good news soon. But he needs quiet, and no shocks or surprises, like..."

"... Like the appearance of his long-exiled and -disowned only son?"

"Yes, like that," I said. "It must be so difficult to know he's so near and not... go to him."

"Mmm. Honestly, it feels like cowardice. If we restore him to his true mind – well, I don't expect our reunion to go smoothly. I'm not exactly looking forward to it."

"If he's anything like you, he's at least reasonable and kind."

"Ha! Well, I like your optimism."

Chapter End Notes

I decided to post twice in one day, because it was really bugging me to leave y'all with 3 chapters of a sad and lonely Dash, and no resolution in sight.

I tend to channel the emotions and impressions of characters as I write them. Which means these last few chapters were... kinda ouchy... to write. Imagine me typing furiously while bawling my eyes out. THESE STUPID DOOFUSES!

*You might be asking yourself why I couldn't just write something happier, then. I can't tell you about other writers, but my characters live pretty independent lives in my head. I don't tell them what to do; they tell me what to write down. *shrug**

I hope you're enjoying!

Love, Rowan

Healings

Next day, Wyll and I sat in the lounge area of the suite. The others were off doing their own things – Astarion on his bunk, Karlach out probably getting some tail. Gale... hmm. Hadn't seen Gale for a few hours, actually. Probably at Sorcerous Sundries, then.

"Dearest," Wyll asked. "Can I ask you a difficult question?"

"Sure," I said, looking up at him.

"I still don't understand something. What did I say to make you think I wanted to break things off? You seemed so certain I came back to do that. Or was it that I was so angry and upset?"

I wrinkled my brow, thinking about it.

"You've seen me angry before, and you know I'll calm down soon enough. I understand why you'd be afraid in the moment, but... you were calm and rational. You'd had time to think things through. And you were *sure* we were over."

Was I illogical about this? Probably. I looked at my current emotions, and the primary one was... fear. I sighed.

"Do you remember what you told that woman at the circus? The one with the love test?"

"About your greatest fear?"

I nodded. "I haven't done something like this before," I confessed. "And I didn't realise how many insecurities I still had hiding deep down in my heart."

"And I keep blowing them up," Wyll said, nodding. "But – hells, Dash, haven't I given you reason to have faith in my love for you?"

I frowned. "I think... you said you'd *never forgive me*, and I'm... sometimes a rather literal person. I suppose I don't absorb hyperbole well."

"Hmm. And we couldn't be in love if I hated you?"

I nodded, feeling the pain rise again. Ugh. That was old news. I needed to let that go. But my mouth was trembling regardless.

"OK. Fewer exaggerated statements made in emotion, not logic."

I tilted my head and looked at him, confused. He rested his hand on mine, stroking the back of my hand with his thumb absently as he talked.

"I realised that me lashing out at you is unfair, yes – but maybe I've been thinking about this badly. You're usually so even-tempered and controlled... I thought I needed to be the same.

But... look, even in the midst of battle, with all the fear and anger and bloodlust, there are rules I'm capable of following. So maybe... if I find myself yelling at you and I'm not sure who's in the right because emotions are running too high, I can at least follow rules of engagement for *us*. Things I never do. Things I do. Like telling you that I love you."

"While you yell at me," I said, trying to catch up.

"Not the most orthodox of courting methods, I'll grant," he said with a smile.

I smiled, feeling lighter.

"That might be a wise rule for both of us to follow," I said, pondering. "I can't see how an *I love you* or two would mess up a good fight."

"Mmm. Adds a bit of sugar to the spice. Dearest..." he said. "Would you please cuddle with me? Because I saw that look on your face, even though you tried to hide it. And I want to hold you."

I sat next to him and leaned into his side. He turned to wrap his arms around my shoulders, rubbing his cheek against my hair.

"I don't hate you, dear," he said. "I'm sorry. I should never have said such horrible things to you. I couldn't hate you, ever. I might be furious with you from time to time – whether you deserve it or not – but I could never hate you. You're my sunlight, darling."

"I thought killing your father might be an exception to the rule."

He sighed. "You were a convenient target, weren't you? You didn't kill him. You didn't even let him die. *I* made a choice. I made the choice I secretly wanted. And then you helped me to save him regardless. Even though you thought we were over and I'd hate you forever. You looked after him. And all along, it was Mizora to blame. She's just... harder to yell at and hurt, I suppose."

"Hmm."

"And I was ready to bind myself over to her again. Over a situation she created. She almost manipulated me into another contract, and this time, she never would have let me go. Hells, how stupid can I be?"

I looked up at his sad face, and drew him down for a kiss.

"Mmm..." he said, smiling a little. "Your silence is eloquent. But... you're allowed to tell me when I've been a fool, Dash. Even if I don't like it at the time."

I relaxed against his shoulder and thought about that. "It might take some time," I said eventually. "I think I expect to be abandoned if I disagree out loud, and... I know you didn't mean to, but you reinforced that rather strongly."

He sucked in a breath. "Ouch. But you're right."

I sighed. "I need to check on your father. Thanks for the cuddle." I stood and kissed his cheek. He smiled at me, but his eyes were sad as he let me go.

We'd set aside an area in the large tavern room for the duke. He needed as much quiet as possible, but we could only do so much to shield him from the noise and bustle of a group like ours. Just the noise from putting armour on could get a little much some days.

I walked in. He was awake, and nodded at me. "Dash, right?"

"That's right," I said, smiling. "How are you feeling?"

"Well cared for," he said, sitting up. "Your man Halsin has been tending me well."

I breathed a sigh of relief. He seemed so much better. Alert, responsive, and his memory was improving by leaps and bounds.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, checking his pulse. "Do you need anything?"

He shook his head.

"I'll leave you to it," I said. "But please. If there's anything you want or need, let us know. We'll do our best."

"How is he?" Wyll asked.

"Better," I said. "He seems lucid when awake, now. He's remembering things from day to day, too. Little things like my name."

Wyll sighed. "Thank Balduran himself," he said. "I can't wait for him to get better and get back to running the city."

I sighed. That wasn't necessarily going to happen, even with the man making such good progress. Being capable of basic functions and being able to run a city were very different things. But better Wyll come to the realisation on his own than have me jam it in his face. Again.

That night, as the candles burnt down in their holders, I thought about sleeping arrangements. I wasn't sure how my request would be received, but... gods. I was so fed up with waking alone, and the misery that came with it.

"Wyll?" I asked, and he came to my side.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Would you sleep with me?" I asked. "I know it's too soon. But..."

"Talk to me," he said, sitting on a bed.

I pressed my lips together, trying to rid them of their tremor. I knew this was going to come across badly, as an accusation. But I couldn't think of a way to soften it.

“I don't want to wake by myself,” I said, sudden tears rising. “I'm sorry, I just...”

Wyll's face twisted, and he held out his arms. I cuddled close to him, head on his shoulder, trying to let go of the upset I felt at the idea of sleeping alone.

He wrapped his arms around me. “Darling, anything you need,” he said, kissing my forehead. “Anything. But I'd like to hold you tonight. Especially if it brings you comfort.”

We pushed two of the beds next to each other, in a corner of a side area of the room. They were day beds, which would make getting into and out of bed difficult... but at least we could lie down together in relative comfort.

Wyll clambered over the side of our makeshift bed to sprawl on the blankets, then laughed, looking at me facing the barrier. On him it was hip-high. On me: closer to shoulder-height.

“Do you need help?” he asked, grinning.

I took hold of the side, testing its strength, then vaulted over with a flip. “Easy,” I said, smug.

“Somehow I always underestimate you,” he said, opening his arms. “Come here, dear. Let me hold you for a while.”

I lay down, pressing against his side, and slowly relaxed. I inhaled his scent of sulphur and salt, that scent that said *home* and *safety* to something deep inside, and started to feel less adrift, more together.

“That's better,” he said softly. “Hells, Dash. Having you in my arms soothes all my ills.”

“Mmm,” I said, starting to succumb to sleep. “It's certainly improving my mood.”

He stroked my hair gently, and I drifted off, cuddled against my Wyll.

Shifters and sore muscles

Chapter Notes

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

“So,” I said. “We need to go after Orin next. But she's a little trickier than Gortash, in more ways than one. She won't be sitting still waiting for us to come at her. Ideas?”

“Follow the trail of blood,” Wyll said, his eyes bleak. “If we investigate this rash of murders, it seems likely she'll be at the end of the trail.”

“Go down to the sewers?” Astarion offered. “She seems like the sort to hang out there.”

“Takes one to know one,” Karlach muttered, and Astarion frowned at her. Hmm. Those two had had some weird interactions lately.

“If we follow the murders,” I said, thoughtful. “Where to start? Just wander around the city looking for pools of blood?”

“We could ask at the Open Hand temple,” Wyll said. “They help a lot of people – or they used to. If the murders are happening to those less fortunate as well as people like Stelmane, they'll know about it.”

I nodded. “Seems like a decent place to start.”

“Less stinky than the sewers, I suppose,” Astarion said. “But the stench of do-goodery is still rather terrible.”

The Open Hand temple was in an uproar. I'd seen refugees arguing at the door as we'd passed a while ago, but assumed the problem was simply lack of resources compared to the colossal influx of people needing food and healing.

It wasn't.

Their head priest had been murdered the day before, presumably by a refugee. We exchanged glances. Orin?

The head priest, Lorgan, had been paralyzed and his hand taken, before he died.

“Orin,” Wyll said grimly. “Or one of her lackeys. This has *Bhaalists* written all over it.”

“Mmm. I think so too.”

Exploring the temple a little, we found a makeshift basement chapel, and an entrance to a cave system, with caches of food.

“Hells. Was Lorgan harbouring refugees down here?” Wyll asked. “Why? Weren’t there refugees staying upstairs? Why bring them down here, and presumably in secret?”

“Because the refugees fell foul of the Fists, I assume,” Astarion said.

“So he was helping criminals?”

“No, darling, I said he was helping them *against* the Fist.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, the blessed naive,” Astarion said, rolling his eyes. “Dearie, the Fist are renowned for being corrupt, money-hungry, and vicious to those who can’t afford to bribe them. Your *criminals* probably stole a loaf of bread, or some other terrible crime. Or worse, just existed as a bored patrol came by.”

“A bit lacking in tact, but Fangs has a point,” Karlach said more gently. “The Fist under your father... they’ve lost their way more than a little. Their reputation isn’t what you might expect, and it’s mostly well-deserved. We haven’t been in the city long, but it’s pretty clear.”

Wyll’s face twisted. This was not a truth he wanted to hear, and it was one that would eventually reshape a lot of his childhood memories. I took his hand and squeezed it, and he smiled a little at me.

“We need to get on,” I said, letting go to walk into the next set of caves.

This one was occupied. Shit. The bandits attacked on sight, and I ran ahead with Karlach to engage them, leaving Wyll and Astarion to back us up. One went down fast, but as I finished him off, another got around Karlach to throw me across the room. I rolled, swearing, and missed seeing the bandit I’d killed turned into something else as he died.

I jumped back into the fray, my back twinging. Karlach was almost through them, but I took down one about to hit her from the side, and we were done.

The bandits didn’t look human anymore.

“Shapeshifters,” Wyll said. “Shit. This isn’t a good sign. If Orin has shifters on her side...”

“Could be anyone, anywhere,” Karlach said. “Shit. Should we use a passphrase or something to prove we’re really ourselves?”

“Anyone could overhear it,” Astarion pointed out. “Or just sneak into our room, kill someone, and hide the body. Once they’re in, they’re hardly going to be challenged.”

“Great. Thanks for the nightmares, Fangs.”

“But what *I* find interesting is that we’re not just hunting Orin. We’re hunting a whole group of Bhaalists, by the looks of this. That seems like a very, very ill-advised thing to be doing.”

“Hey. Look at this,” Wyll said. He was holding a piece of paper: a list of names, some with *DEAD* written beside them.

“Shit. List of victims?” I said.

He pointed to one entry with *DEAD* written beside it. *Father Lorgan* .

“Well. This is convenient,” Karlach said. “Follow the murder targets, Orin’s sure to turn up to indulge at some point.”

“Did nobody hear my point about the inadvisability of searching for a nest of bloodthirsty, pain-obsessed, violent, insane killers?”

“We heard you, Astarion,” I said, feeling a stab of worry, but also resolve. “We probably don’t have much choice, unless we can lure her out into the city. Otherwise... we’ll have to find wherever she’s holed up. If we follow the list, we might get lucky.”

“Ugh.”

Back at the lodgings, I sat down and instantly regretted it, as my back twinged. I took a healing potion, and the pain reduced a little... but it was still there when I moved. Damn.

I stood, grimacing, and walked downstairs for a kettle of hot water. When I came back, Wyll eyed me.

“You look uncomfortable,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Gods. Those shapeshifters really did a number on my back,” I said, wincing. “I’m going to have to do a healing meditation session if I want to walk tomorrow.” I rummaged in my pack for the herbs I wanted.

“Healing potions won't help?” Wyll asked.

“I tried. It did, a little – but there's technically nothing *wrong* with the muscles, I guess. They're just strained. More difficult for the magic to recognise, I suppose.” I picked up the kettle and winced.

“Ugh. And we find another limit to magic. How irritating. Let me, silly.” Wyll took the kettle from me and poured hot water over the herbs in the billy.

I grinned at him. “Sorry. I can’t help but try to do everything myself.”

“Don’t I know it. It’s one of your more infuriating traits,” he said, smiling back to take the sting out of the words. “Can I help, dearest? Do you have any salves I could rub in?”

I considered. “Actually, I do. And a massage might help, if you're so inclined.”

“Perfect,” he said, kissing my cheek. “Find your salve. I'll get some food from downstairs. Don’t pour that tea out until I get back.”

We met back in the room, and Wyll placed the tray of food down on the table. “Simple fare,” he said. “Sausages, bread, fruit. I thought it would keep the best. Doesn't matter if it goes cold.”

“Perfect,” I said, handing him a mug. He poured tea for me, watching as I drank slowly.

“Come over to the side,” he said, pointing to the side of the chamber where we'd set up our makeshift bed, opposite the screened-off area for his father. The others had taken up beds elsewhere, clearly deciding to leave the two of us with at least a little space.

I put down the empty mug and joined him next to a spare bed.

“Get undressed,” he said, pulling the top from the jar and sniffing. “Hmm. I expected this to be stinkier.”

“A lot of healers use wintergreen,” I explained. “It gives a nice warming sensation, and it *is* good for muscles, but I detest the smell for some reason. So I make my muscle salves without it. There are plenty of options, if I have access to enough herbs.”

He grinned at me. “No wintergreen. Got it.”

“Knowing you, you'll remember it someday when I'm old and grey,” I said, looking at him with fond eyes.

“Stop talking, silly creature. Clothes off. On the bed.”

“Mmm,” I said, grinning as I stripped off the day's blood-spattered clothes. “Bossy *and* telling me to get undressed. I'm enjoying this.”

“You like me bossy?” he said, raising an eyebrow and getting on the bed.

“I like you in every mood,” I said, climbing onto the bed. “But... hmm... a little bossiness might appeal now and then.”

“On your stomach,” he said, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes.

I obeyed, with a shiver. That gleam held... promise.

Wyll took a glob of the salve, then stopped. “Wait. Tell me where, first.” He stroked gently from my shoulders downwards. “Tell me when I get to the sore spots.”

“Ahh... there,” I said when his fingers reached my lower ribs. “I pulled something when that shifter threw me, the little bastard.”

Wyll's fingers slowly rubbed the salve into my muscles, pressing lightly to unkink and loosen the muscles as he went.

“Gods,” I said, breathing in light to help the process along, “that's perfect. Just what you're doing. How did you get good at this?”

“Two things,” he said, amusement lacing through his voice. “Growing up in the Flaming Fist, with ageing mercenaries all around me. And being the recipient of some rather excellent massages from our resident healer. You have a wonderful touch, dear.”

I smiled. “It feels odd to be the person getting the massage. Luxurious.”

“Good,” he said, fingers slowly working at a troublesome knot. “You deserve a little luxury occasionally. Although I'm not sure *keeping muscles limber so you can fight* really counts as luxury. More a necessity.”

“One I've happily gone without when the massagers are few, and their hands are rough,” I said. “I hate being pummelled into shape. I know it works, but I don't like the pain.”

“I'd rather give you pleasure,” Wyll said, a hand drifting downwards to caress my arse lightly for a few moments. “You make such interesting noises.”

I laughed. “Gods, Wyll – you're making me forget all about sore muscles.”

“Tsk. Focus on healing, you silly gnome.”

“Tormentor,” I accused.

“Hmm,” he said, massaging down each side of my spine, then digging fingers into the muscles that ran across my arse to my hips. “I'm not the one lying all naked and tempting on a bed, dearest.”

I snorted. “That's all it takes? Hmm.”

“Ha! No, just your existence is enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi folks,

Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter out. I have a lot of Act 3's scenes already written, but they're a smidge chaotic. That means I sometimes get to the next chapter, and realise that it needs bridging story to connect it properly to the previous chapter. So I have to put posting on hold while I feverishly write the bit I missed.

This one took longer than I expected. Sigh.

One characteristic I definitely share with Dash, apart from making my own salves - I utterly detest wintergreen with a passion. Which is how I ended up making my own muscle salves; I couldn't find one without the dreaded oil. 🤢

Love, Rowan

Orphans and blockheads

Chapter Notes

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

I went to check on the duke. He was standing, slowly and carefully trying a few swordwork stances and forms.

“That’s good,” I said, observing. “Your balance is coming back, and your memory is definitely improving.”

“Dash,” he said, turning around. “Did I hear Wyll?”

I nodded. “He’s back,” I said. “I don’t want you overexcited, so I asked him to wait before visiting you.”

“Hmm. You think I’m prone to getting overexcited?”

I eyed him. “When it comes to Wyll? Let’s just say I’m not prepared to take chances. People who’ve had head injuries sometimes suffer brainstorms if they get too angry, in particular.”

He harrumphed, but sat down so I could check his pulse.

“How have you been eating?” I asked.

“Well. It’s all staying down, and... moving through... as you’d expect.”

“Good. Keep drinking the teas. They’ll boost your strength.”

He nodded. “I want to see my son.”

“You will,” I said gently. “Don’t worry. He loves you. He’s worried about you. I won’t keep you apart longer than I need to.”

He snorted and stood to pace. “I could just walk out and confront him myself,” he pointed out.

“You could,” I agreed. “Nothing stopping you, and I wouldn’t even try. Or you could take the advice of an experienced healer, and not risk damage to a mind I assume you rather value.”

He huffed a slight laugh. “Very well. I’ll take your advice. For now.”

I looked him over. His eyes were clear, his movements a little shaky but purposeful. He was more tired than he’d let on, which meant his body was still in healing mode, but seemed a lot more mentally capable. Perhaps he and Wyll could see each other the next day. For good or for ill.

“Would you spar with me?” I asked Wyll. “I need to check that the treatment yesterday gave back my full range of motion before we chase up the Bhaalists.”

He nodded. “Happily – but where? Here in the lounge area seems a terrible idea.”

“There has to be an outdoor area we can use. Hmm... doesn’t this place have a flat roof?”

Wyll shrugged.

We explored the floor, and found a ladder in an out-of-the-way alcove. Bingo. Sure enough, the roof was flat and usable; it was also landscaped carefully. The tavern must hold parties or something up here when weather permitted.

“Touches only; no hits?” Wyll asked. I nodded; I needed a workout, not a skill test.

I stretched, then we sparred a little. Careful at first; then I started to move more confidently. Wyll fended off my touches, grinning.

“You seem fighting fit,” he observed.

“Feels fine,” I said. “I might try to avoid any acrobatics, though. Less bouncing around for a couple of days.”

“Hmm. Less being thrown across the room might help too.”

“Look, if we can negotiate with Bhaalists to not throw me, I’m all for it. I’m not sure they’re into rules of engagement, though. They seem more the *chaos and confusion* types, from what I’ve seen.”

Wyll just snorted.

“Who’s on our list?” Karlach asked. “And do we start at the bottom and move up, or start at the start and maybe play catch-up?”

“Risky either way, in terms of potential deaths,” I said, pondering. “I say start at the start of the people not marked dead. They seem the sort to enjoy creating a spectacle; that requires planning. If we move fast, we should be able to catch up, unless they go on an instant killing spree.”

Astarion hmped.

“Would you rather not come?” I asked. “I realise that facing down Bhaalists is a little daunting. We can manage.”

Astarion scowled. “No, I’m along for the whole ride, and you know it. But it still seems an utterly asinine idea to me.”

“I’m open to alternative plans.”

“Run away to Amn and see if distance keeps us safe?”

“Well,” I said. “You’re welcome to try, but I think that way lies only tentacles and a love for all things cerebral.”

Karlach cackled. “Not Astarion’s usual preference, from what I’ve seen.”

“Hey! I like an intelligent man as much as the next person,” Astarion said.

“Yeah, if the next person is a teenager eyeing a muscly hunk,” Karlach shot back.

Astarion chuckled, and I relaxed. These two seemed to be settling whatever issues had arisen between them.

The first person on the list not marked DEAD turned out to be a recluse with a pet rat. Alright; no judgement here. He was also very dead. Sigh. Karlach fed the rat some cheese, and we left to look for the next potential victim.

“Cora Highberry,” Wyll read. “Hmm. Never heard of her. I guess we ask around again?”

We walked into a nearby shop, and I asked the shopkeeper if he knew the name.

“Cora?” he said, face lighting up. “Of course. I’m heading to her wine tasting soon. Just have some things to tidy up here. And customers to see to. Ahh... you are a customer, right?”

I bought some supplies, both to give us some options in case the Elfsong fare got a little bland, and to mollify the shopkeeper. “Where is this wine-tasting?” I asked. “I’d like to go, but I lost my invitation.”

“Oh, just down the street a-ways, on the corner,” he said. “You can’t miss it. They’ve been setting up since early morning.”

Sure enough, the wine tasting booths were very obvious, and very festive.

“Well,” Astarion said. “I thought we’d be hip-deep in murder and blood. Wine as well? This day is looking up.”

“Hang on,” Karlach said. “What if she’s a shapeshifter?”

“Who? Orin?” I asked.

“No. Cora. What if a shifter already replaced her?”

“Huh,” Wyll said, thoughtful. “We don’t know her. We wouldn’t know either way.”

“She’s on a murder list, though,” I objected. “Not a replacement list.”

“And isn’t it convenient that the killer just dropped it in the Open Hand temple?” Karlach pointed out.

“Shit.”

“So what do we do?” Wyll asked.

“Hang about, see if Orin’s people come after her?” I suggested.

“That could take days! Weeks!” Astarion said, his voice a little shrill.

“True. Talk to her? With any luck, if she’s a shapeshifter, she’ll just attack us on sight,” I offered.

“With any luck... bloody hells. I’ve fallen in with a group of utter crackpots,” Astarion muttered.

Karlach chuckled. “Coulda told you that months ago, Fangs.”

“Hi! Are you here for the wine-tasting?” a woman asked. I turned. A gnome woman smiled at me.

“We are, thank you,” I said, wracking my brain to think why she looked familiar. Seen on the streets, perhaps? That must be it. But she was staring at me, now.

“Dash?” she asked. My heart dropped. “By the light of the dawn. It’s you, isn’t it?”

Emotions swirled with me. Confusion was probably strongest. *Who was she?* “I’m so sorry,” I said. “You’re right, but... you look familiar. I don’t remember you, though.”

“Oh, why would you?” she said, waving a hand. “I remember you, though. Vividly. You inspired all this, you know.”

“I guess she isn’t a shapeshifter,” Astarion whispered behind me. “Or if she is, she’s a master manipulator. This is intriguing!”

“I don’t understand,” I said helplessly.

“Come inside,” she said. “The wine tasting won’t start for another hour. Let’s catch up.” She led the way into her house, and into the kitchen, putting a kettle on the stove and gesturing us to take seats at the table.

“I’m Cora,” she said to me. “And we met through Dawngreeter Patric. At his services. So many years ago, now.”

A memory cut through the emotions roiling inside me. A kind-faced woman, offering me a packet of sandwiches and cakes just after my mother died. A jolt of pain ripped through me, remembering that time.

“You remember,” she said, watching me closely. “I owe you an apology, Dash. When you disappeared, I realised... we failed you. You were so sad, so lost. And I gave you food when I should have given you a huge hug and brought you back here.”

I stared at her, feeling the telltale tingle of tears about to rise. “You didn’t owe me anything,” I said, shaking my head. “I was just some whore’s kid.”

She poured hot water into a teapot and brought it to the table with mugs. “You weren’t just some kid,” she said. “You were a child in need. I’m sorry, Dash. I’ve regretted my lack of action for years.”

The threatened tears rose. Wyll put a hand on mine, warm and comforting, and I relaxed a little. “What did you mean?” I asked, voice thick. “When you said I inspired all this?”

“We’re holding this wine tasting as a fundraiser,” she explained. “My husband Roger and I take in orphans where we can. Or children whose parents are fighting the Absolute’s forces. We needed extra gold to keep them in clothes and food. Children grow so fast, you know.”

I nodded, trying to take it in.

“I wanted to do better,” she said, handing me a mug. “Better than I did by you. So we do this, now. We have two children with us right now. Looks as though they’ll be staying; we got word recently that their parents have passed.”

I sipped the tea. I wanted to say something appropriate, but I was awash in memories and the emotions they evoked.

“That’s sweet,” Karlach said thoughtfully. “Gods know I could have done with you when my parents died.” I could see the thought on her face: these people wouldn’t have sold her to Zariel.

“That means a lot,” I said eventually. “Thank you. Though... I don’t think you needed to apologise. I’m a little lost for words.”

“I saw a desperate need and, through inaction, allowed it to continue,” she said, shaking her head. “Absolutely, that deserved an apology. Only 15 or so years too late. I’m just glad I could finally deliver it. We thought you were dead.”

“Speaking of dead...” Astarion muttered.

“Oh. Right,” I said, wiping my face with a hankie. “We actually came here for another reason, too. We just weren’t sure whether to talk to you about it.”

“Well, I’m all ears, darl. What is it?”

“You’ve heard about the rash of murders?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s been a little difficult to miss.”

“Well, we found a list of potential victims dropped by the killer,” I said slowly, trying not to drop this on her too quickly. “Your name was on the list. We think you might be next.”

She looked stunned. Unsurprisingly. Finding out someone wanted you dead? It might be our Tuesday, but regular people didn’t deal with this sort of thing very often.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We’ll help if we can, but you’ll need to take care – we might not be here when they attack.”

“Perhaps it would be best to cancel the fundraiser,” Wyll added.

Cora shook her head. “Everything’s in place. We can’t stop it now. We’d lose money, and we need *more*, not less.”

I glanced at Wyll. “I guess we’re staying for the wine-tasting, then.”

After a brief catchup, Cora went outside to check on the preparations for the fundraiser. Karlach and Astarion prowled away to explore the house.

“That looked pretty rough,” Wyll said. “Would you like a hug?”

“Desperately,” I said, and he knelt by my chair to pull me into an embrace. I relaxed against him, arm around his waist, sighing. “Gods. I wasn’t expecting my past to rise up and bite me today.”

He kissed my forehead. “It’s rather sweet that she and her husband started taking in orphans, though.”

“I think I empathise a little more with Astarion now,” I said. “It’s lovely, and I appreciate that not helping me more led to her wanting to do it... but I also want to scream *yes but what about me?* at the universe for a while.”

He nodded. “I can imagine it being rather bittersweet, when you put it like that.”

“Mmm. Now I feel bad for being so selfish.”

Wyll scoffed. “You must be one of the least selfish people I’ve ever met.”

“Who in their right mind gets envious of orphans?” I asked.

“You’re in turmoil,” Wyll said. “It’s alright. Feel what you need to feel. None of it makes you selfish or bad, dearest.”

I smiled through the turbulent wash of emotion. “It’s usually me saying such things,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“Would you believe there are *no* signs of evildoing in this entire house?” Astarion demanded, walking back into the kitchen. “No children locked in the basement, starving. No fraudulent ledgers. No cache of weapons in the attic. Nothing. Just... Lathandrian prayer books and happy little orphans who love their new home.”

“It’s a little perturbing,” Karlach admitted, following him. “Usually someone this nice is, like, a hag or something. Nope. I think they might just be really lovely people trying to do something good.”

Astarion sniffed. “Or their game is much, much deeper.”

The wine tasting came, and we mingled with the guests. Astarion partook; the rest of us stayed sober. I thought about asking him to limit the indulgence, then shrugged to myself. Worst case; three of us to handle any trouble instead of four. It was hardly the end of the world. Besides, Astarion got drunk on blood occasionally, but wine? Not that I’d ever seen. Vampire biology was probably wildly different to my own. And it might help us to blend in. Just a few mates, here to support their alcohol-loving friend.

Then the trouble hit. The assassin raised his knife, and I ran and leapt at him to knock him down. A woman nearby took out a knife like magic, but Wyll shoved her aside, getting a nasty cut in the process. But the assassin underneath me recovered from his surprise at being tackled, and I had no more attention to spare for what the others were doing. As he reached around himself with both hands, presumably for a blade, I grabbed his shirt in one hand, lifted him, and let him drop. His head cracked against the paving stones, and he went still.

“Any others alive?” I called out.

“Three dead, one ran,” Wyll said behind me. “You want to keep him for questioning?”

I looked at the blood seeping underneath the man, and the body shuddered underneath me, turning into the oddly featureless shapeshifter form. “I think it might be a bit late for that.”

I stood and looked at Wyll, who was cradling his arm. Blood dripped down from his fingers. “Shit. That doesn’t look good.”

“This?” he said, raising the arm to look at the torn flesh. Bone showed through near the elbow, though I doubt he could see that from his vantage point. “Doesn’t hurt.”

“You utter lackwit,” I swore at him. “Get in the house. *Now.*”

Startled, he obeyed. I sat him down, pushed his arm into position, and washed out the wound with water from the kettle. It was still hot, but not enough to scald.

“Ow,” Wyll said. “Why is it suddenly starting to –”

I dripped healing potion carefully down the length of the wound, and it started to close over.

“*Fuck.* That hurts! Why does it only hurt now?”

“Because you were going into shock, you great lump of a man.” I poured leftover tea into a mug and added honey. “Drink this. It won’t fix you, but the honey will help align your humours long enough for me to get you back to our rooms to treat you properly. Fool of a man!”

He laughed, then winced. “I’ve never heard you insult me so many times in such a short amount of time, dear.”

“That’s because you’re usually far more sensible.”

“Yikes,” Astarion said. “Dating Dash seems more dangerous than I realised.”

“Only if you’re enough of a blockhead to jump in front of a knife yelling *Here I am, cut me!*” I snapped.

Karlach laughed. “I’m rather enjoying watching Wyll get abused. Who would’ve thought?”

Wyll shot her a sour look, then smirked.

Back at our rooms, I hunted up bandages and salves.

“It’s healed now though, isn’t it?” Wyll asked, inspecting the scar.

“Mostly,” I said. “But that blade ripped through muscle, and those don’t always heal cleanly, even with the healing potion.”

“Hmm. Like your back,” he said, and I nodded in agreement.

“You seem rather upset with me,” he said, tentative.

I sighed and sat down next to him on a pillow. “I am,” I said. “I realise some of it is probably left over from the shock of seeing Cora again. But you ran to my rescue without thinking, and seriously endangered your dominant arm in the process.”

“I... did,” he said slowly. “I saw her about to get you, and I had to stop her.”

“It was ill-thought-out and dangerous as the hells. You can’t just dash to my defence whenever I’m in danger, Wyll.”

“I’m not sure I agree,” he said, looking thoughtful. “But I’m sorry, regardless.”

“What do you mean, you’re not sure you agree?” I asked, anger rising in me again. Gods, this utter twit of a man!

“You’re our leader,” he said, watching me closely, as though he expected an explosion to happen any time. “You were about to be hit by someone you couldn’t have foreseen would attack you. You were already grappling with another assailant. Realistically, I can fight with one arm. One knife through a kidney, though, and with our healer down, you’d be in serious trouble... and hence, so would we.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “I’m overreacting, aren’t I?”

“You’re... reacting,” he said. “Maybe a little in the wrong direction.”

I salved his arm, inspecting the skin carefully as I went. “I think I want a bandage on this too,” I said. “It’ll help support the muscles as they heal. Might also stop you busting it open again if you indulge in more heroics.”

Wyll laughed. “I love you,” he said, touching my arm with the hand I wasn’t wrapping.

I looked up from my work and smiled despite my sour mood. “I love you too, you great oaf.”

“Alright, you can get back to abusing me now,” he said. “I’ve been fortified.”

“Utter clod,” I said, trying not to laugh. “You’re spoiling my ranting with your logic and rules of engagement.” I finished off the wrap and tied the bandage.

“Kiss it better?” he asked, face smiling but eyes a little sad.

I straddled his legs, careful to avoid jostling his arm, and cuddled close to him. “I think I’m taking out a lot of shock on you, Wyll. I just... she reminded me of so much loss, and then you got yourself sliced, and...”

He wrapped his good arm around me. “I’m here and I’m yours, dearest. It’s alright. Yell at me, abuse me, whatever you need to do. I can take it.”

I leant back to see his face, and kissed his mouth. “No, you’re right. I’m aiming this badly, and I’m sorry. For some of it, anyway. Some of it you probably deserved.”

He laughed, and his face lightened. “I’ll take it,” he said. “Come cuddle with me in bed? This has been a hell of a day, and think you’re probably more tired than you realise. I’m about to drop.”

“We should eat first,” I said, torn.

“Later,” he said, standing up. “Come on, dearest.”

I gave in and let him lead me over to the bed, and we reclined together. I nestled close on his good side, head on his shoulder, and found my eyes drooping shut. Damn the man, he was right – I was more tired than I’d felt.

“How are you feeling?” Wyll asked.

“Exhausted, now,” I said, yawning. “Gods. I don’t know what to make of seeing Cora. Of what she said.”

“You must have felt so alone, so often,” he said, cheek rubbing against my hair.

“Mmm. And realising that help was so close but people just didn’t realise I needed it, or didn’t know what to do. I suppose I have to rethink how I saw everything.”


I felt Wyll nod, but he didn’t say anything. I breathed in, looking for some balance, and fell asleep instead.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man. The surprises I set up for myself, creating Dash as an ex-Lathandrian. 😊

I was halfway through writing this chapter when I realised that Dash and Cora (and Roger) must have met previously. They were both Lathandrians, and while Lathander seems very popular elsewhere, he doesn't seem to have gained a huge foothold in Baldur's Gate. Doesn't have his own temple; doesn't even have his own statue in the Stormshore Tabernacle. So there's a good chance that all devout Lathandrians in the city know each other by sight, at least. Especially since they're both gnomes.

Once I realised that, I could see exactly how their acquaintance had played out, and how Cora must have felt when she saw a recently-orphaned teen she knew just vanish in the city. She must have been devastated when she realised that he was probably dead, and she could have stopped it. I know I have been, when I've suddenly realised I messed up and failed to help someone in desperate need. Sigh.

I hope you're enjoying the story so far! 

Love, Rowan

A long-awaited reunion

When I woke, my stomach grumbled. We'd missed dinner and slept right through to dawn, I realised with a quick look around the room. The others must have decided not to wake us.

I clambered out of the beds and stretched, contemplating my usual routine of meditation and then breakfast. Flip them today, I decided. Meditation wasn't ideal on a full stomach, but even less so on an aggressively empty one. I went downstairs and cajoled a carafe of coffee, a loaf of very fresh bread, a pat of butter, and a small jar of berry jam from the cook. Upstairs, I dug in, sniffing the bread happily. Gods, was there anything better than bread still warm from the oven?

When my stomach was contented, I sat down near the window, curtains drawn, to meditate. Light streamed in over me, and I remembered the innumerable times I'd done this in the past, with my siblings in Lathander all around me. In the monastery, where I'd felt so at home, at peace. In the small threadbare rooms of Dawngreeter Patric, where we followed his soft, deep voice in guided meditations.

Cora had been there. Cora had seen that I was struggling with my lot in life. She had cared. I vaguely remembered appreciating the food bundles; with Jurgen's behaviour towards me, sometimes they were the only thing standing between me and a sleepless, hungry night. It had never occurred to me to think that anyone should have done *more*. And now that I was confronted with the idea, I realised she wasn't entirely wrong. That children kept falling through cracks in Baldurian society was appalling. I'd been lucky enough; I'd had the dawngreeter to show me care, and the adults at the brothel. And I still could have died so easily at the hands of Jurgen or a client.

I breathed in light, and let my emotions flow through me, feeling them and releasing them as I breathed out. Gods; so many emotions. And someone was *doing something*. After the chaos of the refugee camps and the Open Hand temple, that was perhaps the biggest comfort. Even if I envied those orphans just a little. I'd had my mother's love far longer than they'd had theirs.

I sighed, opened my eyes, and stood up. Time for round 2 of breakfast.

"Morning, dearest," Wyll said, sipping from a mug of coffee. "You're the one who got breakfast? My thanks."

I kissed his forehead in passing, and sat down on a cushion. "You're welcome. How's your arm?"

"Stiff and sore," he admitted with a grimace.

"I'll resolve it soon," I promised, loading a piece of bread with butter and jam while Wyll poured coffee for me with his left hand. "It'll probably hurt for a couple of days – that blade sliced through a decent amount of muscle. We might have to get you sparring every day to make sure you don't lose any mobility."

“Oof,” he said. “I didn’t realise it had done so much damage.”

“You couldn’t tell from my unhinged reaction?” I asked, chuckling at the memory of the name-calling that had ensued.

“You *were* surprisingly upset,” he said, grinning. “Are we alright, dearest?”

I nodded with a mouthful of bread, watching him with fond eyes.

“I wasn’t sure whether to be worried that I’d upset you so much, or comforted that you clearly care so much for me,” he said, face soft.

“You weren’t angry that you were injured and I was calling you names?” I asked.

“Hells! No. You were clearly out of your mind with worry, dearest.”

“My stars,” I said softly, smiling at him. “Can’t have my sky going dark.”

His eye filled with sudden tears, and he held out his arms. I went to him, sitting between his legs to lean on his chest, and he wrapped them both around me.

“What’s happening?” I asked, stroking his leg.

“Just appreciating what I have, and almost threw away,” he said, voice cracking.

I rubbed my cheek against his shirt, silent, and squeezed with the arm around his waist. I wasn’t sure how to reply to that, or even if there was a need to do so.

“Ugh. They’re cuddling again,” Astarion said, walking out to pour a mug of coffee. “Make them stop!”

“Never,” I said, grinning at him.

“You confuse me,” he said. “He walks away, and you take him back in an instant as soon as he returns. I saw how devastated you were. I thought we were going to wake up some morning with blood dripping down your wrists. The bastard deserves to suffer a bit more than that.”

I sighed.

“You’re right,” Wyll said, his arms tightening around me. “If it helps, though, it tears me up inside every time I think about it.”

“Good. Think about it extra hard for me,” he said, walking away.

“Well, that was... surprising,” I said, looking up at Wyll. His mouth was turned downwards.

“I love that everyone is so protective of you,” he said, kissing my forehead. “I can handle some well-deserved angry words. Though I’ll admit, I didn’t quite expect them from Astarion.”

“He cares more than he lets on,” I said, thoughtful. “He came and held me one night when I was crying. There’s hidden sweetness in our vampire, though he wouldn’t thank me for saying it.”

“Hmm,” Wyll said, and I remembered the old jealousy issue a smidge too late. “I’m glad he was there for you, darling, when I wouldn’t be.”

I drew his face down so I could kiss him thoroughly.

“How are you feeling this morning?” I asked the duke, handing him a plate of bread and jam.

“Almost fighting fit,” he said, stretching before taking the food. “Thank you, Dash. Do you think...”

I took his pulse on the arm that wasn’t holding his breakfast. It was strong and steady. His eyes were clear and direct; they’d lost the aimless stare and confusion he’d shown when we first rescued him.

“I think we can risk it,” I said. “But please. Keep yourself as calm as possible. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“Hmm. I’ll try,” he said, his tone forbidding.

I winced. This meeting was going to be fraught. On top of Wyll’s other stresses, including the hostility he was still receiving from our friends, it could be devastating. But I had no good reason to delay further.

“He’s been asking for you,” I told Wyll. “I think he’s strong enough to handle a reunion. But...”

“He’s in a terrible mood, and likely to rip my head off?” Wyll spoke lightly, but I could hear the slight quiver in his voice.

“Pretty much,” I said. “Remember that I love you?”

“Always,” he said, smiling at me. He stood and closed his eyes for a second, clearly gathering his resolve. “Come with me?” he asked.

I nodded, and together we went in to finally talk to his father.

“So. Fifteen years, and my profligate son wanders back into my city, trailing devils and destruction, and saves the day,” Duke Ravengard said. He crossed his arms and glared at Wyll. “Look at you! Changed beyond recognition! Devil horns! Why did it have to be *you*? Why couldn’t you stay away? I don’t understand what to do with you. You – you’re like an agent of chaos!”

Well. He certainly *was* feeling better.

Wyll bowed his head, and I realised that to him, there was no defence he could offer. He *could* argue, but he wouldn't. His father loomed too large.

“Sir,” I stepped forward. “Might I explain a few details to you?”

“I appreciate your care for me, Dash. But this is between my son and I.”

I nodded. “Your love for each other is tangled in many conflicting responsibilities,” I said carefully. “But I do have some information that could shed some light on some of your confusion about his actions. If you’re willing to listen.”

“And why are you better equipped to tell me this than my own son? Why does he stand mute while someone else defends him?”

I opened my hands in front of me. “Because there are some things he *cannot* say to you. And there are some things that he *will not* say to you, because his admiration and respect for you is too great.”

The Duke harrumphed. “I don't think I like where this is heading – and be aware that my gratitude will only extend so far. But... continue.”

“You went away when Wyll was 17,” I started.

“Yes, and came back to a warlock!” the Duke thundered. “I know what a person has to do for the powers he sought out, and the underhanded way he sought them while I was away and couldn't stop him...”

“There was a threat. From Tiamat cultists. They were raising Tiamat against Baldur's Gate. Wyll was alerted to it, but he didn't have time to go for help. It was him against 25 cultists. He was **seventeen years old**,” I said, my voice sharp. “Your son did what he'd been raised to do – he saved the city the only way he could see how.

“Was he manipulated? Probably. But he was **seventeen years old**. He had the wit and sense to put together a contract that kept Baldur's Gate safe for decades, and allowed him to live an honourable life *while in servitude to a devil* .

“Your son is the kindest, gentlest, most honourable person I have met on my travels. He teaches children self-defence. He gives alms to beggars. He helped refugees fleeing the Absolute’s armies, over and over, to reach Baldur’s Gate. He is honest and loving. He does not take the easy path if it might hurt an innocent – and if an innocent is harmed inadvertently, he sorrows.

“He damn near worships you, despite the fact that when you came back from a jaunt to find your son devil-ridden and strangely silent about the cause, it never seems to have occurred to you that he might have been *under a flaming geas* and couldn't!

“But,” I continued, with a fond look at Wyll, who was looking rather gobsmacked by my tirade, “you brought up Wyll to be kind, and gentle, and honourable – so I can only assume

you've been suffering under disappointment and misunderstanding, rather than being a complete dunderhead.”

“Oh. So that's how it is,” the Duke concluded, looking grim. “You have a crush on my son. So insulting *me* is the way to his heart?”

“Wyll's only thought for weeks,” I said, gently, “has been finding the father that he loves, admires, and respects so much. He finally finds you and frees you – at much personal cost – and you abuse him to his face instead of thanking him and telling him he's just who you raised him to be and you're proud. Yes, I will defend him when he won't defend himself. Please. Don't strike the person who could never raise a hand to you.”

The Duke's face twisted. “Gods. You make me sound a tormentor and tyrant both.”

“May I show you?”

He frowned, confused. I looked into his eyes, and our illithid parasites stirred, forming a loose connection.

“May I *show* you?” I asked again.

Understanding dawned, and he nodded grimly. I reached blindly to my side and touched Wyll's side, bringing him into the link. Then I showed the duke... everything. *Wyll's memories of making the pact with Mizora. The battle with the Tiamat cultists. Reaching the hostel and running through a burning building to rescue the Duke. Finding him already abducted. Following him to Moonrise Towers through the Underdark and the Shadow-cursed lands. Infiltrating the prison. Finding him already moved to Baldur's Gate. Always arriving just a hair too late, in slightly the wrong place.*

Travelling here... Wyll's face when he saw the Duke alive, but a puppet to the Absolute. The breaking of the pact with Mizora. Wyll's anguish and heartbreak, before and after. The look on his face when he yelled he could never forgive me. His refusal to give up hope for the father he loved so greatly, respected so strongly. Wyll's face when he talked about his father, over and over, and how the Duke had shaped his life.

As I broke the connection, Wyll's arm stole around my shoulders, and I hugged him against my side, feeling a burst of love for this gentle, loving warrior who'd become such a large part of my life.

Duke Ravengard looked... broken. “I misunderstood *everything*,” he said. “And still you defend me. My son, my brave, decent son – I'm so sorry. You gave up everything for this city, and I reviled and scorned you. I believed the worst of you without hesitation. And I was wrong.”

Wyll shook his head. “No! You did what you had to do, to protect the city. I bear you no ill will for that. None.”

The Duke glanced at me. “Your friend's face tells me you might be the only one.” He sighed. “Tell me honestly, though – is the city in more danger with you here or gone?”

Wyll shrugged helplessly. “We've made enemies along the way, I'm sure. But most of them were trying to take Baldur's Gate anyway, so...”

“Oh for gods' sakes,” Astarion drawled, wandering in. “We’ve been here a couple of weeks and we’ve cleared out half your criminal element and killed your main competitor. Give the boy a break if a pissed-off monster or two come banging on the city gates. He's a hero – these things happen with that tiresome breed.”

The Duke hmphed. “Well. I suppose. But please tell me this indolent fop isn't another one of your lovers.”

“Please,” Astarion said. “I'd rather make love to a cardboard cut-out. It would be more exciting.”

I sighed and shut my eyes for a second. “Astarion, we're here to support each other, remember?”

“Oh really? Because it sounded like we were here to yell and snipe.”

The Duke sighed and sat down. “You know, it's probably best we stop now and convene again another day, when we've had time to... think. For the record: thank you all, Wyll included, for the tremendous sacrifices you made to protect this city. I don't know where we go from here, but I'm sure we can sort something out once the dust settles.”

Fittings and mendings

I went up to the roof, looking for a brief moment of peace before I went to talk to Wyll.

“Oh hey, soldier,” Karlach said, turning away from the barricade around the open roof. “What’s up? You look... hmm. Fraught.”

“Wyll just talked to his father,” I said. “Drama ensued.”

“Oh. No hugs and kisses?”

“Abuse and recriminations, more like,” I said, and gave her a brief recap of the morning’s proceedings.

“So he gets his son back after twenty years, a son who’s been traipsing around half of fucking Faerûn trying to track him down, said son actually succeeded in saving him where no one else could... and the first thing he did was yell at him?” Karlach asked.

“Pretty much,” I said with a sigh.

“No *Hi son lovely to see you I’m so glad you’re still alive since I left you to fend for yourself* ? No *Oh wow that’s not quite the face I remember; what’s the story there* ?”

“Not exactly, no. More *Oh no why did it have to be you that rescued me! What infernal chaos are you going to bring down on my house this time?* which, given the circumstances, seems a little rich.”

“You gave him an earful, right? Please tell me you reamed that asshole up one side and down the other,” Karlach snarled. Wyll was... one of her favourite people, to put it mildly.

“In a nutshell. And now... I’m not sure Wyll is very happy about it,” I said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have interfered. He’s perfectly capable of defending himself if he wants to.”

“Oh, fuck that!” Karlach said, steaming. “He thinks that man’s some sort of saint! Fucking asshole, like all wannabe saints.”

“Well, he listened and admitted he got a lot of things topsy-turvy. So I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But hey –Astarion came to Wyll’s defence,” I said, smiling.

“Oh HO! Things must be bad when even Fangs is speaking up! Never thought I’d see the day, myself.”

With some fresh air and a hug from Karlach, I felt ready to tackle the next challenge – talking to Wyll. Who, I assumed, wouldn’t be overly happy about the reckless way I’d dealt with his father.

“Hey,” I said, finding him in the common area of our rooms.

He smiled a little at me. “Hey.”

“How are you feeling?”

“All at sea. Gods, Dash. Whatever possessed you to speak that way to my father?” Wyll asked.

“I’m sorry if I made things harder for the two of you,” I said. “I’m used to keeping a better emotional balance, but the way he spoke to you – Gods, Wyll. It was horrible. It aroused all my protective urges.”

“I... honestly don't know if you made things better or worse,” he said, sitting down on a cushion and putting his head in his hands. “I was almost comfortable with him yelling at me. It felt... normal. That's how I remember leaving him. He was so angry and confused. But hells, you made me sound like a paragon of every virtue, wronged by a terrible tyrant.”

“Mmm,” I said, hesitant to express the thought that his description seemed rather apt, from what I'd witnessed.

“I want him to love you,” he said, raising his head, “and you just walked in there and challenged him over and again. You do *not* choose the easy path.”

I knelt in front of him and offered a hand. He took it, kissing a finger gently. “I want him to truly see the man you've become,” I said. “Wyll – whatever happens, regardless, you are worthy of your father's love and respect. So very worthy.”

He dropped his head, and his shoulders quivered. “Will you hold me?” he asked, voice muffled. “I think – I could do with the company to keep me from wandering dark paths.”

“Of course,” I said, and stood. “Come to bed. Let me be your safe harbour.”

I lay down, with a pillow on my shoulder to accommodate a horn, and motioned an invitation. He curled up around me, head on my shoulder, horns brushing my face.

“Gods, what a day,” I said, and he laughed shakily.

“I don't know how I'd have gotten through it without you. We've been through so much together, been to the literal hells, and it's reuniting with my loving father that I struggle most with. I'm not sure what that says about me.”

“That you're a regular mortal, I suspect,” I said, lightly kissing his forehead. I pulled the blankets over us, and eventually fell asleep, with Wyll's head on my shoulder, and his hot breath on my neck.

At breakfast the next morning, I pushed onwards. We needed to find Orin and eliminate her before she terrorised the city any further. And to pick up her netherstone.

“Alright, next on the list, I guess?” I asked.

“What if they just go back and slaughter Cora?” Karlach asked.

“We can't just hang about protecting her,” Astarion objected. “We have places to go! People to kill!”

I grinned at him. “Astarion has a point. Although if anyone feels like volunteering to sit around at Cora's for the day, it might give us all some welcome peace of mind.”

“Count me in,” Karlach said. “I'd like to see those bastards try to sneak back. I'll set their arses alight.”

Wyll laughed. “I'd rather like to see that.”

“Bad luck,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “You're with me.”

“Damn,” he said, “my heart is broken.”

Astarion snorted. I sighed, thinking about how much work I'd need to do to fix the group dynamic.

“Anyway,” I said. “Next person on the list is Figaro Pennygood. Anyone heard of him?”

“And here I was thinking we'd be stuck going after some relentlessly cheery do-gooder,” Astarion exclaimed. “This day is looking up!”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“A tailor at Facemaker's Boutique,” he said, looking me up and down. “Something I assume you've only ever heard of.”

“Hey!” I said, laughing. “My clothes are... perfectly serviceable...”

“Yes, for mopping up blood,” he pointed out. “I suppose they do a lot of that, to be fair. But Figaro will set you up with something nice. Maybe even make you look a little taller.”

I made a rude gesture at him, learnt in the sewers of the city, and his eyes widened before he laughed.

“Right. Off to Facemaker's, then,” I said. “Astarion, you know the way?”

“Like the back of my hand.”

“Gale? Feel like a little shopping and random heroics?”

“My favourite combination,” he said, deadpan. “I'm in.”

“Alright. Gale, I'm guessing Hold spells might be useful. Astarion: sneak around and strike from the shadows, if you can find any in a tailor's shop. Wyll and I to draw attacks and go in close. Any issues?”

Everyone shook their heads, except for Shadowheart.

“I can't help but notice I'm left out,” she said.

I nodded. “I'd like you, Jaheira, and Halsin to head out onto the city. See if you can find any sign of that Sharran enclave. Stay with the druids, though; I don't want to find myself rescuing you from the stronghold of the scary dark goddess.”

She snorted, but nodded.

“All good?” I asked, and received silent nods. “Let's go, then.”

“Are you alright?” I asked an unusually quiet Wyll as we followed Astarion to the tailor's.

“Mmm. Just smarting from a well-placed sound of derision,” he said, reaching for my hand. “Utterly justified, mind you, but it's the comment last night that hit hard. That they thought they'd wake up to find you with slit wrists.”

“Mmm. I was rather inconsolable for a while there.”

Wyll stopped in the middle of the street, kneeling. “Dearest,” he said, pulling me into a hug. “I'm sorry. I love you.”

I kissed his cheek and pulled away gently. “I'm fine. And this is feeling a little repetitive.”

He stood and smiled at me, heedless of the people glaring at us for blocking the way. “I decided to just apologise every time the guilt got too much, rather than sinking into self-recriminations.”

I chuckled, and jogged with him to catch up with Astarion and Gale. “I suppose I'd rather hear occasional repetitive apologies, over days' worth of monologues on how bad you feel.”

“Exactly. I knew I was smarter than I give myself credit for.”

At the tailor, we spent an uncomfortable while being measured, prodded, and stared at thoughtfully. Gale and Astarion seemed to enjoy the process thoroughly; me a little less so.

“I don't usually tailor garments for uhhh... one of your stature,” Figaro said, looking at me, head cocked. “I'm not sure exactly how to compensate for your obvious deficiencies. A feathered hat? No, that will only make it clearer. Perhaps some boots with nice gilding down the sides? Draw one's attention to the ground, where everyone is equal.”

I sighed. “My height,” I said firmly – so firmly I almost believed it – “is not a problem to be compensated for. Nor a deficiency. Keep a civil tongue in your head, please.”

His eyebrows twitched upwards. “Well. You clearly know nothing about fashion. Tall is *in* this season.”

I looked him up and down. “You're hardly a paragon of *that* dubious virtue yourself, you know.”

He snorted derisively. “Do you want an outfit from the master outfitter in the entire Sword Coast, or not?”

“I’m starting to wonder,” I muttered darkly.

It was a relief when the assassins burst in.

“Gale!” I yelled.

“Got it!” he called back, and stopped the one who got away before – a dwarf, I noticed – in his tracks with a Hold spell.

Mopping up his compatriots was a simple task. Getting Orin’s location was likely to be anything but.

“Where’s Orin?” I demanded.

“Temple of Bhaal. Entrance in Cauldhallows,” he gasped. “Use the password *Scleritas*.”

I blinked. That was a lot easier than I’d expected.

“Why tell us?” Gale asked.

“Orin wants to see you, of course,” he said, grinning widely. “Oh, she wants to see your innards, festooning her shoulders like a bloody cloak.”

“Lovely,” Gale muttered. “I knew she had terrible fashion sense.”

“Are we done?” Astarion demanded.

I nodded, and he slid a knife between the man’s ribs from behind. Bright red blood gushed out, and the tailor moaned.

“My carpets!”

“Your *life*,” I snapped, and he subsided.

“Feels a bit unsporting to kill a man while he’s held down and cooperating,” Wyll said, staring down at the corpse at our feet.

“Given that he was an assassin and a follower of Bhaal who would have tortured, maimed, and killed us in a heartbeat?” Gale said. “I’m not likely to lose any sleep over the sport of it all.”

I nodded. “There’s a time for respecting one’s enemies, I think – and it starts when they deserve respect.”

“Hmm,” Wyll said.

“Pretend he’s a goblin child,” Astarion said. “That should make it all better.”

I pressed my lips shut. No reaction I have would be useful here. Especially not the near-hysterical laughter I felt bubbling up inside.

“I really think I should be compensated for the damages,” Figaro complained. “Look at my shop! Look what you've done to it!”

“You could finish outfitting us, so you get paid *and* have high-profile clients wearing your garb,” Wyll pointed out.

“But my furnishings!”

“But your *liver!*” Astarion gibed. “We just saved your life, you simpering, prattling nincompoop. He was about to poison you and cut your hand off. Slowly. While you tried to scream. Show us some appreciation. Or at least some rare fabrics.”

“Hey,” I said, putting a hand on the tailor's arm. “I know you're rattled. I know they came in here and messed up your life. But we're trying to help you.”

He sighed. “Fine. One outfit each. I'll even throw in the modifications for free. Just make sure you wear them a lot. I'll need the advertising if I'm going to redecorate.”

We finished the consultations, with fewer muttered complaints about my lack of presence and height, and left our address at the Elfsong for delivery.

“Well! Shopping and murder indeed! That's put quite a spring in my step!” Gale exclaimed. “What's next? Sorcerous Sundries?”

I looked at him and laughed. Somehow he'd been caught in a spray of blood, and had an oddly speckled appearance that was most perturbing in bright sunlight. “Back to the tavern, I think,” I said. “I'm not sure the shopping public are ready for us looking like this.”

Gale scrubbed at his cheek, and looked at the resulting mess on his fingers. “Oh. I see. That might cause a few stares, true.”

How to annoy a devil

“So, Wyll,” Mizora said, lazing in our suite. “How does it feel to know that you’ve sentenced your father to die?”

Wyll’s face crumpled.

“Rather a power-hungry move for my scrappy little hero pup, I thought. Snatching the Ravengard name and control of the city in one fell swoop, so to speak. I couldn’t be more proud.”

“We rescued him without your help,” I pointed out. “He didn’t have to die.”

“Oh, but Wyll agreed to his death in return for the contract being broken.”

“Wyll agreed to no such thing. *You* broke the contract voluntarily.”

“You dare question *me* on the legalities of an infernal contract? Upstart little thing, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “Call up your witnesses. Ask them to repeat *exactly* what Wyll said.”

She called out a few words, and two cambions appeared in circles of hellfire. They repeated Wyll’s words: *Don’t help us get my father out. No new contract.*

“I don’t hear any agreement to amend the existing contract, *or* sign a new one,” I observed. “Wyll, were you intending to trade your father’s death for removing six months from your contract to Mizora?”

“Of course not!” he said, face twisting with anger.

I shrugged. “We appreciate that you broke the contract early, Mizora. It gives us a lot more freedom and peace of mind in fighting the Absolute – a goal we share, remember. But you have no contractual right to go after Duke Ravengard, nor Wyll. Legally, your ties are broken.”

Mizora glared at me, then lifted her head. “Well. Aren’t you the shyster. Wyll, I thought better of you – I really did.” She vanished.

“Shit,” Wyll swore. “That’s going to come back and bite us in the arse at the worst possible time.”

I nodded. “I know – but at least it should take some heat off your father. She might not get as much support in Avernus for an attack on him if she has no legal standing. Besides – she might hold off until after we’ve dealt with the Absolute, at least.”

“Until I have no powers.”

“Mmm. But let’s cross *that* bridge when we get to it. For now, she’s angry at *us*, and honestly, I think I’d rather she be trying to break you and I up or something.”

“Thank you. That was some tricky manoeuvring. Did you plan that from the start? When she proposed the new contract?”

“Not really. I was just trying to make sure you saw through her bullshit of two impossible choices to the third one underneath, and I was hoping any wording you used would be vague enough to work.”

“Hells. And you didn’t tell me this why?”

I walked up close to him and he knelt on one knee. I put my arms around his shoulders and breathed him in.

“I’m sorry.” I said. “It’s been a big few weeks. I keep finding things I’ve forgotten to do or say.”

Wyll nodded and folded his arms around me. “Once again you pull the Ravengards out of trouble,” he said. “I can’t be upset about the rest. Thank you.”

“Now. Maybe we can start thinking about how to mollify a powerful devil. What do cambions like? Chocolate?”

He laughed. “We’re going to need a *lot* of chocolate.”

“Would you come for a walk with me?” Wyll asked.

“I’d love to. I’ve been doing this all day, and I’m sick of the smells,” I said, pouring a tincture into a jar of salts and stirring gently. “I’ve been dealing with this for a decade, but I really am sick to death of makeshift alchemy labs.”

“We’re not overly fond of the smells, either,” Karlach pointed out, wandering past. “We love the results, mind you. But oooof. I’m out of here myself. I want to smell air that only stinks of dead fish and sewerage.”

I snorted. My potions smelt *much* better than dead fish and sewerage. I sniffed the potion and considered. Well. Most of them did.

Wyll waited patiently while I bottled up the results and capped them. I looked up at him, smiling. “All done. Let’s go?”

He nodded and took my hand. As we walked out of the tavern, I inhaled. “Huh. Maybe that potion is stinkier than I realised.”

“It... was rather impressively whiffy,” Wyll admitted. “That’s not why I did this, though.”

“Did what?” I asked, confused.

“You'll see,” he said, smiling but looking worried.

We walked to a group of shops near the harbour, then Wyll pulled out a key to unlock a door. “I realised that we've been here for weeks now, and you haven't done what brings you joy for months. I know our lives are chaotic, but I see no reason you couldn't be healing people other than us, if you wanted to.”

He opened the door to usher me inside, and lit some candles. Drying herbs hung from the rafters, lightly perfuming the air. A small bed and folding screen stood at the far end.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I... put down a year's rent on this place,” he said, his eyes concerned. “Dash, I want you to have your healing booth. I know this might not be what you had in mind, but it's fairly close to Heapside, and –”

I grabbed him and wrapped my arms around his waist. “I don't know what to say,” I said, my heart full of joy, my voice muffled in his robe.

“Do you like it?” he asked, drawing away a little so he could kneel in front of me. “I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing. It felt rather presumptuous to organise this without consulting you, but I wanted to present you with a *fait accompli* – so you couldn't protest that you don't *need* something like this.”

I laughed wryly, since I'd been thinking exactly that. “I think I love it,” I said slowly, looking around. There was a long bench along the front wall, with a large, comfortable-looking chair tucked underneath it. Glass retorts and candles were arranged on top. “You put a lot of thought into this.”

“I had help from Derryth,” he admitted. “She set it up, for a modest fee.”

I grinned at him. “It's amazing. And you're right. I have been missing the healing work. Although I won't be able to keep very regular hours.”

“Villains not being known for their tendency to send invitations and RSVPs?” Wyll asked, smiling.

“Mmm. I didn't think it worth trying to set up a booth because of that, and the amount of time it would take to put up and take down each day. But this is... this is perfect.”

He grinned. “I didn't mess up?”

“Not in the slightest, Wyll. Thank you. This is... so thoughtful of you. I never could have expected this.”

“I want you to be happy and fulfilled,” he said, suddenly serious. “You've been stressed and strained for weeks now. And most of that is because of me, or because you've been helping me. I want you to have something that's all yours. That you love doing. Not that I can imagine healing people being a walk in the park, but... it seems to bring you joy. I've missed seeing joy in your eyes, dearest.”

My eyes filled with tears.

“Hells. Please tell me those are happy tears. I hate making you cry, darling.”

I nodded, sniffing.

He knelt in front of me, arms open, and I pulled him close. I rested my head on his shoulder and sobbed, not even sure why I was crying. Random emotions that needed to get out somehow, perhaps.

Wyll wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, kissing my cheek. When I drew back, he was smiling, but his eyes were still a little worried.

“What else does it need?” he asked, obviously trying to shake off his concerns. “I’m sure there are things I’d never think of that you’ll need or want. I have paper and quills and ink to make a list.”

I looked around, thinking. What sort of injuries and illnesses was I most likely to see? The docks weren’t too far away: cuts from filleting knives, barbed hooks in legs and hands, and near-drownings. I couldn’t rely on healing potions; the ingredients were too rare and expensive. I could snaffle a few from our supplies, but I’d mostly need to rely on more common herbal remedies.

“Clean rags,” I said, and Wyll dipped his quill and started to write. “Empty glass bottles for potions. Two cauldrons, at least – I’m going to be boiling a lot of rags for padding and bandages. A surgery kit. Steel needles. Steel or glass trays. Is there a backyard or balcony?”

Wyll took my hand to lead me upstairs. A comfortable-looking double bed took up most of the space, with a screened-off tub for bathing. A door on the other side of the room led to a surprisingly roomy and sunny balcony on the roof of the floor below, already lined with plant pots.

I smiled. “You thought of everything,” I said, leaning against him.

“I didn’t know which herbs you’d need to grow for yourself,” he said. “Derryth says she knows some growers who might supply you. And of course, she has a few seedlings in her greenhouse. But it felt presumptuous to make those decisions for you. More so than the rest.”

“It’s perfect. All of it,” I said quietly. “I’m lost for words. Except...”

“Yes, dearest?”

“There is a bed right here...”

Wyll sighed and drew away to kneel in front of me. “Darling, I love you. I want us on an even keel again. And while I’d love to kiss you and touch you again... this feels like gratitude, not... not a natural progression of intimacy. Do you know what I mean?”

I nodded, stroking his cheek. “I understand, Wyll. It’s just... I’ve spent so much time feeling lonely and sad. I’d like to spend some time doing something fun. And... I really want to

spend some time lost in your kisses.”

I felt a wave of sadness and frustration. I started to drop my head to hide it, then stopped. Hiding how I felt was getting to be a bad habit. I raised my face, let him see the conflicting emotions filling me.

“Oh, my darling,” he said, pulling me into a hug. “Come here. Let me hold you and kiss you for a while.”

We lay down together on the bed, and Wyll stroked my cheek gently, running fingers through my beard. “My light,” he said, and pressed his lips against mine. I opened my mouth to him, our tongues sliding slowly against each other, and warmth flowed down my spine.

“Would you like to do the skin-healing thing?” he asked, and I nodded, sitting up to strip off my shirt. He did the same, and we lay back down, skin to skin, his mouth on mine.

“Gods,” I said, pressing against him. “I didn't realise how much I needed just this.”

His arms tightened around me. “I'm sorry, darling. I was trying to take things slowly – let our bond heal naturally.”

“Mmm. Good theory, at least,” I said. “But, Wyll...”

“I'm failing to kiss you enough?”

“Mmm.”

He bent to remedying the situation, and I relaxed against him, letting my focus narrow to his mouth on mine and his claws sliding gently over my chest, down my belly and leg, soothing and arousing all in one.

“It's alright?” he asked, drawing away a little.

“Perfect. Please?” I asked, and he bent to kiss slowly down my throat as I let the sensations fill me, drowning out thought and worry. Just pleasure, and a gentle feeling of *rightness*.

When we got back to the tavern, Gale was pacing. He looked at Wyll and I, and somehow managed to smile with his mouth and frown with his eyes at the same time.

“You saw it,” he said to me. “You liked it? You look... happier.”

“You knew about this?” I asked.

“Gale was my best advisor on the project,” Wyll said, smiling at him. Gale's return look was... still less than friendly. “I needed someone to bounce ideas off – someone who knows you well and loves you.”

I walked over to Gale and held out my arms. He knelt to hug me, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “Thank you,” I said. “I know this wasn't a simple task.”

“I love you both,” Gale said. “I want you happy. You know that.”

“I’m hungry,” I said. “I’m heading down to the kitchen to see what I can scrounge.”

The chef downstairs had a vegetable stew, fairly fresh bread, and butter. I bought enough for everyone, and loaded a tray to take it upstairs.

“... harbour any ill feelings from you protecting Dash,” Wyll was saying. “I know you worry about him. I can’t be angry that you’re upset with me over all this. But do know – I’m doing my best to work through it and make things better, not just buy his love back. He may be too forgiving for his own good, but he won’t be bought. Only loved.”

I cleared my throat and walked in, putting the tray down on a low table.

“We were just talking about you,” Gale said. It might have been my imagination, but the look he flashed Wyll seemed less chilly.

“I’m, uhhh... starting to feel a little like an invalid with too many nurses,” I said, ladling out a bowl of stew for myself. “I know I haven’t been myself lately. But this is feeling a little cloying.”

“Noted,” Wyll said, smiling and sitting down next to me, taking a piece of bread and buttering it. “I’ll try to hover a little less.”

Gale sighed. “I’m sorry. Tara called this my mothering mode.”

I laughed. “Did you know you’re the camp mother?”

Gale blinked.

“A little secret Wyll let me in on a while ago. I’m Father; you’re Mother.”

Gale laughed. “I don’t know how to respond to this revelation.”

“Eat,” I said. “Take your own advice, Mother.”

Reflections

The lodgings were quiet, everyone was thinking about turning in... but I was restless, so I sat in the living area toying with a book. I couldn't even decide if I wanted to read or not.

"So," the Duke said behind me, "you and my son, hmm?"

Looks like my quandary was solved.

I turned and gestured an invitation to sit next to me.

"I'm sorry if it's not what you wanted for him," I said carefully. "I know it makes things awkward in multiple ways."

"Ha!" he barked. "As if my son's lover were the biggest issue we'll need to deal with. My son's a devil and part illithid. I don't know if he could father human children even if he were so inclined. I'm not sure how the city would feel about a family of mindslayer-tieflings in the patriar ranks. And frankly – I had doubts he would be inclined to marriage long ago.

"No," he continued, "What you are is fine. Whatever it is. Wyll hasn't told me and I haven't asked. You're the leader of the group who pulled me out of the Iron Throne and stuck the middle finger to Lord Gortash himself, and for that if nothing else, you'd be... acceptable."

He sighed, and looked at me.

"When you shared with me," he said hesitantly. "You shared... possibly more than you meant. It felt like a deep, abiding love for my son. Was it just part of the melding, or is that really how you feel? The way you defended him to me certainly implies it, but – is this just a passing fad, or do you truly love Wyll?"

I smiled. "I'm not sure you got the half of it, if you can still ask."

He frowned, and I realised he wanted a better answer. I sighed, trying to sort out my still-complicated feelings.

"Yes. I love him. I admire and respect him; I think he's one of the best people I've ever met. For those reasons, I would love him. But it's more than that. He has the soul of a poet. His spirit... vibrates in tune with mine. He understands me, and I him, and if we find ourselves lost, we can talk together and end closer than before. We can disagree and argue, and accept the other regardless. That's... that's why I want to be with him."

"One of the best people you've met, but utterly the best person for you?" the Duke asked, his eyes crinkling.

I nodded. "I'm sorry if this all sounds hopelessly young and naive, but –"

“No, that’s exactly what I wanted to know,” the Duke interrupted. “I had that sort of bond with my wife, Wyll’s mother – I miss her every day. She and I worked together so well, and I’ve felt... hobbled, I suppose – ever since she died. While your love seemed honest, it also seemed tinged with a little hero worship. I wanted to find out for myself. Hero worship is all very well – we all need heroes; but we should never marry them.”

My breath caught.

“I don’t know you enough to say that my son has chosen well,” the Duke said. “But I’m content. Wyll deserves the sort of love written in stories and the stars. Love him well.”

The Duke stood to leave, and I put out a hand to stop him. “Thank you,” I said, honestly. “I was so worried that you’d hate me, for so many reasons, and then I yelled at you. When you were just out of bed, what’s more. I’m sorry.”

The Duke shook his head. “Never apologise for fighting a righteous fight, and being as harsh as you were kind. I needed to hear what you had to say. There’s nothing to forgive.”

He turned away, then came back to sit down next to me. “I meant to say,” he said. “You helped Wyll escape his contract. You talked him into not taking the new one in return for my life.”

I nodded, uncertain where this was going.

“Thank you,” he said. “Especially for not allowing him to sign away his soul for my mortal life. That would have grieved my heart for the rest of my sorry life, that my boy felt a need to lose his eternal soul to give me a few more years. Bless you for the wisdom with which you argued. I... had the impression it has led to trouble between you.”

“It did... perhaps has,” I agreed. “I... was not gentle, sir Duke. And Wyll loves you dearly.”

“Hmm.”

“I would do it again, though,” I said, thoughtful. “If I lost him entirely, I think... I’d rather that than have him lose his soul.”

He smiled. “Me too, Dash.”

He strode away, presumably to ready himself for bed.

Well. If I’d been restless before, I was triply so now. I realised that meditation might be a good idea, what with the sheer turmoil of my emotions. I crossed my legs, rested the backs of my palms on my knees, and let the world drift away. I slowed my breathing, relaxing muscles. Thoughts came and went – emotions did the same – I watched them, but didn’t let them lead me out of my centre. When I felt calm, I opened my eyes.

Wyll sat in front of me, kneeling, eyes closed – to all senses doing exactly as I had been. Hmmm.

“Hi,” I said, quietly enough that he could easily ignore me if he needed or wanted to.

Wyll's eyes opened, and he smiled at me. It was a relaxed, happy smile; the sort I hadn't seen on his face very often, in recent times.

"You look as though half the world's weight left your shoulders," I observed.

"I overheard some of your conversation with my father," he said. "I'm sorry; this isn't a very private place at times."

I shrugged in rueful agreement. "Seems fair," I said. "It was mostly about you anyway."

He grinned. "Still."

I tilted my head. "Is it reconciling with your father that has you feeling better?"

"Yes? And no, I suppose," he said, thoughtful. "Hearing you and my father talk – I realised you both love me. Both forgive me. I've been half out of my mind, thinking that he'd realise that I don't measure up to his standards. Or that it would dawn on you what a cad I'd been, and you'd decide never to trust me again."

"Oh, Wyll. Of course we do. Of *course* your father does. You're his son. He asked about you every day he was even vaguely lucid. Deep down, all he wanted was to see you again. Besides, you did your best, and you did it admirably. For years, with no love, no support, no... no connections. Your father knows now that you're exactly who he raised you to be, only more so – you've transcended those bounds."

Wyll smiled a little.

"I'm so used to feeling as though I'm the mistake. *Daddy's biggest regret*, that hag threw at me. I think maybe I just started to let go of that title."

Tears sprang to my eyes. He reached out to touch my face, and wipe a tear from my eye with his thumb. "Happy tears?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"I also heard what you said about me," he said, looking down. "You really feel that way? About us? Still?"

I reached out to tip his chin upwards so I could meet his eyes, lightly brushing his lips with a finger. The illithid parasites connected, and I offered my mind to his. "See for yourself," I said.

I took myself back through our every encounter – the good, the bad, the wonderful. I let myself simply remember how I felt when I was near him, when I touched him, when we spoke and fought and kissed.

When I first laid eyes on him, leaping down from the wall of the druid grove, theatrically flourishing a rapier and declaiming a flashy line. The next, completely contrasting view as he comforted a small orphan child. Touching his face for the first time and thinking it must be the parasite causing my sudden desire. How good it felt to touch him.

When he fell in battle and I wasn't sure if I could get to him in time. When I lay on the ground dead, after a particularly rough fight, and Wyll's tear-stained face was the first thing I saw when I came gasping back to life, and there wasn't a bit of surprise in my heart that he'd move heaven and hells to bring me back if he could.

How it felt when he wasn't there for days. Not just the heartbreak, but instinctively reaching out for comfort or advice to find only an empty space where I'd grown so accustomed to finding his love and support. When I saw something lovely and wanted to share it with him. When we triumphed over Gortash and the victory felt odd and hollow because I wasn't anointing Wyll's wounds afterwards or watching him drink to the fallen enemy.

The comfort that his embrace had offered me over and over again. That if I was sad or in pain, he'd offer solace and respite.

That paradoxically, his pact with Mizora had been what started me falling in love with him.

His curiosity flooded me at that, so I took him deeper.

To old insecurities and hurts. To my cravings for morality, and the disillusionment I found when the people I loved prized their rules over the well-being of those around them. To distrusting the moral and ethical in favour of those who, ironically, felt more trustworthy – because they'd at least care for those they loved and valued. And then... Wyll. Someone deeply ethical, deeply moralistic... who would choose the 'wrong' thing in a heartbeat if it were the only way to protect something or someone he loved. Who somehow balanced loyalty and righteousness to near-perfection.

He withdrew gently from the connection then, and held out his arms. I gladly embraced him, resting my chin on his shoulder, relaxing slowly. I hadn't realised quite how much tension I'd built up during the sharing.

"I hope that wasn't... offensive," I said, voice muffled in his shoulder. I didn't really want to move. "I know it can be weird seeing yourself through others' eyes. It's always oddly distorted and wrong."

"No, it was... illuminating," he said, with an odd chuckle. "Hells, I feel like a new person. I've just seen reflections of myself in the two people I love the most, and I barely recognise myself. But with a few exceptions, it's the person I've always wanted to be."

"You are quite an astounding person," I pointed out.

"Mmm. As are you, dearest one. In two or so tendays you've managed to yank my father from the icy jaws of certain death, reconcile the two of us, and lay to rest half of my insecurities and sorrows."

"Only half?" I asked, leaning back to meet his gaze.

He laughed. "Hells, Dash. Do you never stop aiming for the stars?"

"Not when you're the stars, love."

“May I kiss you?”

I laid my lips on his, and we melted into a long, slow kiss full of love and promise.

“Wyll?” I asked softly.

“Dearest?”

“How do you feel about me, though?”

“Well, that’s only fair. Do we need to meld again, though? I think twice in one day might hurt.”

“I think words are fine.”

“When I’m confused, and I don’t know what to do, I think of you. I think of your kindness to every thief, goblin, and ragamuffin we came across. Hells, even illithids. Didn’t matter; you let every single entity show you their heart before you acted. I think you would show mercy to Mizora herself. I started out resenting that; it felt like a waste of time. Dangerous. Then I realised that you did the same for me; had *always* done that for me. You know that my greatest pain was how things went when my father banished me from the city. You... wouldn’t have done that. You would have seen a sudden change and *worried* instead of getting angry. Your acceptance is something I love about you; but it’s also what drew me inevitably towards you.

“But that’s something about who you are, and what you’ve done for me. Like you said to my father... I would love you for that. But... I asked for romance, and you understood and gave me the most enchanting, sweet, and passionate courtship I could have imagined. When you’re hurting, you reach out and let me comfort you. When passions are volatile between us, you bring a steady head and... and a loving heart. It’s not just about what you do, it’s how you approach this... it’s captivating. It suits what I want. *You* are what I want.

“I’m sorry it’s not poetry, but – well, maybe I’m not. Maybe this shouldn’t be poetry just this once. Maybe you deserve the unvarnished, unpretty truth of how I feel about you. Which is that I love you, I admire you, I think you make an excellent partner... and I can’t imagine ever wanting anyone else, because you far surpass my wildest dreams.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

“Ah, my dearest one, speechless for once. I think I’ll treasure this moment for years to come.”

I relaxed into his arms, then, trying to just be in the moment. Maybe he was right, and that’s who I’d really managed to become. Regardless, it was a pretty picture.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “I think I’ll treasure this day for many reasons. But one of them is because you just called me *love* again.”

I looked up at him.

“Having you open back up to me after that hurt... my dearest one, I can't tell you how humbled I feel. Hells. I love you so. I'm the luckiest man on Toril, to have someone like you.”

I nestled against him and thought for a while. “I feel the same way, love. You might be feeling bad just now because of everything that happened, but... it will be the other way around, at some point. I'm far from perfect. And I hope you'll be as willing to let me back into your heart when it does.”

“Always, dearest. I'm yours.”

My heart swelled. “Gods. Say that again.”

“I'm yours, darling. All yours.”

“Mmm. I can't imagine ever tiring of hearing that,” I said. “Love – will you kiss me?”

He bent down to kiss me, lips slowly caressing mine.

“Gods,” I murmured. “If we had a bit more privacy...”

“We have a key to the shop..?”

“Oh,” I said, drawing back and grinning at him. “I'd forgotten about that. Come on. Let's go and test that bed again.”

He smiled slowly. “You're sure, dearest?”

“You *really* need to stop asking me that.”

He laughed.

Upstairs in the shop, I pulled him onto the bed. “Come here, love,” I said. “Shirt off. I want to feel you against me.”

He pulled off his shirt and lay down beside me, running tentative fingers down my side. “What do you have in mind?”

I sat up to yank off my shirt, then pulled him close, rubbing myself against him.

“Hells,” he murmured. “Dearest, may I kiss you?”

I slid eager lips against his, and his arms pulled me tight against him. I slid my tongue over his lips, wanting to taste his mouth, and he opened to me. I slipped a hand to the back of his neck and pulled on his braids, pushing my tongue into his mouth. I kissed him, hard and demanding, until his hands slipped down to my arse, stroking slowly. I pushed my hardening cock against his belly, biting his lower lip lightly, and he gasped.

“Tell me I'm yours,” he said.

“You’re mine, Wyll Ravengard,” I said softly, tightening my grip on his hair, pulling his head back, watching his face go slack. “Mine. Don’t you forget it, love.”

“Music to my ears,” he said, coming back to himself and smiling at me. “I love when you do that to me.”

“Why?”

“No idea. Perhaps I just like the idea of belonging to you, body, heart, soul.”

“Mmm. I certainly like that idea,” I said, sliding down his body to press my very hard cock against his. “Especially the body part just now.”

“Oh, by all the hells,” he said, a shiver running through him. “Slow down, my dearest. I’m about to lose all control.”

“Do you really want me to slow down?” I asked, licking his nipple. His back arched to push himself against me, and he groaned.

“Not at all,” he said, looking at me with eyes glazed with lust. “I want to lie underneath you with your dick buried in my arse, darling. Hells. I’m desperate for it. Feeling your dick against me drives me wild.”

I grinned. “I’d turn you over and tease you with my cock sliding over your arse, but we’ve seen how well my self-control lasts against that lovely piece of you.”

“Mmm. True. Will you do it anyway?”

“Gods. I can’t resist a request like that.”

He turned over so that we were spooning, me in the unfamiliar position of big spoon, and I ran my hands over his arse. “I love your face,” I told him, “but gods. This arse of yours makes me see stars.” I kissed down his shoulder blades.

He tightened his arse muscles, and I groaned. I wanted to press my cock against them, badly. I gave in, pulling his hips roughly against me, sliding my cock against his arse crack, and he cried out.

“Alright, love?” I asked, and he nodded, breathing hard.

“I want you,” he said, voice throaty. “Dash…”

I let my cock move slowly against his arse, drunk on the sensation, imagining my cock buried inside him. Soft, warm muscles flexed against me, just a couple of layers of fabric away.

“Hells,” Wyll murmured.

“If I had the choice between sipping the nectar of the gods in Elysium, or lying here with your arse nestled against my cock, I’d choose to be right here, love,” I said, sliding against him in the age-old rhythm.

He groaned.

“What do you want, Wyll?” I asked softly.

“Your dick inside me,” he said, pressing backwards against me. “You shoving into me; your hand stroking my dick. Hells. I want to climax like that, trapped between you and your hand, helpless to do anything but feel the ecstasy you bring me, dearest.”

Arousal flooded me. Gods, I wanted to lose all inhibitions and control. I wanted exactly what he described; to push my cock deep inside him. To feel that arse all around it. Make him cry out as he climaxed.

I let my hand drift down his hip as I pushed my cock against him, stroking up over his thigh, avoiding his loins narrowly, prompting a sound of frustration. “Like this, then?” I asked, kissing his back.

“Mmm. So close and yet so far.”

I thrust a few more times, my cock moving against that gorgeous crevice, loving the sounds I was drawing from him, heady on the thrill of having him right where I wanted, knowing that he desired me just as I desired him.

But sense slowly returned, and I pulled away a little, stroking my hands down his back, gently caressing his arse with my fingers.

“My sweet love,” I said softly. “Gods. I could forget the whole world in your embrace.”

He turned over and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. “You drive me to the edge of madness, and pull me back,” he said. “Hells, Dash. I long for you when we’re apart. I long for you when we’re together. You make me wild with desire.”

“Kiss me?” I asked, and his hungry mouth was on mine, tongue sliding over mine, claws stroking down my back. I lost myself in the safer pleasures of long, sensuous kisses, holding him close and warm.

Frustrations

When we got back to the tavern, Wyll kissed my cheek. “I want something to eat, darling. You?”

“I could eat,” I said, smiling at him. “I seem to have worked up an appetite.”

“Hmm,” he said, grinning at me. “I’m not sure the kitchen can help with that sort of appetite.”

I wiggled my eyebrows at him, sparking a laugh. I felt a lightness inside – gods, it was good to see him laughing.

I walked into the rooms alone, to find it deserted... except for Mizora.

“Well well,” she drawled, leaning against the wall, one leg almost entirely bare. “What have we here? A very frustrated man. With so many unfulfilled desires.”

I sighed. “Hi, Mizora. What brings you here?”

“Why, you, of course! You know... I’ve been watching you. You have a certain appeal, especially seen through the eyes of Wyll – so to speak. And you’re so, so pent-up.” She pouted, slunk over to me, and stroked my cheek. “I could relieve some of your tension, little man. And take you to places you’ve only dreamt of. You think Wyll is appealing? Imagine what I might do to you. The heights of agony and passion combined in a glorious climax.”

I was reeling inside. “You’re propositioning me?” I asked.

“Don’t sound so surprised!” she said, her laugh tinkling. “You know what devils can do, dearie. I’d give you a night you would never, ever forget.”

“Darling, they only had goulash and bread, but I thought –” Wyll said, pushing open the apartment’s door. He stopped dead at the sight of Mizora. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Mizora said to me, winking, and disappeared.

“Well, shit,” I said, sinking onto a pillow.

“I get the distinct feeling that the consequences of our actions are coming around to bite us,” Wyll said, putting down the tray and sitting next to me.

“Hey, we should go out at night more often,” Karlach said, stumbling a little as she walked in. “Why don’t we go out? Why do we always fight evil during the day?” The rest of the group followed her in, many in a similar state.

“Gods, what did you do?” I asked.

“Just imbibing,” Jaheira said, winking at me. “Don’t worry, Dash. I kept them out of trouble.”

Halsin snorted. “Yes; mouthing off to a drugged drow was a very helpful measure.”

I laughed.

“Why are you two looking so sober?” Karlach asked. “Haha. Sober.” She threw herself onto the cushions on the floor. Gale staggered away to his bed. The rest arranged themselves around the lounge area.

I held out a hand to Wyll, and he held out an arm instead of taking it.

“Come here, dear,” he said. I leant against him, and he wrapped the arm around my shoulders.

“I just got a visit from Mizora,” I said. “She had a... proposition... for me.”

Wyll sighed. “What was it?”

“Horizontal entertainment,” I said, feeling my face grow hot.

“Whew! Nice score,” Shadowheart said. “Mizora is hot.”

“You said no, right?” Karlach asked. “I wouldn’t trust that bitch as far as I could throw her. Although I might enjoy seeing how far I could throw her.”

“I didn’t get a chance,” I said. “Wyll wandered in and she scarpered.”

“That asshole,” Wyll said, clearly seething. “She saw a crack in our relationship and decided to get back at me, didn’t she? So much for mollifying her.”

“You know,” Shadowheart said thoughtfully, “You got out of the contract originally partly because Dash acted fed up with you and your patron’s demands.”

“And she thought it would hurt me to be stuck with them all the way to Moonrise Towers?” Wyll asked. “True.”

“I’m confused,” I said. “Shadowheart, what...”

“I’m suggesting you sleep with Mizora,” Shadowheart said. “Then act as though it’s caused trouble between you. That might be enough entertainment to have her leave the duke alone.”

Wyll’s arms tightened around me.

I looked up at Wyll. “This is not something you could be alright with.”

He shrugged. “No, but if it would keep you safe –”

“He’d be an utter fool to say no to it,” Shadowheart said. “Entertain her enough, she might leave you alone for years. You know devils. Entertainment is the ultimate currency. The crueller the better. She’d probably even be fairly gentle with you, in case Wyll felt sorry for you afterwards.”

I realised that she was right. This could well be a way of mollifying Mizora, and keeping her off our backs. I'd done a lot of things for far less reward back in my youth. Was this a sacrifice I was willing to make for Wyll and his father? Of course it was. I could just meditate away from it. Let her do whatever she wanted with my body. I shuddered involuntarily, feeling the first stirrings of panic despite my thoughts. I felt Wyll draw away, and looked up to see him frowning at me.

"No," he said, as if it ended the conversation. "No, you're not doing this, love. We're stopping this idea dead."

"It's fine," I said, breathing to dispel the nascent attack. "Wyll, of course I can do this. If you wouldn't hate me for it. If it would help. Of course."

"No," he said, stroking my hair. "Shadowheart, no. No way in the hells am I letting Dash do that to himself. Not happening."

She frowned, clearly confused, but shrugged. "Fine. Just an idea," she said.

Astarion stood and strode out of the room. "Shit," I said, diverted from the argument. "That's brought up something."

"Leave him be for a while, dear," Wyll said, still stroking my hair. "Let's just sit here a bit."

The others seemed to take this as a dismissal, and in ones and twos got up and walked to bunks or the door.

"Mmm. This is nice," I said, cuddling into his side.

"Is it alright if I hug you?" he asked.

I looked up at him. "Of course, love."

He frowned. "Dash, what's going on? I saw that look on your face. You were deeply upset. And now you seem to be fine. But... dearest, I don't think you are?"

I closed my eyes and breathed, focusing on how I was feeling, what thoughts were going through my head. I felt fine. *No thoughts to speak of. I'm fine.* Wait. 'Fine' wasn't a feeling. What was I really feeling? I focused, tried to relax, sank deeper into myself. It felt like I was standing on ice, and under it, a deep lake of panic, only centimetres away. Shit. I'd shoved it down so hard I hadn't even realised I was doing it. But why was I hiding this?

Because panicking about a trick is a good way to get a beating, I thought. There it was. The old rule: *Don't show you're upset. Hold it all down. If you don't, you'll pay.*

"Light hug," I said. "Give me room. In case."

Wyll's arms squeezed me, then went slack.

"Thanks, love," I said, looking up. "You're right."

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have even entertained the idea for a moment, darling. It’s just... for a moment I thought that you could be free of the shit I bring with me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not yours, love. It’s ours. And I’ve done worse for less pay,” I said. “Far less than the safety of my love and his family. At least it would have meaning.”

His face softened. “No one is ever putting a look like that on your face again, if I can stop it,” he said. “It might not have even worked. And then you’d be in pieces for nothing. No. You aren’t doing that to yourself while I’m here to stop you.”

I relaxed against him, wanting to argue further but unsure where to go from that. “I thought you’d be too jealous,” I said thoughtfully. “Not worried about me. I’m a bit confused.”

“Ouch. I suppose I’ve deserved that assessment,” Wyll said, his voice rueful.

“Huh. I guess you could take that badly,” I said. “I... didn’t mean it badly.”

“You’d think I’d be seething with jealousy at the idea of you with Mizora, wouldn’t you?” he said, sounding thoughtful. “I suppose she seems so obviously not someone you’d ever be interested in a relationship with.”

I shuddered. “No.”

His hand moved slowly over my shoulders in a light caress. “I love you,” he said softly.

“I love you too,” I said. “Thanks, love. I think I’m better. I should check on Astarion.”

He kissed my cheek. “Go, dearest,” he said. “But I’ll be here if you need me.”

I went up to the roof, suspecting that the man held captive for centuries would head to somewhere he could see the sky. Sure enough, a familiar silhouette leant on the fence around the roof, drinking from a goblet.

“Hey,” I said, looking around for a bottle. “Is that wine or blood?”

“Checking up on my sobriety, are we?” Astarion asked, sullen.

“I was going to ask for some if it was wine; leave it to you if it was blood,” I said, holding my hand out for the goblet.

He handed it over, and I sniffed. Heady fumes hit my nostrils. Wine. Good. I took a large sip. It was fruity and dark; almost a dessert wine.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“He defended you,” he spat. “I thought that hero act was all rubbish. Especially after...” He waved an arm aimlessly. “You know. Then he had something to gain. And you would have done it. No pushing. No fussing. You were a whore; you know how it works. What’s one more? And he said no. Just because you looked scared. What the hells is wrong with him?”

I nodded. “You seem angry,” I said quietly.

“Of course I’m angry! I convinced myself that sort of person doesn’t exist. But if he does... if he does and others do too... then it’s my fault. My fault no one rescued me or stood in front of me and said *no* .”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “Cazador’s fault, the fault of everyone who failed to realise or care that you were in trouble... but never yours, Astarion.”

“You’re just saying that because it’s what people say,” he said, turning away.

“No; because it’s true,” I said. “I don’t doubt you did some pretty horrible things to survive, or to keep your sanity. But... I know how it can be. Sometimes just getting through the next few hours is all that matters. It doesn’t mean you deserve any of it.”

He sighed. “I can’t believe that. Not really. I was the one that put me under his power in the first place.”

“And you’re allowed to be angry at yourself for that misjudgement. But that doesn’t mean it’s alright to be angry at yourself for all of it. You put too much on your own shoulders.”

“Not a sentiment I’ve heard often,” he observed.

I chuckled. “Yes, but that’s usually in reference to washing dishes, not centuries of slavery.”

He scoffed, staring out into the dark. We stood in silence for a while. I took another sip of his wine and handed it back.

“I think I’m starting to understand your thing with Wyll,” he said. “And I don’t like it. I don’t like that it’s exactly what I thought was impossible. I thought I needed to seduce people so they’d care about me. And then here you are, the whore and the bloody blade, and you’re chaste as can be. And still mad about each other, long after the bloom should have worn off.”

“Hmm.”

“Why did you take him back? What made the humiliation worth it?”

“Humiliation?” I asked, startled.

“Surely you have some pride. Wasn’t it hurt when he walked out?”

I wrinkled my brow, thinking about it. “Maybe? But it wasn’t really a priority.”

“Then why take him back?”

I shrugged. “*Because I love him* isn’t much of an answer, I suppose. Let me think... mostly because we’re all human, I think. We make mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes... they hurt other people. Sometimes horribly. But we all make those mistakes. I guess it’s just a question of whether we can live with the results if we forgive them.”

“And you could live with being abandoned?”

“Just,” I said, feeling a wave of pain. A windblown wave in a sheltered bay, though, compared to the crashing tsunami it had been tendays before. “I suppose... at the time all I wanted was an end to the sadness. But once that wore off... he was genuinely sorry for what he’d done. He knew it and accepted his fault. He’s trying to make it better. He loves me.”

Astarion was silent, looking out over the city. “I don’t know,” he said eventually. “It seems risky.”

“That’s love for you. All types, I suppose.”

“Hmm.”

“You know, I’m pretty much always available for hugs, if you feel in need of one.”

He snorted. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Alright,” I said, raising my hands in surrender. “Just remember that you have people who care about you now. I know it doesn’t make up for the last 200 years, but it’s something.”

“Mmm. Something.”

I turned and walked over to the ladder, glancing back to see him staring back out over the city.

When I got back downstairs, Wyll was in bed. He stirred as I approached, and sat up. “He’s alright?” he asked.

I nodded. “Mild crisis of faith,” I said, figuring Astarion wouldn’t appreciate me sharing any more than that. Even though most of the conversation involved Wyll and I.

“Good,” he said. “That he’s alright, not that he’s struggling, I mean.”

I jumped the side of one bed, and landed neatly next to him.

“If I tried that, I think I’d break myself or the bed,” he said, looking amused. “You have surprising acrobatic skills.”

“Mmm. Comes from my time in the circus,” I said, watching his eye widen. “Kidding. I know how much you love clowns. I’d never hide such a source of arousal from you.”

He laughed, lifting his arms to invite me in for a cuddle. I lay down with my head on his shoulder, and he hugged me close.

“I love you,” he said, nuzzling my hair. “I did have something I wanted to ask you, though, if now is a good time?”

“Something big?” I asked, drawing away a little to see his face better. “Ask away.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I... Dash, no matter how you answer this, I won’t be angry. No yelling. I promise.”

“Hmm. Sounds big. What is it, love?”

“Were you tempted? By Mizora’s proposal? Gods know I’ve teased you halfway to the moon and back, and we still haven’t consummated this. I can’t help thinking... is that why you were willing to do it? Partly, anyway?”

I started to deny it reflexively, then stopped to think. “I really don’t think so,” I said, going back to the moment and sorting through my feelings. “Mizora does *not* arouse me. Except to fury, on occasion.”

“If it had been someone else?”

“Are you trying to ask if I’m hopelessly frustrated, love?” I asked.

He frowned. “I think I am, yes.”

“Hmm. Frustrated, perhaps, but also deeply enjoying every second,” I said, stroking a finger down his jaw. “Love, this... it works for me. I’m content with what I have. It’s not lesser because we haven’t fully consummated our love. It’s just... growing. That’s all.”

His face softened. “You know, you could have had me tonight. All of me. I wouldn’t have said no. I would have enthusiastically gone along with whatever you wanted, I was so drunk on lust for you. And I wouldn’t have blamed you for it. We’re too close; we’ve been through too much.”

I stretched to kiss his cheek. “I know, love. But... I don’t know. I like what we’re doing here. Even in the depths of arousal, when all I can think about is getting lost in your touch... I remember that. Even if I can’t quite remember why at the time.”

He chuckled.

“You’ve gotten through so many of my walls,” I said softly. “Love, I don’t know that I could have brought them down if we’d been together, like that, all along. Perhaps I could have. But... you make me feel safe and loved. I don’t feel like a whore in your arms.”

“Oh, my dearest,” he said, eye filling with tears.

I had a sudden flash of insight. “I didn’t resist going further with you because I was thinking of someone else, Wyll. I resisted because I want to do this *right*. To give us both the courtship we want. That’s all.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “And once again, you cut right to the heart,” he said. “I didn’t quite realise until you said it.”

“I love you, silly giant,” I said, grinning at him.

He pulled me close, arms tight around me. “ *Your* silly giant,” he said, closing his eyes.
“Always yours, dear.”

A new perspective

I woke and groaned, sitting up. I was a fool. An unthinking, unmitigated *fool* .

“What’s wrong, dear?” Wyll asked, blinking sleepily.

“It’s alright, love,” I said, leaning down to kiss his forehead. “Just had a thought. Go back to sleep.”

“Kiss me again?” he asked, closing his eyes.

I lay back down to kiss his mouth, and he smiled, his breathing slowing. I watched him fondly for a moment, then levered myself out of the makeshift bed.

I spent some time in meditation, but my irritation with myself won out over a calm, collected mind and body. Eventually I opened my eyes, sighed, and stood up. Breakfast it was. At least there would be bread. The cook always made bread in the mornings, bless him.

When I got back upstairs, Gale was in the lounge area, yawning. “Ooh,” he said. “Do I smell coffee? And bread? Luxury. Funny that I should think so. A year ago, I’d have scoffed at such simple fare.”

“Mmm. It’s funny what a few months on the road can do,” I agreed. “I’m glad you’re awake. I need to talk to you. Away from Wyll.”

“What is it?” he said, looking concerned. “I thought you two were honing out your differences.”

“Mizora reminded me of something I’d completely forgotten about, and I feel a right fool,” I confessed. “Wyll’s false eye. It’s a sending stone.”

“And she has control of it? How long have you known?”

“Suspected. And... from the start. *Shit* . I can’t believe it slipped my mind so thoroughly.”

“Well. He couldn’t do anything about it until recently anyway, I suppose. Besides, most of our objectives align rather closely with hers, at the moment,” he said thoughtfully. “That’s not to say we shouldn’t do something. First: are you sure about this?”

I shook my head. “Fairly sure, but not certain. Wyll told me a story, back at the start. It sounded ridiculous. As though he wasn’t allowed to tell the truth about it. I wonder if there’s some other magic on it? Why wouldn’t Wyll remove it as soon as he could?”

“Hmm. We should ask him, I think.”

“What can we do about it, though?”

“Well. Worst case, we could take it out and give him an eye patch. It’s not pretty, but it would work. But if we had access to an Ersatz Eye...”

“Volo has one,” I said, finally seizing the thought that had been niggling at me. “Or he did. Yes! Right. But Mizora won’t be happy about this.”

“What if we enlist Rolan? That shop must be full of wards. She won’t be able to get through all the noise to see what we’re doing.”

“Rolan’s at a shop?”

“Sorcerous Sundries. Best magic and book shop this side of Waterdeep.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned.”

“Full of ancient tomes and fair crackling with magic. It would be perfect.”

“Hmm. I guess I’ll be off to see Rolan then, rather soon.”

“Good idea,” he said, grabbing a slice of bread.

Later, when everyone was awake, I called them together. “Jaheira and Halsin – do you two have anything planned for today?”

Jaheira shook her head. “At your service, oh omnipresent authority figure,” she said, just a little bit mocking.

Halsin nodded. “I too am yours to command,” he said, shooting Jaheira an amused glance.

“We need to know what’s going on with Cazador,” I said. “Astarion, where are your siblings likely to be?”

“Flophouses. Brothels. Pubs,” he said. “Anywhere the hopeless and poor congregate. But preferably not *too* poor; Cazador likes his food to at least smell nice.”

“Hmm. A dig through the unsavoury parts of the city,” Jaheira said. “Sounds perfect.”

“Astarion, would you go with Jaheira? I’m sure she can identify vampire spawn, but you’d be best at getting the information we need about this rite.”

He nodded.

“Right. Karlach, you’re with me and Wyll later this morning – that OK? It’s more a private matter, so it’s strictly voluntary.”

She shrugged. “Fine by me. You know me. I’d rather be out and doing than sitting around talking about it.”

“What did we discover about the Sharrans? Any leads?”

“There’s a suspicious new House of Grief near the Upper City,” Jaheira said. “We didn’t approach. But Shadowheart thinks – and I agree – that it seems a likely place for them to be.”

“Shadowheart and Halsin – would you see if you can find out more about the House of Grief, then? How many people are down there, whether they’re actually Sharrans, any other information you can pick up? Memories you might be able to unlock?”

They both nodded and stood to leave.

“Thank you all,” I said, looking around. “I know some of us are here by necessity. But still. You all pitch in and spread the work around, and I appreciate it. We’re making progress. And that’s down to each of you.”

Almost everyone got up to prepare or set off, leaving Karlach, Wyll, and I still sitting in the lounge area.

“So what’s this mystery outing?” Wyll asked. “I’m bursting with curiosity.”

“Me too!” Karlach said. “Something fun, I hope?”

“Mmm... sort of. Interesting, at least. Wyll, I need to discuss something sensitive with you.”

“Should I leave?” Karlach asked.

“Give us a few minutes? Shouldn’t take long.”

She nodded and walked away. Not that she couldn’t hear pretty much anything we said if she wanted to; but the illusion of privacy was there, at least.

“What is it, dear? I’m a little concerned. But you know you can talk to me about anything.” He narrowed his eye, observing me and how uncomfortable I was. “Even if it’s something I’m not going to like hearing.”

I reached out for his hand. He gave it willingly, warm palm in mine, fingers curled around mine, claws tracing small circles on the back of my hand. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“When we first met, I asked you about this,” I said, touching his face next to the false eye. “You told me a lovely story about bloodstone that... uhhh... sounded a little like a fairy tale.”

Wyll grimaced and looked down. “I was hoping that people would recognise the story as ridiculous and assume something was wrong with it, but they never did,” he said. “I’m sorry, I should have done more to –”

I held up a hand to stop the flood of apology. “I did,” I said gently. “I just... didn’t think there was much to be done about it, and I didn’t want to risk it blowing up if I tried to do something then and there. And then...” I shrugged. “Events overtook us, and frankly, I sort of forgot. I’ve been doing that a bit lately.”

He looked... stunned. “So you knew that she –”

I put a finger on his lips. “Yes, but I think direct speech might be a terrible idea. Anyway, I think perhaps doing something about it now might be a good idea – don’t you think?”

“Hells! I’d love to. But who and where?”

“I think Rolan might be willing to help. And Sorcerous Sundries would certainly have any spells needed, if anyone would.”

“Where would we find a replacement?”

“I have an idea on that front, too. Volo tried to do surgery on me once, and in his mutterings, mentioned that if he happened to blind me, no matter...”

“Hmm. Sounds as though you have it all thought out.”

“Gale helped. I think perhaps you should just stick here this morning, if you can bear to. I’d rather not tip off interested parties about our plans.”

Karlach and I went to find Volo, to find that yes, he was indeed in possession of a most marvellous and recondite Ersatz Eye, which I could buy for a mere pittance, a tiny trifle of a price... I reminded him of multiple rescues, and his *trifle of a price* became somewhat reasonable.

Next, Sorcerous Sundries. Sure enough, Rolan was at the counter of the famous store, hair tousled, eyes dark with fatigue. I frowned at him, concerned by his appearance, but decided to stay on track as much as possible. I explained the problem, and what I wanted from him: space, a countertop, and alcohol to help dispel bad humours.

“Hmm... I don’t know; Master Lorroakan keeps me hopping! I’d have to sneak you in at night and lose sleep to do it.”

I sighed. I didn’t like using this sort of argument, but... needs must as the cambion drives. “Rolan, Wyll charged into a fight with three prison guards and a warden to give your siblings time to escape from Moonrise. He jumped into a fight outside the grove to protect you and your kin. He’s done so much for so many people. I just want him to be free.”

Rolan scowled. “You’re right – fine. I owe him. We all do. Alright; no point putting it off. Come back here tonight. I’ll put up a Silence shield to block what we’re doing a little more. Then take out one eye, put in the other. All going well, it should be finished before anyone’s the wiser. But what do we do with the old sending stone eye?”

I frowned. “Mizora might be able to construct some legal argument if I sell it or destroy it. Or even throw it away, for that matter. Hmm... what if you set it up as a temporary display here? If the magic here doesn't completely mess it up, she’ll know quite quickly that we’ve removed it. And if it does, well – it will give us extra breathing space, at least. If she wants it, she can walk in here and ask for it back.”

“Great, sic a cambion onto us. Just what we need. For that matter, I wouldn’t mind seeing –”

“ROLAN!!!” came a loud voice from all around us.

Rolan winced. "I'd better get back to work. Tonight," he promised, and dashed away.

That night, we took Wyll and his new eye to Sorcerous Sundries. Rolan cracked open the front door and motioned us into the darkened store. "Over here," he whispered. "Come on. We'll need to be quick."

Wyll lay down on a bench, and Rolan gently covered his real eye with a gauze patch. "You don't want to see this," he said to Wyll. "Just relax. It will be uncomfortable, but it shouldn't hurt." He spritzed his hands with a spray that, by the smell, contained a lot of alcohol. Good. He had some idea about medical procedures too, then.

I pulled the Ersatz Eye from my pocket. It was in a sterilised glass jar – after seeing how Volo had been storing it, I'd been careful to disinfect it as much as possible. Rolan put up a Silence shield, and a light came on somewhere upstairs.

"Shit," he said. "Quick." He pulled Wyll's eye open, made an odd scooping motion, and popped out the sending stone on the first try. It lay in his palm, still and quiet. He opened the jar, pulled out the Ersatz Eye, and carefully placed it in Wyll's eye socket, then pushed.

Wyll jerked, then pulled the gauze from his other eye. He closed one eye, then the other. "By Balduran's bones," he said. "I can see! I have... what's it called... I can see how far away things are."

"Depth perception," I said, grinning. "You might actually be able to land some archery shots now."

He snorted. "What's your excuse, then?"

"ROLAN!" a voice yelled. As before, it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"Right. We done? I'll put this somewhere on display," Rolan said. "You need to get out." He took down the Silence shield, and led us over to the door.

"Thank you," I said. "You're a lifesaver. But... are you OK here? Your master seems... demanding, to put it mildly. Gale said he has a reputation for being a bit of a bastard."

"I'm fine," Rolan said fiercely. "Living my dream. I wanted this for so long. Don't ruin it for me."

"Let us know if you need help," Wyll said, putting a hand on Rolan's arm. "Any time. We owe you. But also, we have an archmage travelling with us. Lorroakan isn't your only option."

Rolan shook his head. "I wanted the best, and that's what I got," he said. "Off you go. Goodbye."

We left, hearing more shouting as he closed the door.

"That doesn't seem a good situation for a young man," Wyll said, frowning.

“I don’t think it is,” Karlach said. “Did you see the bruise on his cheekbone? I think Lorroakan is more than a bit of a bastard.”

The Wilden Oak

“I want to show you something,” Wyll said. “Will you come with me?”

“To the ends of the earth,” I said, smiling. “Where are we going? Should I change?”

He shook his head. “You’re perfect.”

“Yes, but do I need different clothes?”

He laughed, a full-throated belly laugh. He reached out a hand, palm up, and I took it. Then... we were somewhere else.

A grassy meadow, with a single massive, twisted, ancient oak tree towering over us. Near the trunk, candles flickered to provide a fitful light. A blanket lay spread out on the grass nearby, with a bottle of wine.

“This is the Wilden Oak,” Wyll explained, walking over to the tree to touch its bark. “I used to come here as a child, when I could get past Father. Legend says it’s been here since the dawn of time. I’d sit in its branches and dream of the sights it had seen, the secrets it heard, the epic battles and the love stories it witnessed. And... darling, I’d like it to witness one more.”

Warmth filled my heart nearly to bursting.

"You have been the sun in my sky since the day we met," he said, squeezing my hand and looking down at me with loving eyes. "And you call me the stars in your sky. Do you know how wonderful, how awe-inspiring, it is that we can bring light to each other's lives? That in the darkest times, we're never without a glimmer of that love. That we can always help each other to become better."

He knelt on one knee, facing me. "I feel as though I can see into forever from this place. But when I look into your eyes, Dash – I see so many multitudes of forevers. So many things we might do. Calamities that might befall us, and joys that might surprise us. Choices we might make, for good or ill. I see those forevers in your eyes, Dash, and – I want them all. I want every moment of the rest of my years to be spent near to you. Wherever we go. Whatever we do. By your side."

He picked up an acorn from the grass. “The acorns from the Wilden Oak are said to have the power of granting wishes. I don’t know if it’s true, or if it’s only a tale, but I’m wishing upon this one tonight, dearest.

"Dash – you know I love you. You are the sun in my sky, bringing me warmth and light every single day. But I’d like to make this official. To declare to everyone that I’m yours, and you’re mine. Not just today, but tomorrow, and always, for the rest of our lives, and perhaps beyond." He held up the acorn to me.

My heart was racing. This was what we'd wanted for so long. But... I needed to be sensible about this.

I took the hand offering the acorn in mine. "Wyll... you know I want to be with you. Forever. But... are you sure this is what you want? If a gnome is publicly by your side, so many things will be more difficult. This was all very well when you were an exile and adventurer; now you're a duke's son again. I don't want to take away what you've worked so hard for, love."

He smiled, stroking the hair out of my eyes with his free hand. "You don't understand how people out there see you, do you? You think they see an Ironhand when they look at the person who defeated Ketheric and Gortash? No – dearest, they see a hero. Hells, if I were motivated only by ambition, I'd try for your hand in an instant."

I frowned, trying to imagine the city lauding a gnome. It was a nice idea, but I thought Wyll was being overly naive.

"Darling, let's imagine the worst scenario. An angry horde descends upon us, pitchforks raised and torches burning. They chase us from the city. Do you know what I do? I run with my hand in yours, heart joyful and wild. Because the man I love is by my side, and *that* is what I need in my life. You. Not the trappings and titles. My father might have forgiven me, but you stood by my side through everything, and held me together. I love this city, but if it ever came down to a choice between staying here and keeping your love, I would leave without a second thought; never to return."

Tears rose in my eyes.

"I meant what I said about the futures in front of us, love," he said softly. "I don't care which paths we go down; where we end up. As long as we do it together. My future and yours, intertwined forever. That's what I want. That's what I'm asking for."

"My sweet love," I said, my voice unsteady. "I can't imagine anything better. You're sure?"

"Desperately," he said. "Gods, Dash, will you put me out of my suspense?"

"Of course," I said. "Wyll, love, of course. I'm yours. From now to eternity, I only want you." I smiled, taking the acorn from his hand.

Wyll's face bloomed with a sweet smile. "Hells, this is the happiest I've been... maybe ever. Dash, will you kiss me?"

I stowed the acorn in a pocket, took his face in my hands, caressing his cheeks with my thumbs, and lowered my lips to his. That familiar and beloved taste of sulphur, with a hint of wine. He might have needed to calm his nerves beforehand, I supposed. We kissed, slowly and sweetly.

"I... want to make sure you understand something," he said slowly. "Would you listen? Without telling me it's alright, that I don't need to worry, or anything of that sort."

I nodded, my forehead wrinkling.

“My dearest, I hurt you badly not long ago. I think we’ve worked out some of it, but I need you to know that I don’t think this betrothal magically fixes everything between us. But also – and maybe this is wildly contradictory – it’s a pledge. From me to you. That I won’t ever leave you again. That no matter what I might say in the heat of the moment, I love you. And I want to be by your side forever. Unless we sit down calmly and decide together to part ways – I’m yours. No matter what.”

Tears rose in my eyes. “Love…”

“I mean it. You’re the best thing to ever happen to me. When I came back, darling, I got the shock of my life. I realised I’d jeopardised everything I hold so dear. And I had a glimpse of my future without you. I’m not letting you go. Not unless you want to go. Ever.”

I felt a tension deep down break suddenly, and a tear rolled down my cheek. “Thank you, Wyll. My love. I knew it, but… it helps.”

“My treasure,” he said, looking at me fondly. “It was so hard for you not to tell me everything’s fine, wasn’t it?”

I chuckled, rueful. “You know me too well.”

He shook his head. “No such thing, darling. I want to know you much better, yet.”

“Same, love. Always.”

“My dearest… we’ve brought each other comfort, and we’ve brought each other joy. May we bring each other pleasure tonight?”

A frisson of excitement flashed through me. “I’d like that.”

He rose and led me over to the blanket. We lay down together, and he brushed the hair from my eyes, smiling. “My dearest one,” he said softly, kissing my forehead.

I felt warmth flowing through me, and a sense of utter peace. “My beloved,” I replied. “Kiss me? I want to taste your lips again, love.”

He bent to press his lips against mine, and I felt warmth spread down my spine. His tongue slid over mine, and I felt energy pulsing between us. He kissed down my throat, and I pressed up against him, feeling almost drunk. Wyll drew back to pull his shirt off, and I followed suit quickly, eager to feel skin against skin.

He kissed over my heart, fingers tracing a pattern down over my belly, and I arched my back, feeling every sensation echo through my whole body.

“Darling… may I touch your dick?” he whispered.

“Please, love?” I murmured. “Gods. This feels…”

He slid gentle claws over my trousers, down the length of my cock, hard and ready for him, and I groaned. It felt as though every nerve in my body came alive at once.

“Hells... you just lit up,” he said. “What’s this?”

I gasped, arousal pulsing through me. “Oh, you clever man,” I said. “You just opened all the gates.” I let my head fall back, letting the sensation flow. “Gods, Wyll.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Breathe,” I told him. “Like in meditation. Breathe in the light. Pull it into each of your gates.”

He frowned a little, so I kissed his forehead. “Breathe, love.”

He pulled in a breath, and it was if light flowed down his spine. He arched his back, understanding filling his eye. “Hells.”

“There you are,” I said, smiling at him. “Beloved, may I touch your cock?”

He nodded, and I slowly stroked my fingers over his trousers, following the bulge of his hard cock. I felt a pulse of energy, and gasped. “Gods, love,” I said softly. “This is a nice surprise.”

“What’s happening?” he asked, opening his eyes to smile at me. “I’m not complaining; I’m a little... hells! Confused.”

“We’ve been meditating together for months,” I told him. “It never occurred to me, but... I think we can share the light between us. Do you want to try?”

“This feels... incredible. Let’s.”

“Sit up,” I said. He obeyed, and I sat between his legs, facing him, loins close together, my legs around his waist. “Hold my hands. Now... breathe together, and imagine the light flowing between us wherever we’re touching.” I scooted closer, so that his cock pressed against mine, and groaned.

He closed his eyes and breathed in, and I followed suit. Warmth flowed into me and through me.

“Whew.”

“You’re alright, love?”

“Never better, darling. What now?”

“Hmm... imagine light flowing out of your right hand into me, and out of mine into your left hand.”

I closed my eyes to imagine the same, breathing light in, sending it through to him, pulling his light through my left hand. Nothing new... until the connection clicked into place, and energy flowed freely between us.

“Hells,” Wyll whispered, as the pleasure started to build. “I can feel you all through me.”

“Mmm,” I replied, having trouble forming words.

Pleasure built and built as the light flowed. I opened my eyes... Wyll was definitely feeling it. His eyes were closed, face alight with joy.

“I want to be closer,” I said, and he nodded without opening his eyes. I straddled his lap, letting go of his hands, and he slid them down my back, resting one between my shoulder blades and one cupping my arse. I pressed against him, hands on his shoulder blades, and kissed his mouth.

Ecstasy pulsed through me, and his hands convulsed against me, claws biting into my skin. It built slowly and surely, as if each sharing just increased the energy between us. We kissed slowly, letting the energy build and move, until Wyll seemed suffused with light.

“Gods, love,” I whispered.

Wyll opened his eyes and smiled at me. “My light,” he said, bending to nibble lightly at my neck. “How do you always astonish me?”

Warmth flared in me, as though the light was overflowing, and he gasped.

The energy concentrated in my loins, and I assumed the same was happening for Wyll, based on the look on his face.

“Love, I'm close,” I said, feeling a sudden wave of anxiety. This was not the climax I'd expected to be seeking.

He breathed hard, gazing at me with eyes shrouded by arousal. He pulled my face closer to kiss my mouth. “Show me, darling,” he said.

I pushed aside the anxiety – whatever we were doing, it was too late to stop it. Instead, I closed my eyes to concentrate on the flow of energy between us, steadying it, pushing energy into lower gates. I slid my cock against his, groaning as the light flared hard between us, and melted into the kiss.

I felt him tense under me as euphoria exploded from deep in my loins, and there was nothing left over for thinking, just feeling, as I spilled my seed in long, slow bursts against him.

Wyll broke away from the kiss to cry out, hands clutching my arse, pulling me hard against him as he jerked, and I held him up as his back arched and he lost himself in the climax. I felt a sudden heat where our loins pressed against each other, light flowing from him into me like an echo of his climax. I threw my head back, groaning at the prolonged sensation; pure pleasure, but somehow on the edge of pain.

When the aftershocks settled, I collapsed against him, my head on his shoulder, and his arms pulled tight around me.

“Well that was... unexpected,” he said, a thread of amusement lacing his words. “Dearest, what in the world was that?”

I chuckled, rubbing my cheek against his bare shoulder. “You're amazing,” I said. “My love.”

“Hmm,” he said, reclining and pulling me with him to lie down on the blanket. “Would you explain? I'm not at all distraught, but I'm still a little bemused.”

I breathed for a few moments, head on his shoulder, arm over his chest, trying to collect my very scattered thoughts.

“Sorry, you flabbergasted me rather thoroughly, love. We've been working with light for a while,” I said slowly. “Making love, when you get down to it, is just a form of energy manipulation. Focusing energy in the loins to produce pleasure, and a climax.”

He nodded, fingers sliding through my hair, stroking gently.

“So we took that a step further, and shared that energy between us,” I said. I frowned, trying to put into words something that I'd only felt. “And in sharing it, amplified it. We were both focused on the same thing – bringing pleasure to each other – so the energy...”

“... took the form of pleasure,” he completed. “A little more, I'd venture to say – that was utter bliss.”

I grinned at him, enjoying the look of awe on his face. “It really was,” I said, touching his cheek. “Love... I didn't expect to share something like that with you. Not without a lot of work and meditation together.”

“Hmm. I suppose we have done both, in our way.”

“Mmm. I keep forgetting that as a warlock, you're more – open, I suppose – to this sort of thing, too.”

“Might have been nice to take our trousers off first, though.”

I laughed, feeling my cheeks heating. “Oh gods. We're going to have to do our own laundry, or we'll never hear the end of it.”

He chuckled. “This is one story that stays between us, I think.”

I nodded agreement, cuddling against him. “Definitely. But, Wyll?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. For being open to a new experience. That was amazing, and all because something happened and you trusted me enough to go with it. If you'd been uncomfortable, if we didn't trust each other implicitly, we couldn't have shared energy like that. In fact, I'm a little surprised it even worked.”

“So you trust me again?” he asked, his voice a little wistful.

I looked up at him, reaching to stroke his cheek. “I wouldn't have agreed to marry you if I didn't, love.”

“You know I’ll do my best to live up to that trust every day?”

“As will I,” I said softly, my heart overflowing. “Wyll, I love you.”

“May I kiss you, my darling?”

In answer, I just drew his face down to mine to slide my tongue into his mouth, tasting him, feeling a slow, languorous echo of the pleasure we’d shared.

“Will it always be like that?” he asked, drawing back a little.

I narrowed my eyes in thought. “I suppose it could,” I said. “We could meditate first and bring on that sort of joining, if we want. Or we could just relax and let whatever happens, happen.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure which I’d prefer, right now. That was amazing, but... it might be a little exhausting to do that every night, my dearest.”

“Every night, you say?” I asked, a smile spreading over my face.

“As if I could ever get enough of you,” he said softly. “My sweet darling.”

“Mmm. I’m noticing a lot more *my* statements tonight.”

“Silly, isn’t it? I love when you call me yours. But now I feel as though I can call you mine, too.”

“Even though I’ve been yours since the moment you kissed me?”

“Told you it was silly.”

“Very, love. But do it again?”

He chuckled. “My darling.” He kissed my forehead. “My own dear love. My light.”

“Mmm. That’s perfect.”

“It’s not very poetic.”

“Hearing you call me yours will always sound like poetry, beloved.”

“Sweet talker.”

“Gods. If our friends could hear us now. They’d probably vomit on the spot.”

Seeds and seedlings

When we got back to the tavern, the rooms were – thank all the gods – empty of people. We bathed and changed clothes, leaving our old ones in the water to soak. I put the acorn in my pack. I wanted it close, but secure.

“Mmm. A few moments of privacy,” Wyll said, fingers lightly caressing my neck. “What should we do?”

“I know what I’d *like* to do,” I said, leaning against him. “But perhaps not here.”

He laughed. “Now I understand Withers’ dislike of romance,” he said. “It’s terribly distracting when you’re trying to save a city.”

I pretended offence, crossing my arms and scowling at him. He just laughed again.

“It’s good to see you laughing, beloved,” I said, smiling at him. “How about we head down to the shop? Organise some of the supplies that I ordered and then left cluttering up our communal space?”

“I’m in,” he said, nodding. “Maybe some food along the way? I’m getting a little tired of the Elfsong’s fare. I could do with a change.”

“Perfect.”

The shop was looking near-perfect. The supplies were basic ones: some bandages, a lot of rags, quills and ink, and paper. We unpacked those and I stowed them in chests.

“Hang on,” I said, walking upstairs to see more greenery than I’d expected. “When was Derrith going to tell me my seedlings were ready?”

“Did she just deliver them to your bedroom?” Wyll asked. “That seems a little intrusive.”

“Hmm. We might want to get that key back from her. But I need to plant these out, or they’ll die. Look, the mint is already a little wilted.”

“Want some help?”

“Getting dirty? I’ll always want your help, love,” I said, flashing him a smile.

“Tease. What do we need? Trowels? Watering can?”

I nodded. “I’ll need to find someone with chickens, too, at some point. Not now.”

“Why? Oh – fertiliser?”

I nodded. “Mix with water; leave in the sun for a few days. Plants love it.”

I showed him what and where to plant, and we got to work.

“What’s this plant?” he asked, sniffing curiously. “It smells familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“Catnip,” I said, glancing over. “Was there a cat somewhere in the house when you were younger? In the kitchens, perhaps? Cooks often keep it around to keep their cat happy.”

“Hmm. That’s probably it. Are you trying to attract cats?”

“Well. I wouldn’t mind one hanging around, truth be told. Rats can be annoyingly indiscriminate in what they get into. But not exactly. It’s good for a very mild diuretic. Aids the flow of bad humours out of the body.”

“For people?”

I nodded.

“Does it bother you if I ask questions?”

“Not at all, love. My mind’s hardly ticking over, doing this. What do you want to know?”

“Why are we planting different plants in the same pot? Doesn’t that cause confusion?”

“Ahh! Good question. It could, I suppose, if I had someone picking that didn’t recognise the herbs by sight or smell. But we plant them this way because some herbs help each other to grow; more than their own kind. Take rosemary, here, and sage. Rosemary deters some insects; sage deters others. We’re planting golds with the mint; mint is hardy but some pests will eat it down to the root. Golds help some of them decide to go elsewhere.”

“Huh. Methods in the madness.”

“It’s a little like battle tactics,” I said, thinking about the parallels. “Team up the fighters who can work well together and make up for each others’ flaws.”

“Like you need a big lover to keep enemies from smacking you in the head before you can break their kneecaps?” he asked, smirking at me.

I laughed and shot him a mock glare. “*Yes*. Also works for giant devils who get so busy declaiming fancy lines that they forget to watch their back.”

“Oof. Ouch,” he said, clutching his heart. “That one stings.”

“The ones we love ever hurt us the most.”

“Right. That’s the last of mine,” he said, grinning at me. “Watering can?”

I nodded. “I’ll water them in, then I think we’re done here. The shop’s almost ready to open – I just need a name for it. Any ideas?”

“Hmm. You could take a leaf from Sorcerous Sundries’ book and call it Healing Herbs. Uninspired, but expressive.”

“Plain, but you’re right. Tells people what to expect. Hmm... except I’m not sure I want the emphasis on herbal remedies. I’d like to use other methods too. Whole Healing?”

“Healing Hole?” he suggested with a snicker.

“Actually...” I said thoughtfully. “Spelt with an H? That could work. A little bit quirky; enough to be memorable. And *everyone knows* that us rock gnomes live in caves and eat mushrooms, right?”

“Making a joke at your own expense? Hmm. Are you trying to attract new clientele or repel them?”

I shrugged. “The needy will come no matter what. The less needy? Well. If I’m refused the chance to minister to a gouty patriarch prostrated with over-indulgence and nerves, I don’t think I’ll mourn too hard. Besides – worst case scenario, I can ask your father if he’d provide a testimonial for my healing services.”

“Not just ask him for money? I’m sure he’s grateful enough to help.”

“If there are more people to help than funds to use in helping them... well, perhaps, I suppose. This city needs to start looking after all of its citizens.”

“You really don’t care that I’m the son of a duke, do you? You’re not angling for the best advantage from your position.”

I finished watering the last plant, carefully emptying the watering can and leaving it upside down to drain. I turned to Wyll, sitting on the balcony floor next to me, and took his hand. “I’m not sure where this is coming from,” I said carefully. “Care to share?”

He frowned. I could see thoughts moving across his face. “I got used to no one caring out there in the wilderness,” he said. “But we’re back now. And it’s all the same. People manoeuvring for the best influence, the most prestige. And you’re... happily opening a healing shop.”

I laughed. “I suppose I might have an undiscovered lust for power,” I told him. “Certainly I like having enough gold to keep ourselves comfortable and well-fed. The occasional luxury, too. But I’ve been lucky enough to find my passions in life, thank Tymora. They bring my life joy and meaning. So that’s what I try to stay focused on.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Multiple passions?”

“Healing and my love,” I said, rubbing a thumb over the back of his hand. “I learnt a long time ago what I wanted from life. I try to make everything else second in place to those things.”

His face softened into a smile.

“I don’t promise to never make use of your connections,” I said. “But love, you know I wanted you when I had no idea who you were. And your name was more a deterrent than a recommendation. That’s not true anymore, but I still love you for you, not what you can do for me. Even if you did rent me an entire shop. Which I greatly appreciate.”

“Darling. May I kiss you?”

“Yes, but maybe after we wash our hands,” I said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek.

We washed off the plant dirt and pungent herb oils from our hands, and I eyed the bed.

“How much time do we have until dinner, do you think?”

“A couple of hours, I’d say. Why?”

“I’m in the mood for a little exploration,” I said, quirking an eyebrow in query. “If you’re up for it...?”

He smiled slowly and pulled his shirt off over his head.

“Mmm. Should I take that as a yes?”

“And a please or two.”

I took my own shirt off and reclined on the bed with him, feeling oddly shy. Our last encounter had been so out-of-the-box that I really wasn’t sure where to go next. Strange, for a whore to be unsure how to go about lovemaking.

“Kiss me?” he asked, and I relaxed. Kissing I could do. I leaned over him as he lay on his back, stroking a finger down one of the scars on his cheek, and pressed my lips to his. He opened his mouth to me, pulling me close, a hand sliding down to caress my arse, and everything clicked back into place in my head. This wasn’t a random, unpredictable encounter full of danger. It was *Wyll*.

“Are you alright?” he asked, drawing away a little. “You looked a little tense for a moment there.”

“Echoes of past me,” I said. “Threw me off-centre for a bit.”

“We can cuddle instead if you’d like?”

“You’re sweet,” I said, smiling at him. “But love... gods, I want you.”

“Hmm. What do you want of me?”

I thought about it. What had I been most desperate to do with and to this man? “You know,” I said thoughtfully. “The one thing I really want to do right now is taste you. Find out what your juices taste like on my tongue.”

“Oh, hells,” he said, closing his eyes. “Dash...”

“No?” I asked, mildly confused.

“You almost got the chance to discover that immediately,” he said, voice strangled.

“Oh?” I asked, feeling a surge of confidence. “So uhh... you’d like me to explore that, then?”

“Please, darling. You’d think I’d have better control after all these months.”

“May I touch your cock, beloved?”

“Stop teasing me.”

I grinned and stroked a hand slowly over the very obvious bulge in his trousers. He groaned, the hand near his hips clenching in the sheet. I unlaced his trousers and pulled them down over his ankles, tossing them onto the floor. I moved back up to take my first proper look at my love’s cock. It was, I had to admit, larger than I’d have liked; we were mismatched in size in more ways than one. But I’d known that. I hadn’t known about the textures along it, although a memory tickled the back of my head. *Bumps and prongs in unmentionable places* ... I supposed I should be grateful there were no prongs where it counted.

I slid my fingers lightly down the naked skin, just a breath of touch, and Wyll moaned.

“Hells, Dash, please – please...”

I realised with a start that he was in servitude for decades. How long had it been since he could just relax with someone like this; be naked and unconcerned about what was happening in the shadows?

I bent to kiss the length of his cock, letting my lips linger over the protrusions down the shaft. Not like a disease; more like it had been designed. Hmm. Maybe some of what I’d heard about devils was actually true.

I cradled his cock in one palm, and licked slowly and carefully up its length. Wyll convulsed, calling out. I licked again, and again he shook. “Too much?” I asked, and he shook his head wildly.

“I want it, I want it... it just... hells. It feels as though you’re killing me with pleasure at every touch.”

I wanted to start over and ease him into it more slowly, but that would be cruel at this point. “Breathe, love,” I said. “Fill yourself with light. Your gates are blocked.”

He pulled in a huge breath, and let it out explosively.

“Come on,” I chided. “Discipline. Pull light into your gates. Let out the darkness.”

He scowled at me, his eyes crinkling with good humour that belied the fake annoyance. He breathed in, more slow and controlled this time, and then out, relaxing.

“Much better,” I said, feeling proud of my meditation pupil. I took the tip of his cock into my mouth, exploring the soft, sensitive head with my tongue. He gasped and tensed, then relaxed again, breathing steadily.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll last with you doing things like that,” he said. “Even with your – hells! – fancy breathwork.”

I pushed my lips down over the shaft, taking more into my mouth, letting the tip slide slowly over the roof of my mouth, until it hit the back of my throat, and the softer flesh there. I tasted a sudden hint of salt and sulphur, and knew he was close, just from this small amount of play. Well, we had been essentially teasing each other for months. No surprise if we were both a little pent up.

“Hells. Your mouth feels... like the heavens,” he said. “Darling, I’m sorry, I –”

“No apologies,” I said. “I love you.”

I continued, pulling his cock into my mouth and letting it slide back out, pressing my tongue against it, enjoying the odd textures on my lips. I pushed a bit deeper, taking it a little way into my throat, and he jerked underneath me. Hmm. Maybe leave that for another day. His breathing sped up, so I changed the rhythm of my movements to match, pulling his hips upwards to encourage him to move with me.

“Hells, Dash. I’m close, darling. I can’t control myself.”

He pushed upwards into my mouth, crying out each time his cock hit the back of my throat, and I reached up blindly to grasp his hand and squeeze it in silent reassurance. Then I stopped focusing on him, and started to focus on the feel of his cock in my mouth, the taste, the sensations, the steady rhythm that was growing urgent. I let my tongue press on the sensitive area on the underside of his cock at the shallow end of every stroke, and he started to shake. I sucked lightly, and he was gone.

Literal heat filled my mouth, almost searing. I swallowed, then wondered if I’d made a bad decision. This was bordering on painful. It was still coming, more hot, salty essence filling my mouth. Oh well. In for a copper piece... I swallowed, sucking, and he spasmed underneath me, groaning, his hands pulling at the sheet underneath us, as he spilt his juices straight into my mouth.

Eventually he was done, and the heat was tolerable – no damage done. I sighed, reassured. The last thing we needed was for one of us to be too hot to handle. That was a complication I hadn’t foreseen a possibility of. Come to think of it, though, Wyll would have warned me if it had been likely to harm me. I sat up, wiping my mouth.

“Darling,” he said, holding out an arm. He looked utterly relaxed, and a little sleepy. “Come cuddle with me? Please?”

I lay down with him, and he rolled onto his side to kiss my mouth. “Hells. I can taste myself on you. That’s weirdly arousing,” he said, smiling down at me. “I love you so much. That was... astounding. Even if it did give you concerns about my stamina.”

I laughed. “Silly giant. Give our bodies a chance to adjust before you start worrying.”

“Hmm. Speaking of adjusting. I thought I wanted to cuddle, but...” He kissed down my cheek and the side of my neck. “I think I’d like to touch you for a while.”

I felt a surge of pure lust, imagining his mouth on my cock. “I think I’d like that,” I said, my voice breathy. I really needed to follow my own advice about breathing.

His hand drifted down to my trouser lacings, deftly unpicking the knot while he kissed my throat. He pushed my trousers and boxers down enough to give himself free range, and then grasped my cock in his hand, squeezing. I pulled in a lungful of air, body jerking upwards.

“Too much?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Perfect. Just... gods, Wyll. I’ve wanted your hand on me like that for so long.”

“How about my mouth?”

“*Fuck.*”

“That’s a yes, right?”

I nodded dumbly.

He bent to take my cock into his mouth, and sensation exploded within me. Every time his mouth moved on me, I could feel echoes of the sensation flowing through me, feel it in my fingertips and toes. His forked tongue slid around my shaft, and I convulsed.

“Gods, love. I might beat you to shortest time lasted, at this rate.”

He raised his head to grin at me, and deliberately licked up the shaft of my cock, watching my face as I watched him.

“Breathe,” he said, grinning.

I laughed and took the advice, breathing in slowly and steadily, focusing on that as his mouth slid up and down, sending pleasure outwards with every stroke. His mouth was hot and wet, and the contrast with the cool air of the shop heightened the effect. The head of my cock rubbed over ridges on the roof of his mouth, making me shake where I lay.

“I’m not sure I’m going to have words for much longer,” I told him.

“Take my hand,” he said, reaching up to me. “Squeeze if you’re close. How’s that?”

“Brilliant,” I gasped, holding his hand for dear life, and lost myself in the feel of his mouth around my cock, the textures of his mouth, the heat and wetness.

He stopped to lick his spare hand, and grasped my cock again, his mouth closing over it. Then he started to move in a slow rhythm, his hand and mouth sliding over my cock in

opposite directions, a delicious counterpoint that kept my attention firmly on what he was doing. Pleasure flowed through me in slow waves, and I tried to breathe with it, as though I was meditating with pure ecstasy instead of light. Warmth built in me, filled my loins to the point of overflowing, until the pleasure was almost pain.

“You’re amazing,” I said, squeezing his hand. “Love, I’m close. I can’t help it.”

He looked up at me, his eyes amused, and I dimly remembered giving him advice about accepting what his body wanted. I closed my eyes, tapping back into the near-meditative state, and let the sensations flow and push me over the edge. I cried out, then bit my lip and tried to quieten down as I spilled my seed. Wyll sucked, and I opened my eyes to see his throat moving as my cock continued to jerk in his mouth, almost entirely out of my control.

When it finally finished, I collapsed onto the bed, dimly aware that the climax had pulled me up, bowed my back. I breathed hard, trying to regain use of my body.

“By all the gods,” I said, “That was... I can’t even describe how that felt.”

Wyll pulled my trousers and boxers the rest of the way off, sending them flying after his own, and crawled back up to lie next to me. “My sweet love,” he said, resting his cheek on the top of my head, “have I told you today how wonderful you are?”

“Mmm...” I said. “I think you have, yes.”

“Oh good. I wouldn’t want you to be unaware.”

I laughed and cuddled into him, closing my eyes.

I woke to Wyll gently shaking my shoulder.

“Ugh. I fell asleep again?”

“I guess I’m just that boring,” he said, snickering.

“Mmm. So boring, you rock my world in bed. A terrible tragedy.”

“I’ll take that as a dubious compliment,” he said, smirking. “We should be getting back, dear. But food would be nice. I’ve never tried to survive purely on love, but I imagine it’s uncomfortable.”

“Stomachs growl more compellingly than any lover, I think.”

Wyll lifted his top lip and growled at me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. I might have been wrong about that. I’m feeling an odd compulsion to just stay here in this bed.”

He laughed and bounced out of the bed. “Come on, you ridiculous gnome. Wash up and come find food with me, before I perish.”

We ended up at a small place that was literally a hole in the wall down an alley, with a grill in the back and two tables outside. The offerings were unvaried – strips of meat, eggs, cheese, and potato seared on the grill, doused in a fragrant sauce, then wrapped in a round of flat bread cooked on the self-same grill.

“Oh,” I said after a mouthful. “This would be terrible to eat all the time, but right now it’s exactly what I wanted. Fat and protein.”

Wyll nodded, wolfing his down. “Another?”

I shook my head, and he went to order another one for himself. By the time I’d finished mine, he’d eaten two, along with most of an odd-looking layered pastry.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Not as nice as you expected?”

He shrugged. “It has nuts and honey in it. No, I saved a bit for you. Thought you’d like a taste.”

My nose prickled with the threat of tears. Why, I wasn’t sure. I popped it into my mouth, startled by the taste. It was intensely sweet – the honey – and crunchy, what with the pastry and nuts. And underneath the sweetness was the tang of spice. I chewed slowly and swallowed, savouring every crunch.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “How did you keep yourself from scoffing the lot?”

He guffawed, drawing the attention of a couple of passersby, who looked scared and crossed to the other side of the alley to get around us. “I do have *some* self-control,” he pointed out. “This afternoon notwithstanding. Besides,” he said, looking at me with fond eyes, “I’ve already had quite a bit of sweetness today.”

I felt blood rising to my face. “Utter blarney,” I said, chuckling.

“Never.”

When we returned to the tavern, everyone else was back. A pot and bowls lay on the low table; another of the Elfsong cook’s innumerable stews, I assumed. Wyll went straight to his father and pulled him away to the side.

“I asked,” he told him, holding my hand.

“And were accepted, I’m guessing,” the duke said, smiling at the two of us. “Congratulations, son. You seem to have chosen exceptionally well. Dash – welcome to the family.”

He clapped Wyll on the shoulder and held out a hand to me. I shook it, mildly bemused. Wyll really hadn’t exaggerated his father’s lack of tactile affection.

“I’m sure you want to share your news with the others,” Ulder said. “I’ll leave you to it – I think I’ll turn in early. I still tire easily.”

I looked him over, and frowned. There was tension in his face – had been the entire time we'd talked to him.

“Headache?” I asked, and he nodded. “Hang on. I'll brew a tea for you.”

“No, I'm fine. Go enjoy yourselves.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, saer. One of the negatives of having a healer around is that we always want to stick our noses into your health. You'll wake feeling sick if you go to sleep with that headache.”

He sighed. “I recognise the type all too well. Very well. I'll drink your concoction, and no doubt thank you for it in the morning.”

“Thank you.”

I walked downstairs to get a kettle of hot water, and Wyll came with me. “You challenge my father almost every time you speak to him,” he said, shaking his head. “And he respects you all the more for doing it. It's so odd. To see my love ordering around the father who loomed so large when I was a child. To see him meekly submitting.”

I grinned at him. “Perks of being a healer, love.”

“It's more than that,” Wyll said, thoughtful. “He genuinely likes you for it.”

“Mmm. He seems to appreciate people who are decisive and stick to their specialties,” I said. “I'm not sure I'm really doing the latter, but I've only ever argued with him on things I know more about.”

“Like me?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Like you,” I agreed.

We carried the kettle upstairs, and I made tea. Wyll took it in to his father; I went to sit with our friends in the lounge area.

“Any luck?” I asked Shadowheart.

She nodded. “Definitely where we need to go,” she said. “I don't think they saw me at all. Halsin got a couple of their brochures, though.”

“Good,” I said. “At least we have that nailed down. Astarion?”

“No luck,” he said. “We'll go out again tonight. I think we'll have more luck when it's dark. I used to go out by day, and travel through the sewers... but that's only useful if one has bathing facilities and a change of clothes available.”

I nodded thoughtfully as Wyll sat down next to me. “Did you tell them, dear?” he asked.

“Not a word.”

“Tell us what?” Karlach asked. “Wait.” She looked between Wyll and I. “OH my gods. You got betrothed, didn’t you? You sneaky bastard, Wyll!”

Wyll laughed and nodded, pulling me close.

“AHHH! I’m so excited for you guys! This is the best news. You should have done it months ago. Everyone knew you’d end up together!” She bounced over to grab us both in a single hug. “Man, I love you guys. I’m so happy!”

“Well, congratulations,” Jaheira said, her eyes holding a touch of sadness. “You belong together, hearts and souls. May your years together be many, and your bond grow stronger all the while.”

“Hear hear!” Karlach yelled. “We need ale! Lots of ale.” She ran out of the rooms.

“Congratulations,” Astarion said. “You seem happy together. We could all use a little of that.”

Gale knelt in front of us, and I stood to hug him. “I wish you every happiness,” he said to Wyll and me, squeezing me tight. “You two are the glue that holds us together. May you never lose sight of each other.” He let me go and turned to Wyll, to hug him as well.

“You’ve found your thiramin,” Halsin said, a slight smile on his face. “Many go their whole lives without ever discovering their soulmate. You are blessed... but may more blessings heap on your heads. They will be well-deserved.”

“I’m happy for you both,” Shadowheart said, kneeling to hug me, then Wyll. “May light always guide your paths.”

“Hmm,” Wyll said. “Your blessings have changed a little over the months.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said, laughing.

“I have ale!” Karlach said, carefully placing two large pitchers on the table. “Frostkiss and Shadowdark. Not the best of omens, perhaps, but you two really shone in the darkness. Maybe it’s appropriate.”

I grinned at Wyll, who smiled back, eyes soft. “My light,” he murmured, and went to pour two mugs of ale.

The night devolved into reminiscences and funny stories, lubricated with plenty of ale and a few bottles of wine.

“Would you have thought,” Shadowheart said at one point, “when we saw them going hammer and tongs at each other, yelling about goblins, that we’d ever be here?”

“Classic enemy-to-lover trope, though, isn’t it?” Karlach said. “Although I think maybe *enemies* is putting it a bit strongly.”

“I’m sad I missed it,” Gale said, looking into his goblet, which seemed to be empty, from the disappointment on his face. “It sounded like an epic battle.”

The impromptu party continued late into the night, as we sat surrounded by loving friends who wanted to cheer and bless our lives together. My heart was warm; for this one night, we could put our troubles aside and just bask in our happiness.

Tombstones and trouble

“Got it!” Gale crowed, walking into the rooms. “You wouldn’t believe the trouble I had to go to. A trawl through the Lower City’s shops. Multiple visits to Sorcerous Sundries. But they finally got it in.”

I paused and put down my coffee. “Ah... got what?”

“The Hold Monster spell I was looking for. I swear I’ve learnt it before, but it’s as though all the spells I learnt before my – mishap, let’s say – just disappeared from my head. Regardless, this one holds monstrously large creatures. According to my research, the Chosen of Bhaal can take on a Slayer form. Quite large; very fast; rather appallingly deadly.”

“Ahh. Hence, the spell.”

He nodded, brandishing the scroll. “I shall memorise it over breakfast, if you don’t mind the rudeness.”

I laughed. “I think I can handle some informality while we lounge on cushions eating pastries, Gale.”

“Excellent!” he said, beaming, and poured himself a cup of coffee, immersing in the scroll.

I yawned. How did Gale always look so fresh and chirpy after a night of drinking? Probably magicked the alcohol from his blood. Or perhaps the orb sucked it up like the Weave. Hmm. Perhaps we should be careful giving Gale alcohol. A drunken orb sounded like a bad idea.

“So what do we know about Orin?” I asked.

“Deranged, unhinged, and out for our blood?” Astarion asked.

“Succinct,” I granted.

“Cauldhallow Tombstones,” Wyll said, eyes dark. “Will she be waiting there? Or will this be some sick and twisted trap?”

“Probably the latter,” Astarion agreed. “I’m oddly excited about this.”

“No more *it’s insane to go into a nest full of Bhaalists* ?” I asked.

“Oh no. It’s completely batshit off-the-wall suicidal,” he said. “But I think I’ll just embrace the sheer stupidity and enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Well,” Gale said. “On that highly motivational note, let’s go?”

Finding and entering Cauldhallow Tombstones was simple. Getting through the secret door, a mild challenge. We walked down the steps and the stench of the sewers hit our nostrils.

“Ugh,” Astarion said. “The sewers of Baldur’s Gate. My old home away from home. How I haven’t missed these odiferous byways.”

Gale made a strangled noise.

“Oh, it’s not that –” I turned to see Orin holding a knife to Gale’s throat.

“Such a pretty mage,” she crooned. “How I long to dig and dig to see where the magic lives. Hear your sweet screams as you try and fail to reach your precious Weave. You miserable, lonely little person, with your big talk and your bigger dreams of someday being relevant.”

Wyll drew his rapier and lunged, but she and Gale disappeared, his pack falling to the ground.

“Well,” Astarion drawled. “Firstly, she’ll get the surprise of her life if she actually kills him. Secondly, there goes our strategy up in smoke.”

“Battle plans rarely last past the start of battle,” Wyll said, jaw set. “We need to follow her.”

“Even though that’s *clearly* what she wants?” Astarion asked. “My, we really are leveraging up the suicidal tendencies, aren’t we?”

“We are,” I said, looking through Gale’s pack. “Ugh. Why does he have an amputated hand in here?”

“A what?”

“A hand. Just a hand,” I said, pulling it out and waving at the others with it. “See? Perfectly preserved.”

“Wow. I guess he wasn’t speaking metaphorically when he asked for a hand,” Wyll said.

“Perfectly normal,” Astarion said. “For a deranged ex-archmage, anyway. What are you looking for?”

I shot him a considering look. Perfectly normal, hmm? “His Hold Monster scroll,” I said. “I’m hoping... aha! Here it is. I thought he’d bring it, just in case. Wyll, can you use this?”

Wyll took the scroll and read it through quickly. “I can. Not without destroying the scroll when I cast it, though. Gale might be annoyed. Sounded as though it took him quite a while to find.”

“He’ll survive. Hopefully,” I said, grim. “Well. We can regroup and risk Orin torturing him to death for a lark, or we can go in underpowered and hope like hell everyone but Orin survives the experience.”

“We need to rescue our ally and friend,” Wyll said. “He’d do the same for us.”

Astarion sighed. “We’re already hip-deep in stupidity. Why not add a little more?”

“Alright; let’s go be stupid,” I said.

The temple was large and carved from solid rock, with a distinctly primeval feel to it. A single round platform featured in the middle, over a deep, dark hole in the ground. We crept in, to see Orin standing over a prone Gale, knife slicing into his skin. She was singing a lullaby.

“That woman is more unstable than Cazador,” Astarion whispered, a slight note of admiration in his voice. “How on Toril does she manage it?”

“Bhaalists and mental fracturing seem to go hand in hand,” Wyll agreed. “I suppose growing up in a cult like this would warp you quite horrendously.”

“Ambush?” I whispered.

“No sign,” Astarion said. “No... wait. A few down there near her. That’s it, I think. She’s cocky.”

“How do we handle the cultists?”

“You draw their attention. Wyll uses that spell and we hope like the hells it works. I sneak around to take them out with my trusty crossbows,” Astarion suggested.

“Wyll and I on Orin, you on everyone else?” I asked, and he nodded. “Deal. Let’s go.”

I jumped down to Orin’s level, rolling to take the shock of the landing, and bounced to my feet to find her standing in front of me, blade levelled at my throat. Well. We got her away from Gale, at least. I wanted to sneak a glance in his direction, but knew I couldn’t afford the distraction.

Orin waved her blade in front of my face. “Hello, little creature,” she said. “Crawled out of your hole in the ground, did you?”

“Odd choice of insult for someone who literally lives below ground,” I countered, watching the knife move in an almost hypnotic pattern. Stupid. I completely missed the kick until it was smashing into my loins, and I doubled over involuntarily. A blow to the head with the pommel of her knife, and I was dazed, my vision blurring. I fell to my knees, cursing my inattention and lack of strategy.

A muffled grunt, and I looked up to see her frozen, blade raised above me. *Shit*. She almost took me out before I even had a chance to land a blow. “Thanks,” I yelled, and a barrage of attacks struck in my vicinity. I ducked and dodged, but a few landed, not helping the head injury at all.

“Buck up, Dash,” Wyll said, leaping into the fray. He levelled an eldritch blast at Orin and missed. I decided to ignore the attacks as best I could, and hit her with a flurry of blows. She twitched, eyes furious, and I gulped. We really needed to finish her off before she could get

out of that hold. I readied a blast of ki energy as Wyll drew back his hands to throw another eldritch blast, and the two bursts of energy hit her almost simultaneously, shoving her backwards off the platform, her knife falling to the ground.

We listened for a moment, but no sounds of her landing. Where the hells did this cave system lead? I shook my muzzy head, wincing. We weren't safe yet, even if that had taken her out.

"Little help?" Astarion called, falling to the ground, a cultist on his back, raising a knife.

"Shit," Wyll said, sending an eldritch blast to tumble the cultist away.

"Thank all the gods your aim has improved," Astarion called, getting slowly to his feet.

"Ugh." He straightened and shot at a cultist aiming a shortbow at him, and groaned as their arrow found its target in his thigh.

Wyll ran to help, and I picked up Orin's knife before following. I didn't want to leave weapons of this quality for the enemy to reclaim. By the time I got there, Astarion and Wyll had downed most of the combatants, and all I needed to do was finish a couple off. A handy thing, as my vision started to blur and darken. I stumbled and fell to my knees, and the darkness took over.

"Head wounds are tricky," I heard Gale saying. "Let's not move him until we get a healing potion into him, at least."

My mouth felt fuzzy, and my head was screaming with pain. I opened my eyes slowly, and was rewarded with a whole new world of pain.

"Darling," Wyll said, his face coming into view. "Stay still. You have a head injury. We need to know what to do."

"I'll be fine," I said, trying to get up, finding it surprisingly difficult.

"Not on your life," Wyll said, sounding grim. "Gale, potion?"

Gale pulled my jaw open and dripped in something foul-tasting. I spat and turned my head away. He sighed, made a gesture over me, and suddenly I couldn't move.

"Thanks," Wyll said with a sigh. "Ye gads. He's annoyingly strong."

Gale pulled my jaw open again and poured in the foul-tasting brew. I tried to resist, pushing it out with my tongue, but it pooled at the back of my throat and I swallowed instinctively.

"What's wrong?" Wyll asked. "Are we doing the wrong thing?"

"He's not in his right mind," Astarion said. "I've seen head injuries before. Sometimes the person gets very confused when they wake up."

Gale poured in more healing potion as I opened my mouth to abuse him, and I swallowed again, raging. "Let me go, you cheesy excuse for a bladderwrack!"

I dimly heard Astarion cackling with laughter.

“Hey, darling,” Wyll said, bending over me, his hand on my shoulder. “We’re trying to help. Please stop fighting us.”

I stared at him. Didn’t I usually trust this man with my life? Why was I so angry with him now? I wanted to hurt him. I was sure he was trying to hurt me. But that didn’t make sense. “If you want to kill me, love, go ahead,” I said, giving up.

“Shit. He’s off with the fey,” Wyll said, sighing. “Thank you, dearest. But I just want to get you somewhere safe.”

The conversation was too confusing. I closed my eyes and let them do whatever they needed to. If I died by their hands, better than Orin.

“Do you want me to take him?” Astarion asked.

“I have him,” Wyll said, and I felt myself being lifted and cradled against his chest. The familiar scent of sulphur and oakmoss filled my nostrils, with an undertone of tangy, coppery blood. “Shit. There’s so much blood.” He sounded close to tears for some reason.

“It’s normal with head wounds,” Gale said. “It’s mostly superficial. Doesn’t mean anything bad. They just bleed a lot.”

I let the darkness take over again, warm and dark and comforting.

“Hey, wake up,” Gale said. “Come on, Dash. You know better than to fall asleep after a head wound.”

I fought my way through the clouds and pain, blinking. Wyll was still holding me, jouncing me up and down. Pain jolted through my head with every movement. “Ugh. Can you stop bouncing me? That hurts.”

Wyll grinned down at me. “So you don’t think I’m trying to kill you?”

“I’m starting to think you might be,” I said, closing my eyes against the headache, only to have Gale pinch my arm hard. “Ow! What the hells?”

“Stay awake,” Gale said. “No sleeping. Not for a while, anyway.”

“Ugh. I want to sleep.”

“And that’s exactly why you shouldn’t,” he said. “I don’t know why. I just know people can fall into comas after head wounds if they go to sleep.”

I realised dimly that he was right, but couldn’t see how that had anything to do with my situation.

“Thank all the gods of light,” Wyll muttered, and sat down on the floor. “Halsin?”

“Here,” Halsin’s deep voice replied. “Head injury?”

“He’s confused. Seems to be getting better, but he thought we were enemies for a while there,” Gale told him.

I scoffed.

Halsin’s face swam in my vision. “You gave him a healing potion?” he asked.

“Yes. Did we do the wrong thing?” Wyll asked, sounding frantic.

“No you didn’t,” I told him. “You just yelled at me and threw me around a lot.”

“Halsin…”

“He’s probably going to be fine,” Halsin said, reassuring. “If you got a potion into him quickly, it should have arrested any bleeds. That’s the main concern with an injury like this. We’ll give him another, but then we’ll need to keep watch over him for a day. Just in case. Look for his pupils changing size, or going uneven. Or his breathing changing. If he stays lucid and calm, he should be fine in a couple of days.”

“Shit,” Wyll said, and I felt something constricting me.

I moved a little, trying to alleviate the discomfort, and the vice loosened.

“Sorry, darling,” he said, and I realised I was still in his arms, on his lap.

“Two hour watches,” Halsin recommended. “Preferably people who weren’t in that fight. You all look as though you’ve been through the hells.”

That night was not a fun experience. People poked and prodded me constantly, keeping me awake, keeping me aware of the pain in my head and the soreness running through my entire body. Every time I closed my eyes, someone pinched me to wake me up. Through it all, the scent of oakmoss and sulphur.

I came out of a light doze to see dawn light creeping into the room. Wyll was lying next to me, propped up on an elbow, staring into my eyes. “Well hello,” I said, smiling. Then I remembered snatches of the previous day.

“My darling,” he said softly, stroking my hair. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” I said, yawning. “No one would let me sleep.”

One eye filled with tears.

“Hey,” I said, concerned, reaching up to him. “What’s wrong?”

“Just worried about you, love. That was a hefty knock Orin gave you.”

“Ugh. Did we kill her?”

He nodded. "It's all fine. We have it sorted. Don't worry about any of that."

"How is he?" Astarion asked.

"Lucid," Wyll answered over his shoulder. "Seems less confused."

"Can I sit up?" I asked. "I really need to pee."

Wyll moved away and stood, offering me a hand. I let him help me to my feet, then swayed as the room seemed to tilt around me. I made my slow, tottering way over to a chamberpot, and relieved myself, Wyll holding my shoulders.

"Well. This takes the mystery out of the romance," I said, grimacing.

Wyll laughed, helping me to stand. "I don't want mystery, darling. I want you." He retied my trousers, and led me back to where we'd been lying – two bedrolls on the floor.

"Oh. This reminds me of camping with you on the road," I said, trying to lie back down without collapsing bonelessly. Wyll saw the problem and sat down to support my weight as my legs gave out under me.

"I have you, darling," he said, arms around me. "Do you want to lie down, or cuddle?"

"Always cuddle," I said.

He pulled me onto his lap, head against his chest, his arms holding me close. "Gods. You silly gnome. You had me so worried," he said.

"Mmm. Worth it for the extra cuddles," I said, inhaling.

"Damn. He's still delirious," Astarion said. "I have soup."

Wyll looked up from me, smiling. "Thanks, Astarion," he said, taking the mug. "Dash, Halsin said you can have soup and water if you're thirsty."

"I'd rather a steak."

"Ha! Liquids it is, for now."

"Spoilsport."

"Hmm. I *do* aim to ruin all of your fun."

I sipped at the soup. It was a broth, thin but tasty. "So what happened yesterday? I'm finding myself a little fuzzy on the details."

Astarion related the events of the previous day, dwelling lovingly on my reactions to being fed a healing potion, which he seemed to find hilarious.

"Gods. I thought you were trying to kill me?" I asked, appalled.

“Seemed like it,” Wyll said, grinning. “But then you told me I had your permission to kill you, which I thought was sweet.”

Astarion laughed. “I love Head Injury Dash. He’s very entertaining.”

“Let’s not make a habit of meeting him,” Wyll cautioned. “I like you best with senses unscrambled. Even though you were surprisingly adorable.”

I closed my eyes, torn between amusement and mortification. What on earth had I said? What secrets had I spilt? Oh well. It couldn’t have been too bad if they were still laughing about it.

“Drink your soup,” Wyll reminded me, and I sighed, lifting the heavy mug to take another sip.

A day later, and my head was finally clear.

“You can eat now,” Halsin said, smiling at me as he stood up. “That must have been a nasty blow. But your eyes are tracking normally, your reflexes are back, and you’re making sense. Take it easy for a couple of days. Rest. And be assured that I’ll tell Wyll if you misbehave.”

I snorted. “Fine. I really don’t want another worried lecture. Turns out I’m better at giving them than receiving.”

“Aren’t we all!”

“Judging from the last couple of days?” I asked drily. “Yes, you all definitely are.”

He chuckled and handed me a mug of tea. “For the headaches,” he said. “I couldn’t give you anything to dull the pain before now. Too much risk.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said, sipping carefully. My head was not happy with me. The feeling was very mutual.

“Gods,” I said, leaning back against Wyll as I slowly sipped the tea. “Why are you always having to nurse me through ridiculous problems that invariably involve my head wanting to explode?”

“You do have a talent for repetition,” he said, sounding amused. “But I like looking after you, darling.”

“You must be perishing for a proper sleep, though,” I said.

“Hmm. I got some naps in here and there. And you slept alright last night – just a bit restless. I’m fine.”

“Tell me if you want rest, though?” I asked. “You don’t have to be at my beck and call, love. Someone else could keep me company.”

His arms tightened around me. “Not on your life. I want to stay at your side a while longer.”

“Was it that bad?”

“Bad enough to make me desperate to hold you,” he said, voice soft. “I’m sorry, dear. I know I’m being clingy and ridiculous.”

I drained the mug of tea, and felt a slight drowsiness coming over me. “Clingy and ridiculous seem perfect right now,” I said, putting down the mug and relaxing back against him. “I like being in your arms.”

“I’m yours,” he said, kissing my forehead, leaning back against the wall. “You have to stop scaring me, though. I’m not sure my poor heart can take it.”

“Mmm. I’ll try,” I said, closing my eyes and letting the tea pull me away into sleep.

Kicked out

Chapter Notes

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

“You two,” Karlach said firmly, “are out of here.”

“You’re kicking us out of our own lodgings?” I said, smiling. “Do tell.”

Karlach paced to the door, jerking her head for us to follow. “Come on.”

She led us to the adjoining chamber, where Duke Stelmane had been staying. And murdered. Hmm. The bloodstains had been removed, and it again looked like a comfortable, expensive tavern room. With a double bed.

“We organised for you to have this room indefinitely. The tavern can't fill it, what with the murder. But it's been thoroughly cleansed and blessed.

“You’re welcome to visit, of course, but you two live here now. You’re betrothed; you need some privacy already. And frankly, we could do without the constant displays of annoyingly sensible loving relationship. Makes us all queasy.”

Wyll and I laughed.

“Thank you, Karlach,” I said, and hugged her.

“You’re very welcome, soldiers. Just keep it down in here, OK?”

“I can't believe it. That horror is finally dead. Did I tell you? Florrick is sending in the Flaming Fist to clean out the remaining rats.”

“Oh. Another thing I missed, what with the head injury.” I looked into the bath. Someone had already filled it with clean water. I tested the temperature – cold. Damn. A while ago, then. “Do you know any water-heating spells, love?”

Wyll walked over to dunk a hand in the water, and it started to swirl lazily. I dipped in a finger – warm, verging on hot.

“That's perfect. I *knew* I kept you around for a reason.”

“I thought it was my arse,” he said, grinning at me.

“Hot arse. Hot water. Hot all over,” I said, winking at him and pulling off my shirt. “Ugh. I stink.”

“Bathing you didn’t exactly feel like a priority,” Wyll admitted. “What with the risk of death, and all.”

“Mmm. I smell like a deep rothe went into rut and battled a hill giant a week ago.”

I spared a thought for the staff of the tavern, seeing Wyll running through the tavern with a bloodstained gnome in his arms. Had they thought he'd killed me? Kidnapped me? I grimaced at the thought of the Fist turning up – but they hadn't yet. Maybe the tavern staff were too scared or too blasé to pay close attention to what we did. They saw us walk in most evenings with blood-spattered clothing, sporting bruises and bristling with weapons. Maybe they were just glad to have the patrons see who they might have to deal with if they started a fight? Come to think of it, the place did seem surprisingly peaceful, given the Elfsong's reputation for rowdy drinking parties, overindulgence, and bar fights. Maybe we'd inadvertently calmed the place down.

I climbed over the side of the tub, scowling at the lack of proper-sized steps. Damn tallies thought they ruled the world. I slipped into the water, sitting on the low ledge around the side of the tub, and groaned. On Wyll, this water would only be chest-high. On me, it was deep enough to soothe my sore shoulders. And my sore everything else.

“You usually only make that noise when I'm doing something rude to you,” Wyll observed. “Have you replaced me with a tub of hot water, darling?”

I laughed. “This tub can't do half the things you do to me. Are you joining me, sweetheart?”

“You want company, then?”

“If the company's you? Always, beloved.”

He quickly and neatly stripped off his robe and trousers, and joined me in the tub. “Mmm. I do a good heating spell.”

“Come kiss me? I want those lips on mine.”

He moved quickly to kneel in front of me, causing a surge of water that almost lapped over the side of the tub.

“Tsk,” I said, grinning. “Clumsy.”

“Parched, more like.”

“For water or kisses? You have one all around you, and the other right in front of you.”

He trailed wet fingers lightly down my face. “Always for you, darling,” he said, suddenly serious. “Hells. I want a few days to lie with you in bed. My food, your touch. My wine, your kisses. We keep saying *after this*, but there's always another task; something else we must do before we destroy the Absolute once and for all.”

“We'll get there, love,” I said, reaching out to pull him close. He knelt between my legs, arms around me.

“I know,” he said. “I know we will. It just seems very far away right now. And... death is always a lingering spectre.”

“We have tonight, at least,” I said, shifting forward to press against him.

“Hmm,” he said, turning his head to kiss my earlobe. “Wet and slippery.”

“All over.”

His hands drifted slowly down my back. “That seems to be true,” he said, voice a little husky.

“You should check further down, in case I lied,” I suggested.

“Ah yes. Further down in the water definitely shouldn't be slippery or wet,” he agreed. His hands slid down to my arse, and pulled me tight against him.

“Mmm. But you were thirsty, and I haven't slaked your thirst yet,” I said, fingers playing over his lips.

“And here I thought you loved me,” he said, kissing my fingers.

I pulled his face closer and laid my lips against his. We kissed for a while, bodies sliding against each other, unhurried. As though we had all the time in the world; as though we weren't at risk of dying horribly in the next few tendays. But the water grew cold, and my head started to ache.

Wyll drew away to catch his breath, and frowned at me. “You're hurting,” he said, and I smiled at him through the odd sparkles obscuring my vision.

“I've felt better,” I admitted. “But I'm enjoying this.”

He shook his head, stood, and reached for a towel. “Come on, dearest. Stop being ridiculous and start being sensible, or I'll spank you.”

I looked at him consideringly, and he laughed.

“I should have known that was a bad threat to make,” he said. “My silly love. Out you get. We can cuddle in bed.”

I raised my eyebrows, and he rolled his eyes.

“Cuddles only, you ridiculous creature. I want you to survive the night, thank you.”

“It would be worth it,” I said, smiling at him as I clambered out of the tub.

“Never,” he said, wrapping the towel around me and getting out, snagging a towel for himself. “My darling, I need you for far more than a night. I want you with me forever.”

“You're sweet, but it's frustrating. I want to touch you,” I complained.

“We have time, dearest. I love touching you too, but you need to take it easy. Besides. My favourite thing is still falling asleep with you in my arms.”

“Only because I haven't had the chance to do some of the things I've been longing to,” I pointed out.

He laughed. “You make a terrible patient, you know that?”

I looked at the towel he wore around his waist, and the very obvious evidence that I'd sparked his imagination. I grinned, and he snickered, looking embarrassed.

“Stop, please,” he said. “You'll have me in fits of blushes soon. I'm not used to all this taunting.”

I laughed and slipped a nightshirt over my head. Another lovely thing about civilisation that I was still readjusting to: different clothes for day and night use. Bliss. “I'll be good, love,” I told him. “I'm sorry; I couldn't resist teasing a little.”

“Hmph,” he said, pulling on a pair of boxers and lounging on the bed. “If I didn't love you, I might be offended. As it is, I'm just looking forward to getting you healthy again.”

“Me too,” I said, rubbing my temples as pain started to win out again. “I must admit, I'm not loving this headache.”

“Hmm,” he says, bouncing up off the bed. “I'll go see Halsin for a tea. Stay put. No shenanigans.”

“Yes, mother,” I sighed dramatically, climbing onto the bed.

He returned with tea, and chivvied me to drink it, watching with fond eyes as I grimaced. “Good darling,” he said, taking the mug and putting it down on the bedside table. “Come here. I want to hold you for a while.”

I went to him happily, resting my now-aching head on his chest. “What happened here?” I asked, tracing around a star-shaped scar on his chest, above his left nipple.

“Oh. Goblin raid,” he said, looking down. “One of the first I encountered. Not the one I told you about in Cloakwood; this was a little later. I'd developed just enough skill to be cocky; not enough to actually back up my cockiness. An arrow damn near skewered me. I was lucky goblins are so much shorter than me, and she was fairly close – the arrow angled up instead of down. It hurt like the hells and laid me up for weeks, but it didn't puncture anything vital.”

“You're lucky you had a good healer,” I noted. “That could have been worse.”

He nodded. “Definitely could have. I've realised since meeting you just how lucky it was.”

“Tell me more?” I asked. “I could use the distraction.”

“So you can fall asleep to the sound of my voice and give me a complex about being boring?” he asked, squeezing my shoulders. I looked up in concern, but he was smiling. “Only joking. I'd love to, darling.”

He blew out the candle by the bed, and I sighed in relief. The darkness was soothing.

“How about the story of a little girl I met in the woods once?” he asked. “She was all alone, and I was so worried about her. Just a tiny thing, maybe twelve years old if that, and she looked so frail. I'd fought a squad of goblins the day before; where there's one lot, you'll usually find more. So I was accompanying her home through the forest, to make sure she made it safely, when a small pack of gnolls found us. This tiny, frail girl turned into a panther and ripped them to pieces right in front of me. My eyes must have been like saucers, I was so shocked...”

I chuckled sleepily and closed my eyes as he continued to talk, his voice soothing, one hand stroking my hair gently. I drifted off, relaxed, feeling loved... if not fulfilled.

I woke early the next morning to find Wyll sprawled on his stomach beside me, arm outstretched and fingers on my hip, as though even in sleep he found himself reaching out towards me. I eyed his prone form and considered just snuggling up to him for another hour... but morning meditation was an important discipline. And we could always cuddle when he woke up. So instead, I sighed and swung my legs off the bed, careful not to disturb him, and sat up. Then I paused, confused.

Next to the bed, on the bedside table, was a small wooden box with a ribbon around it. A piece of parchment under it simply had *Dash* written on it. I smiled. A gift from Wyll? I opened the box, and... the dark gleam of fire opal hit my eyes. Most of the rectangular stone was a dark green, almost black... with sparks of red and orange sprinkled throughout. I lifted it out. A gold ring, with that large, dramatic opal centred. No ornamentation; that would have been too much.

I turned to look at Wyll. His eyes were open, watching me. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“It’s... it’s amazing, love. I love it. I love more that you remembered.”

“You told me I was the opal of your heart, darling. Even if I forgot everything else about us, that might just stay etched on my memory until the end of time.”

I tried the ring on the middle finger of my left hand, where it wouldn’t interfere with me grasping a staff. It slid on easily, just a hint of friction. “It fits perfectly,” I said. “How on Toril did you do that?”

Wyll took my hand and kissed the finger I’d placed the ring on. “These hands have held me... healed my hurts... wiped my tears... coaxed cries of ecstasy from my mouth. I have held these hands going into battle against monsters and myself alike. Dearest, I know your hands better than I know my own. It wasn’t difficult.”

I grinned. “You are the smoothest talker,” I said. “Gods, I need to meditate and get breakfast, but I also need to spend some time holding you close.”

“Mmm... come here,” he said, moving over to sit leaning against the headboard, legs apart. He opened his arms, wiggling his fingers in clear invitation.

I crawled over and sat between his legs, resting against him, head on his chest. I put an arm around his waist, and he closed his arms around my shoulders. I breathed a sigh and relaxed against him. “Thank you,” I said softly. “It’s beautiful, and I’d love it even if it didn’t remind me of a wonderful day with you.”

“Oh. Take it off for a moment,” he said.

I complied, and he pointed to the inside of the ring. I turned it to the lamplight, and read *My light*. I put it back on and sniffed. “You’re determined to make me cry at every opportunity, aren’t you?” I said, smiling up at him with tears in my eyes.

He stroked my cheek lightly, and the love in his eyes stunned me all over again. “If you insist on crying when you’re happy, dearest, then prepare for a very soggy future.”

Chapter End Notes

Confession time: *I'm the one who finds Wyll's voice soothing. 😊 I have a couple of audiobooks that Wyll's actor, Theo Solomon, narrated. I literally fall asleep to the sound of Theo's voice some nights, because it's the most soothing, calming voice ever. The subject matter is interesting too, but damn – he could be talking about global conspiracy theories and I'd still be up for letting him talk away as I drift off.*

History always repeats

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: dissociative episode.

There isn't much in the way of actual storyline that you need to read in this chapter. You can easily get away with skipping it.

As per usual, please look after yourself first and foremost. 💜

Love, Rowan

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

“Astarion, have you been to Rivington yet?”

He shook his head. “I was saving that for last. I hope they’re not moving around every night, and I’m just chasing them, one night behind.”

“Would you like some company tonight?” I asked. “I’m restless, and Halsin’s discouraging me from actually fighting yet.”

“So you’d be a useless tagalong?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not useless. More... moral support,” I said, grinning.

“Fine. Any company but Jaheira’s. She insists on calling me *cub* even though I’m quite clearly older than she is!”

“Only in your body!” the rejoinder floated back from the side sleeping area.

“See what I have to deal with?” he demanded. “The lack of respect is appalling.”

“I respect you utterly,” I said, hiding a smirk.

He snorted. “At least you don’t call me *cub* .”

“Last option,” Astarion said. “Fraygo’s Flophouse. Not a favourite; Cazador used to complain that the people we brought him from here tasted like sadness and exploitation. Funny; I thought he liked those things.”

“Happening to other people, no doubt.”

“Hmm.”

Downstairs was a bust, but upstairs, we hit paydirt. “Well. Petras and Dalyria,” Astarion drawled. “Trawling for scraps at the bottom of the barrel, are we? What did you do to earn Cazador’s disfavour this time?”

“Brother!” Dalyria cried. “You’ve come back!”

“You heard about the rite,” Petras said, scowling. “You want in, don’t you? We weren’t good enough until you heard we were all ascending.”

“Ahh, Petras,” Astarion said, shaking his head. “Ever the last to figure out what’s going on.”

“You’re the one who’s last to arrive.”

“Tell me all about the rite. When and where?”

“Will you come, brother?” Dalyria asked, her face hopeful.

“Yes; but I’m coming to kill Cazador. Not to help him.”

The two stared at him, wide-eyed.

“When and where?”

“Tomorrow night,” Dalyria said. “Under the palace. There’s an old, desecrated temple. That’s where we’ll ascend and become as gods.”

“Ugh. I remember you being far less gullible. How time improves our memories. He won’t ascend you. He’ll kill you.”

They disappeared in swirls of shadow, and Astarion swore.

“Well,” I said. “I guess Cazador knows we’re coming, now.”

“At least we know when the party starts.”

“Ah! You’re back,” Wyll said, putting down the book he’d been reading by lamplight. “Any luck?”

I nodded. “Tomorrow night, under Cazador’s palace. Looks like we get some action soon.”

He snorted. “As if we were getting bored.”

I laughed and took off the light armour I wore outside, stretching to remove the kinks in muscles. “How was your evening?”

“Quiet, for once. No one invaded the room looking for lost treasure or a secret cache of weapons,” he said. “Very boring.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

He held out his arms, and I climbed on the bed to snuggle.

“What would you like to do now?” he asked. “Get a good night’s sleep to prepare for tomorrow’s battle?”

“As if,” I said, scoffing. “I thought you knew me.”

“Oh? What else do you have in mind?”

“Do you know what I can’t get out of my head?” I confessed.

“Hmm?”

“Do you remember when I brought you into the dream world for a picnic, and you kissed me?”

“And damn near ravished you on the spot? Mmm... not one of my proudest moments, but somehow still a fond memory.”

“Would you please do that again?”

“What, and just...”

I felt the heat rising into my face. Embarrassment was starting to win out over arousal.

“You have no idea how delighted I’d be,” Wyll said softly, and rolled over, taking me with him, ending with him on top of me.

His lips were on mine, and again, they were hard and demanding instead of soft and giving. I opened my mouth to his tongue, and it slid hard and fast into me in an unmistakable rhythm. I made a hungry noise and arched into him, pressing up into his body, feeling my cock starting to swell.

He broke from me to take a breath. “Gods, Wyll,” I whispered. “I want you.” Then his lips were on mine again, his tongue dancing the same insistent rhythm, his body sliding slowly against mine. His belly was stroking my hard cock, sending waves of pleasure outwards, and his cock was a pleasant hot hardness pushing against my leg. I slid my hands down to his arse, pressing up against him, digging my fingers into the muscle.

He sped up the rhythm of his movements, and I groaned.

“Is this alright?” he murmured.

I fought my way out of the haze. “Take your clothes off, love. I need to taste you.”

His breathing sped up, and he kissed me again. I slid a hand up his back to his braids and pulled while I kissed him, hard, biting his lip. “Naked, love. Now.”

He pulled away, breathing hard, eyes unfocused. “Hells. Yes.” He knelt, unlaced his shirt, pulling it carefully over his horns.

I watched him, hungry, then came back to myself and pulled my shirt and trousers off.

“Where do you want me?” he asked, standing naked in front of me, cock hard.

I sat up and pulled his hips towards me. “Right here,” I said. “Sweetheart. May I play with your cock?”

“Damn. Yes. Please, dearest.”

I pulled his cock into my mouth, as far as I could, and his hips jerked in my hands. I looked up at him, and he nodded.

“Keep going. Please, darling.”

I turned my attention back to his cock, breathing out, pushing the tip slowly further down my throat, ignoring the instinctive reaction, even though the ridges and bumps were playing hells with my gag reflex. *Get it together, I told myself, you know exactly how to do this. And you know how to make it feel great. If you could do it for random nobodies, you can do it for the man you love.*

I let myself slip into that slightly-removed mind-space, where nothing that happened to my body really mattered. My body wasn't *me* ; it was a tool. A place to exist in when I wasn't working. The urge to gag went away. Everything worked smoothly. I withdrew to wipe my mouth and chin, smiling up with a quirk of my lips, and bent back to the task.

“Hells. This feels wonderful, darling,” he said, breathing hard.

I licked up the cock in front of me, sliding my tongue around its tip, stroking slowly with my thumb over its wet length. A groan, so I let it slide back down my throat, nice and easy, hearing the sounds that meant climax was getting closer. I set a slow, steady rhythm, breathing carefully, making it all seem easy and natural. I tasted salt and sulphur, and knew I was almost finished. I moved to shallower movements, increasing my speed in small increments.

“I'm close, dear. I'm close. Hells.”

A hand caressed my hair, and I half-wished it would go away. Distracting. I pushed my tongue up against the cock as I sucked it in, pushing it hard against the roof of my mouth, making it feel tight and textured. A groan, fast breathing, and then hot juices pulsing into my mouth. I swallowed quickly, easily, sucking gently, licking to clean every last bit of seed from it.

I looked up, smiling the easy, practised smile that said I loved what I'd just done, that it was perfectly rewarding and pleasurable in itself. *No need to work on me; I'm thrilled just to be servicing you .*

“My darling,” he said, touching my cheek. “That was... amazing. Thank you. Cuddle with me?”

I lay down with him, making sure we were touching the length of my body. I stroked down his chest lightly, caressingly. *Give him the full experience. Make sure he feels loved and wanted.*

“Dash?” he asked, voice oddly uncertain.

I looked up at him and smiled brightly. “What’s up?”

He frowned a little. Damn. *Make him happy*. I reached up to pull him in for a kiss, but he resisted, drawing away gently and sitting up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I feel as though you weren’t really there with me,” he said slowly. “Darling, am I imagining things? Tell me I am, and I’ll leave it alone.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I could do with a washup, though.” I sat up, and he reached out to take my hand, to stop me from leaving.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I don’t understand the question,” I said, feeling frustration wash through me. *So much effort just for... wait, for what?*

“What did I do?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I told you I’m fine.”

“Then where are you?”

I frowned. He wasn’t making sense, and I wanted to clean myself up. Have a drink, maybe. “I’m going to wash up. Back soon.”

I splashed my face with cold water, added a little soap, and scrubbed. When I felt clean and refreshed, I went back. Where he was still sitting waiting, face troubled.

He held out his arms, and I went to cuddle against him, my head on his shoulder, one arm around his waist, my side pressed against his belly. He kissed my forehead gently, arms loose around me.

I inhaled, taking in that familiar scent of sulphur and oakmoss, and relaxed against him.

“Mmm. My love,” I said, rubbing my cheek against his bare chest. It heaved under my cheek, and I looked up, concerned. “Wyll. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have the words,” he said, sounding helpless, looking sad. “Dash...”

Then where are you? echoed in my memory. I felt my heart plummet. “Oh. Shit.”

“What just happened?” he asked.

“I... think I went into professional mode,” I said slowly. “Where there are no emotions. Just... mechanics.”

“Oh.”

“Are you alright?”

“I think I should be asking you that,” he said, looking upset still.

“But you’re upset with me.”

His arms tightened around me, then loosened again. “No, dearest, not upset *with* you. Just upset.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought I was sharing love with the person I love more than life. And then... you felt as though a stranger took over your body. And the stranger barely knew or cared who I was.”

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

He closed his eyes. “Shit.” He opened his eyes and sighed. “Of course I did. Physically, it was amazing. But... it was like when I woke up and you were in a dream with Gale. Except you just weren’t there. Dash, I don’t want to make love to your body. I want to make love to *you* .”

I frowned, trying to think it through. “I’m sorry, love. I’ll try to do better.”

“Argh! No. Darling... what’s happening here? I feel as though our connection just flew out the window. Was it me? What did I do? What changed? Did I hurt you?”

“I don’t understand why this is a big deal,” I said slowly.

“Because I don’t want the talented whore, darling. I want the man I fell in love with. I don’t want to be serviced like a rothe in rut. I want to give you pleasure. I don’t want an act. No matter how skilled you might be.”

I felt tears rising, and a growing sense of frustration. “I don’t know how to separate the two!”

“I don’t need you to separate who you are, darling. I just... damn, I wish I had better words.”

“Why are we fighting?” I asked, trying to blink away the teariness. *Get it together, Dash.*

He sighed. “We’re not fighting, darling. I love you.”

I wasn’t saying what he wanted me to say. But I couldn’t figure out what that was. I stared at him, perplexed. No good words came to mind.

“Let’s drop it for now,” he said, shaking his head. “Will you hold me a while?”

I lay back and held out my arms, and he cuddled close, his head on my shoulder, horn brushing my cheek. "I love you too, sweetheart," I murmured, kissing his hair.

A while later, Wyll asleep, I went up to the roof to brood.

"Oh hey you," Astarion said, turning from the balustrade. "You look very pensive tonight."

"Mmm. I'm hopelessly confused."

"Ha! Nice to hear you finally admit it. You do come off as a bit of a know-it-all. What's wrong?"

I sighed, leaning on the balustrade next to him to look out over the city. "I upset Wyll. And I don't understand what I did, or how to fix it."

"Ugh. Relationship dramas are hardly my area of expertise, dearie."

"They're usually mine. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Seems about right. The mason never has nice statues. The carpenter's house always looks terrible."

"Ouch."

"So can you tell me what happened? Or is it private?"

I shrugged. "I... you know how we talked once about switching off? During sex."

He nodded, giving me a curious look.

"I did that with Wyll. It's just a thing I sometimes do. It doesn't mean anything."

"Ah. But our Wyll is the cuddliest of starry-eyed lovers, isn't he?"

I frowned.

"He's not the sort to visit whores, I mean. Too strait-laced. Too boring. But also... maybe he doesn't indulge in such things just for the fun of it."

"Huh. Are you saying I gave him fun when he wanted love?"

"Ugh. Don't pull me any further into this, thank you very much."

I turned back to my contemplation of the city, ruminating on the idea. If Wyll wanted love, not simple physical pleasure... and I'd given him fun without the love... hmm. I could easily imagine someone getting angry that they were promised sex and didn't get it. So why not the other way around? Did he suddenly feel as though he was just a mechanical, boring fuck for me? Was that why he'd looked so downcast?

“Thanks,” I said. “I think maybe this helped.”

“Always happy to have weird-arse conversations about completely inappropriate topics, Dash. You know me.”

I walked back into our room.

“Hey,” I said cautiously, seeing Wyll awake, but still looking unhappy.

“Dash,” he said with a slight smile. “I woke up and you were gone.” He patted the bed beside him.

I went to sit next to him, taking his hand for comfort. “I had a chat with Astarion. He helped me understand what the hells happened.”

“And once again, Astarion is somehow in our sex life,” he said, snorting. “Typical. But if it helped, I might be all for it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, stroking his hand. “I treated you like a client. I can’t imagine how strange and upsetting that must have felt.”

“Ah. Alright, you understand half of it. Thank you, love.”

“What’s the other half?”

“I love you. I want you to be happy when I touch you, when we’re together. Not... tolerating it. Letting me happen to you. It felt as though you disconnected from me completely.”

“Oh.”

“I love your passion. I love seeing that look in your eyes when you’re lost in my touch, darling. I’d much rather cuddle if you’re not in the mood, not... go through the motions like a Steel Watch automaton. I don’t want to use your body like that. It felt very, very wrong when I realised what happened. As though I’d taken advantage of you. Used you.”

“Hmm.”

“You’re very monosyllabic.”

“I’m... I think I’m trying to adjust to the concept.”

“What can I do differently? I want you happy, dearest.”

“I don’t know!” I said, frustration welling up. “I’m too broken for this, Wyll. What if I can’t just ever be in the moment? What if I’m always stuck?”

“Hey. You’re not broken. You’re perfect. I love you. And you’ve been in the moment with me plenty of times. Haven’t you?”

“Of course I have. But shit. I *am* broken! You wouldn’t have to deal with this if you were with someone else.” I let go of him to bury my face in my hands. I could let my mouth tremble then.

“I wouldn’t be madly in love if I were with someone else, you silly gnome.” He sat up to pull me into a hug, his voice softening. “Hey. You’re shaking.”

“I don’t know how to fix myself!”

“My sweet darling. I don’t want you to fix yourself.”

“But you said...”

“No. Stop. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any of it like that. I don’t want you to magically be perfect. I just want to make sure we don’t do that again. That’s all.”

I gave up the attempt at self-control and sobbed.

“Let it out, darling. Cry all you want,” he said, stroking my hair. “I love you so much.”

“What good am I if I can’t even do this right?”

“All the good in the world, my light.”

“Ha! You’re sweet.”

“I mean it. We can go back to kisses only. Forever, if you need it. It’s fine.”

“It’s obviously not. I saw how pent up you were.”

He rubbed his cheek against my hair. “Silly gnome. As though I can’t handle a little physical frustration. Do you have any idea what you’ve done to my life? You make me so happy.”

“Without the touch?”

“Without even a smidge of touch, I’d still be the happiest person in Faerun at the thought of marrying you. Of belonging to you forever, my dearest darling.”

I sighed.

“Now, can we move on from the what-ifs for a bit?” he asked.

“To what?”

“Would you rather we not do those things, dearest? Or would you prefer that we come up with something else? Like checking in every now and then to make sure you’re still alright.”

“Huh. That might work. But if I’m not, you just... what?”

“Stop. I stop. *We* stop.”

“And what then? I don’t know how to do this.”

He shrugged. “I hold you in my arms and tell you I love you? I don’t know anything about these things either, but I know that helps most things.”

“It feels like a lot of work.”

“That’s not work, darling. That’s making sure the love of my life is happy and healthy.”

“Ugh. Why are you always having to make allowances and look after me?” I said, frustrated. “This is ridiculous!”

He chuckled a little. “You look after everyone, and get offended when you need the same.”

“*You* aren’t having these stupid problems.”

“Give it time. I think I might surprise you.”

“Please do. Not that I want you traumatised and miserable. I just want to feel more *bloody* equal!”

“Need I remind you that I’ve already set off two fights and broken your heart?”

“Oh.”

“Can I share something with you?” he asked.

“Please.”

“When I realised what happened... it felt like what used to happen in the hells. When Mizora would give me to her friends. There’d be desire and pleasure, and then suddenly, it was as if a veil was lifted, and the emptiness of it all crashed down on me. It hurt, being used as a plaything that way.”

I remembered back to the look on his face; that pain I couldn’t understand. “I’m sorry, love. I don’t want you to feel like a plaything. At all.”

“No, no apology required. You didn’t realise, and I didn’t realise. But it’s going to keep happening, isn’t it? This collision of our old hurts and scars.”

A few tears leaked from my eyes to fall on his chest. “I wish we could just be free of it all.”

“Hmm. But at the same time... there’s something wonderful about being able to talk to you about it.”

I thought about that, idly stroking his chest. “It’s rather confusing, trusting you as much as I do. There’s so much you could use against me. To manipulate me.”

“Hmm. And vice versa.”

“I suppose. Would you kiss me? I could do with some reassurance right now.”

“Always,” he said, moving to lean over me and lay his lips on mine.

I rested a hand on his cheek and let the warmth of his love surround me, warm as a blanket, safe as a deep limestone cave.

He drew away, smiling at me. “There you are,” he said. “Hells. I love you, Dash.”

“I don’t know if I can stop myself slipping back into that mindset, though,” I confessed. “I’m worried.”

He frowned, thoughtful. “What advice would you give someone else, if they asked you for help with something like this?”

“I think...” I said, trying to imagine it, “I’d probably suggest that they ask each other for permission whenever they do something. Wait for an enthusiastic answer, so they know the other is focused the way they’d want. And perhaps... use a word that tells the other that something’s not quite right. So they know to stop and wait.”

“Well. We already do half of that. But the other half sounds like it might help.”

“It wouldn’t have this time, I don’t think.”

He shrugged. “We don’t need a perfect plan, darling. Battle plans rarely last past the beginning, anyway.”

“And love is a battlefield?” I asked, amused.

He snorted. “What should this word be?”

“Something we wouldn’t usually say in that situation. Like... I don’t know... *pineapple* .”

He laughed. “That *is* out of place in the bedroom. I hope. So someone says *pineapple* , and we stop and cuddle for a while?”

I nodded. “You’re going to a lot of trouble to figure out a solution to my problem.”

“Your problems are my problems, darling. And sadly, the reverse.”

“My joys are your joys?” I asked, smirking just a little. “That’s sad?”

“You know what I meant, you irritating little gnome,” he said, grinning at me. “Come here. I want to kiss my darling some more.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks,

*So, this one was a bit of a weird chapter to write. I was really struggling to write a good sex scene for this chapter, and I couldn't figure out why, until I remembered that at some point in almost every relationship, I'd had an experience similar to this. Without anyone ever noticing, frankly. It took me a pretty long time to figure out that it was actually kind of a Bad Thing, not a Thing Everyone Does All The Time. Once I realised that, the block was gone, and... welp. Huge chapter of Dash self-reflecting. *sigh* It's a little ironic that Astarion is so good at holding up a mirror for him.*

*Anyway, I'm a little irritated that the whole trauma theme keeps popping up so regularly, but at the same time, it feels pretty on point. When you learn to trust and love someone, the **weirdest** shit can suddenly decide to break its way out of your skeleton closet.*

Love, Rowan

PS. Sorry about the lack of updates this week! I'm still writing this, but I had a deluge of paid work, so I'm floundering a little. Once I've finished tweaking the next chapter, I'll put it up. 💜 Thanks for all your comments and encouragement - they mean the world to me!

Deep down into the dark

Chapter Notes

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

“So what can we use against Cazador?” I asked. “Any ideas?”

“Holy water?” Gale suggested. “Old-fashioned, but effective.”

“That daylight spell of yours might give him pause,” Wyll said. “Vampires burn in sunlight. I can’t imagine the spell version being very comfortable.”

“Ooh! I learnt that too,” Gale said. “It seemed a useful option if we’ll be descending into the sewers again.”

“Right, but he’s seen all that before, and survived it,” Astarion said, fidgeting impatiently. “We need to *surprise* him.”

I looked at him, concerned. Astarion was usually collected and debonair to a fault. Fussing and fidgeting weren’t good signs for him.

“How do we surprise a centuries-old vampire?” I asked. “He’ll have seen everything by now.”

“Except...” Wyll said thoughtfully. “That old mace you picked up to blow Rosymorn to bits. What was it called?”

“The Blood of Lathander?” I asked. “It’s holy, true. But hardly surprising.”

“Lathander *really* dislikes undead, though,” Gale said. “Have you taken it amongst undead before?”

I shook my head. “I mostly fight with my hands,” I pointed out.

“Hmm. Go get it for us? I’d like to see if I can sense anything.”

I retrieved the mace, examining it dubiously. For a relic, it was rather pretty, and the amber in the head of it reflected the light as though it shone dimly with its own light. But having a stone embedded in its head seemed wildly impractical, and I wasn’t used to wielding weapons like maces. Give me a quarterstaff any day. Or my own hands and feet.

Gale took it, closed his eyes, and ran his fingers over the weapon. “Light, and something fierce,” he said slowly. “There’s magic on this, alright. I don’t know exactly what it does – it isn’t any school of magic I’m familiar with. But the gods have their own rules. Take it with you to Cazador’s palace. I think it might surprise you.”

“A good surprise, right?” I asked with a hint of trepidation. “Remember the monastery? Big kaboom?”

“Somewhat difficult to forget,” Gale pointed out drily. “He’s a good god, though, isn’t he?”

I snorted. “In theory, yes.”

“Hmm. I share your disillusionment. Mortal lives seem all too worthless to the gods. It’s our souls they value. We’re currency, not companions.”

I laid a hand on his, and he smiled at me.

“Well. Enough about the gods and our resentments,” he said. “Bring the mace. Let’s see if we can give Cazador the surprise of his life.”

Getting into the castle was easy. That worried me. Either Cazador was hopelessly overconfident, which didn't seem likely given his age, or he was luring us in. Further in, further down, into the dark.

But we have light on our side, I told myself. And the light always wins out over the dark. There's always another dawn.

It was a nice metaphor. Even if I'd seen a lot of dark wins lately. Well. At least we were doing something. Our chances of surviving all of this were abysmal, regardless of what we liked to pretend and plan. All we could really do was cause as much damage to evil as possible, before we went down. We could leave the world a little brighter than we found it.

Oddly enough, that thought calmed me. Wyll glanced at me as we climbed a set of stairs, and I grinned at him. He smiled back, face soft.

Astarion, on the other hand, clearly wasn't feeling so tranquil. He looked around as we entered the grand hall, his shoulders tight, his face set in a mockery of his usual debonair mask.

“Ugh. This place. Expensive. Tawdry. So run down, it looks like a brothel that's long past its best. Smells like death and old socks. I don't remember the smell being so bad. And this is my home? What does this say about me?”

“Astarion, this isn't your home. It's a place you lived, it will always be part of you... but it doesn't have to be where your heart stays,” Gale said. “You're beyond all this now.”

“I don't even understand what that means,” he said, shifting fitfully. “Can we just go kill something already? I want to see blood. I want to hit someone. Preferably Cazador, in his smug, superior face.”

I sighed, watching him. This wasn't a time for comfort or personal growth, was it? He was fixated on the end result of our quest – killing Cazador. He was in a whirlwind of negative emotions, and coping the only way he knew how. He was repressing everything and going back to what he knew best: hatred and revenge. It was common, I knew, when going back to a scene of old torments – but I didn't know what to do about it, except to try to be there when

the dams burst and everything hit him again. And hope that he didn't do anything he couldn't take back in the meantime.

“Let's go,” I said, gesturing for him to lead the way further into the castle. “Where would Cazador be?”

“First things first,” he said, his gaze turning feral. “I have someone to visit.”

I blinked, surprised by the sudden change in focus, as he strode away down a corridor, then hurried to catch up.

“Well,” Wyll murmured, “at least there are unlikely to be innocents in this place. If people other than Cazador die, they'll probably richly deserve it.”

“True,” I said, loosening my muscles as we walked. I had a sneaking suspicion that fighting would be coming up soon. The smell of death was getting stronger. You'd think we'd be used to it by now.

“The kennels,” Astarion said, detestation dripping from his voice. But there was a hint of fear in his tone, too. Whatever happened here hadn't involved fluffy puppies – at least in any wholesome way. He burst through the door and turned, fangs bared, to the animated skeleton lurking in the corner. “Godey. I see you, you snivelling excuse for a bag of bones.”

“Such bold words from my little elf,” the skeleton said.

I blinked. This wasn't just an animate skeleton. It had a personality. Something inhabited it – whether its original soul or something else entirely. “What in Toril *are* you?” I asked.

“In the nine hells, more like,” Wyll muttered.

“You've returned,” it said, reaching out to Astarion, caressing his face with the bones of its fingers. “Ahh, you always sang so sweetly for me. I missed you when you went away.”

“You tortured me!” he said, face twisting. “For days at a time. You sadistic bastard!” He knocked the hand away.

“Don't be angry at Godey. It was all for your own good. To bring you into your power, little one.”

I felt a surge of anger go through me. Whatever inhabited this pile of bones, it needed to go back into the void. “Say the word, Astarion,” I said. “We have your back.”

“Oh, I'm *in my power*,” Astarion said, laughing. The laughter had a brittle tone to it, as though it might fracture into tears at any moment. “I have more power than you could imagine. And I'll get more still. But you won't live to see it.”

“Godey doesn't live. Godey serves.”

“Godey *dies*,” Astarion said, and lashed out with the hilt of a knife.

The creature sidestepped and grabbed his wrist. “Uh uh, little one. That’s not the way to play.”

Wyll stepped forward and swept his blade through it from behind, his face like thunder. The skeleton collapsed, bones tumbling to the floor. He kicked the skull across the room. “Fucking *bastard*, ” he spat.

“I... couldn’t have said it better myself,” Astarion said, staring at him.

Wyll turned and strode out of the room.

“You’re alright?” I asked Astarion.

He nodded, visibly calming. “That’s been on my list of things to do for a long time. Even if I didn’t get the killing blow. It’s nice to know he’s gone, at least.”

“Huh,” I said. “I should’ve tested the Blood of Lathander on it. Him.”

“Oh well. Let’s just smack Cazador with it and see if he says *ow*. ”

“How are you feeling?”

“Scared. Angry. Oddly resolute, now we come to it. We need to get going. If I don’t do this now, I may never do it. And he needs to die, the crazy, evil bastard. Oh. Also annoyed, at these endless questions about my feelings.”

I grinned and gestured for him to lead the way back out of the kennels.

Wyll fell in beside me, reaching for my hand. I gave it, pulling his hand up to brush my lips against his knuckles, and he smiled sidelong at me. “My sun,” he said. “Let’s see how Cazador manages up against the light that shines in the darkness, hm?”

“Cazador’s office,” Astarion muttered. “That must be where the entrance is to this temple below. We were never allowed in there. Never. Just him and his food.” He picked a lock, kicked the door open, and walked inside. “What the hells?”

He was staring at a large, circular plate on the floor, with a lever. A lift?

“Our passage to the dark depths?” Gale asked. “Shall we go?”

“We shall.”

We shuffled onto the circular plate, Astarion pulled the lever, and it descended, taking us into a dark passage that seemed endless. Just as the dark got too heavy to bear, candlelight flickered, and the lift jolted to a stop.

Astarion was staring down the vast, vaulted hallway. “200 years,” he muttered. “Two centuries living in this gods-forsaken hellhole, and I never knew this was down here.”

“Always a shock, to find that something we thought we knew well had hidden depths we never suspected,” Gale said, his face pensive. I had an inkling that something had brought Mystra to mind.

The first room we came to was a bedroom, with a bed in one corner and a large, ornate coffin in another.

“Bloody hells,” Astarion said. “ *This* is where he slept. We wondered if he ever did. The paranoid bastard.”

I picked up a threadbare cloth-covered journal, and skimmed the first few pages. “Shit. Astarion...”

He took it from me and started to read aloud. “Godey informs me that Cazador snuck a message out yesterday. He allowed it, so as to find my spawn’s mystery correspondent. It was an old friend, or perhaps a lover. For that, he must be punished. We may not have bonds with those we leave behind. The lesser ones. A year, I think, in the coffin in which he died. To remind him that... *that he is dead to the world now* .”

Astarion slammed the book shut, throwing it to the ground. “That bastard. His master did that to him. And he did it to me. *He knew exactly what he was doing!* ”

Gale picked up the book and leafed through it. “Cazador has learnt everything I can teach him,” he read. “To become as I am was ever his goal. Now it is his reward. He is as cold, as ambitious, as hard, as a vampire must be. If I had room in my heart for pride, I would feel it now.”

Astarion stared at Gale. “He was trying to turn me into himself, wasn't he? I thought he hated me. I thought he tortured me for fun. But it's worse. He tortured me for power.”

Gale nodded, sombre.

Astarion closed his eyes, and I tensed in spite of myself. But he just shook his head, squared his shoulders, and turned for the door. “Let's go,” he said, his voice low.

We followed him out, and down the echoing hall again. He opened a door, and we were assailed by a stench.

“Gods. And I thought the sewers in this place were bad,” Gale said through the handful of robe he was holding over his nose. “What is that malodorous miasma?”

“Unwashed bodies, decay, and misery,” Astarion said. “What did he do?”

We reached the first cell then. People clustered within it, slouched, defeated in body and mind. Red eyes shone dully from pale, gaunt faces. Gods. They were packed in like sheep in a market pen. If they wanted to lie down or even sit, they'd have to take turns.

“Spawn. Hells. How many has he turned since I left? Why?”

“You,” a voice said from the depths of the cell. “I'd know your voice anywhere. The instrument of my downfall. The source of my suffering and pain.”

Astarion's eyes widened, and his mouth twisted in something like fear. “No.”

“And you don't even remember me, do you?” the man said, pushing forward. “For me, it was the end of my life, of every hope and dream. Of even a scrap of happiness. For you, it was another night of hunting like any other.”

“Sebastian,” Astarion said, his face set, his eyes pained. “How...”

“Oh. You do remember my name, then. How *sweet*,” the man spat. “You ruined me!” He beat on the bars, screaming.

Astarion backed away, eyes still fixed on Sebastian. “I thought...” he faltered, closing his eyes. “Shit. I thought we were bringing him food. I thought he was eating. Not turning them. And not like *this* .”

“He forced you to do this,” Wyll said, laying a hand on Astarion's arm. “It wasn't your fault.”

“Don't touch me,” Astarion said, shrugging off the attempt at comfort, but reflexively, half-heartedly.

“There's a rune,” I said, unhappy to be adding to the deluge of shock. “On Sebastian's forehead. It matches one on your back.”

“Well that's unlikely to be a coincidence,” he muttered. “But why would —” He paused, clearly thinking unwelcome thought. “Shit. These are the lambs.”

I frowned.

“Sacrificial,” Wyll murmured to me.

My heart sank. The rite wasn't supposed to sacrifice seven spawn. It was supposed to sacrifice hundreds. As we walked down the dark hall, I revised my estimate: there were thousands of vampire spawn down here. Starved, kept in the dark, desperate. I stopped, closing my eyes. “We need to let them out,” I said. “They can't... we can't leave them in these cages like this. We can't.”

I opened my eyes to see Wyll and Astarion exchanging a look. “What?”

“There's no way to open them without Cazador's staff,” someone said from a cell. “No one else can free us. That's why we're doomed. Just run. We can't help. We can't escape. You can't help us. Maybe you shouldn't.”

“There,” Astarion said, his eyes shifting away from me. “We can't. Come on.”

“What aren't you telling me?” I demanded. Something was screwy.

“Nothing important,” he said. “Come on.”

He didn't want to release the spawn. No; he didn't want to release them because *he had a use for them*.

"Astarion. No. This rite... it will damn thousands of people to the hells."

"They're doomed regardless," he said. "Your boyfriend there won't let you release vampire spawn into the city."

I looked at Wyll. His face was sad, but resolute. I reeled under the realisation that Astarion was right. Wyll wouldn't agree to letting them go. Not without a fight. But this was a distraction, wasn't it?

"That's another problem entirely," I said, still looking at Wyll. "But you. Astarion, this is not the miracle you think it is."

"You need strong people on your side, Dash. I could be stronger. I could be unbeatable."

"You're plenty strong enough already," I told him. "You're enough. For us. For yourself. Don't sell yourself short."

"Sell myself short?" he yelled. "Are you insane? Without this worm in my head – the worm, may I remind you, that threatens to turn us into mindflayers at any moment – yes, THAT worm... without that, I can't even go outside in the daylight. I can't enter a house uninvited. I can't even cross a river! That little tributary that winds around Wyrms' Rock? I can't go there. I'm *useless* without the parasite, and I'm next to useless with it! Your delusions don't help!"

"Hey," I said. "You're a great Bowman and swordsman. You're an asset, damn your pasty hide! So stop with this ridiculousness. I love you. I'm not letting you degrade yourself with some devil's profane rite."

He spluttered wordlessly.

I sighed. "Turn and leave now if you want," I said, feeling a wave of sadness. "I'll understand if you hate me for this."

He ground his teeth. "You'd really pass up the opportunity to have a powerful, invulnerable vampire on your side, because you're worried about my soul?"

"I'm worried about your heart," I said. "You only just got it back."

He barked laughter. "Ha! That's a good one. There's nothing there. You're wrong about me. You're seeing a person who doesn't exist. Never existed."

I shook my head. "You're worth more."

"More than what?"

"More than profanity, mass murder, and misery."

“I can’t be what you see in me,” he said, pleading.

“Astarion. Hon. You already are. I’m not blind. I know you’re not a goody-two-shoes who secretly wants to pet kittens and run soup kitchens. But – what I see in you *is there*. You have a heart, and people who love you. Don’t shut yourself into a new prison.”

“I can’t be free like this!”

“You can’t be free like Cazador, either. It won’t bring you peace, or safety.”

He stared at me, mouth working as though he wanted to spit more words of denial and defiance at me, but had run out.

“I love you,” I said softly.

“Stop saying that!”

“I love you.”

“Ugh! You’re ridiculous.” He turned and stormed away down the hall, away from the entrance we’d come through.

“I think that’s as close as you’ll get to a capitulation,” Gale muttered. “Let’s go?”

I nodded, resigned. Cazador had probably heard us coming, what with all the shouting.

We walked through a door, and all stopped, simultaneously, to gape at the scene. The room was a huge natural cave, walled in something like basalt. At the bottom of the stairs, a huge ritual circle was inscribed on the floor. At every point but one, a vampire spawn hung, suspended in the air.

“Shit,” Astarion whispered. “He’s only missing me. Where *is* he?”

A swirl of cloud rose from the ground behind us as the doors clanged shut. It formed into a short, nondescript man with black hair and a look of fierce concentration. “Hello, *son*,” he said, baring his teeth. “Welcome home.”

He grabbed Astarion and dissolved into mist, floating down to the ritual circle. I lashed out as they passed me, but my hand just went through them as if they truly were made from mist. Astarion reappeared, hanging in the air like his siblings.

“There. Isn’t it nice, having the family back together?” Cazador asked. Astarion wasn’t struggling. Only his face showed his terror and anger. “And Astarion. You brought me a snack for later. How considerate.”

“Ahem,” Gale said quietly behind me.

I shook my head, pulling out of the reverie the vampire’s hypnotic gaze had lulled me into. I pulled the Blood of Lathander from my back, and the amber within it lit up with a blinding golden light.

“Ha!” Gale crowed. “I knew it!”

“Wait to see if it actually does damage,” I shot over my shoulder as wolves closed in.

“Wolves?” Wyll muttered. “Underground. In a vampire’s lair. They must be –”

The rest of the sentence seemed redundant when three of them transformed into huge, shaggy humanoid creatures with short muzzles.

I shrugged and ran forward. I wasn’t leaving Astarion to be killed in a vampire’s sick demonic rite, and I knew the others wouldn’t either. The wolves flinched when I jumped into their midst, and I grinned, a thread of pure happiness running through me. I’d been coddled too much lately. Action was *exactly* what I’d been needing. I lashed out at a person-wolf with the mace, and it yelped, hitting back wildly. This thing was blinding them and hurting them all in one. I sent a quick prayer of thanks to Lathander. Our differences could wait. This was useful help, in months of utter silence from the rest of the gods.

Ice slammed down from the ceiling to my right, prostrating three of the wolves, and an eldritch blast blazed past me from the left, knocking another onto the ice forming on the floor.

“Vamp behind you,” Gale called, and I turned, mace raised, to attack. The mist formed into Cazador, and he grabbed my wrist, lightning-fast.

“You thought *that* was enough to keep you alive?” he asked, sneering. I saw Gale’s hands moving behind the vampire, and carefully focused on Cazador instead. Whatever he was doing, he didn’t need the vampire focusing on him right now.

I let go of the mace with my right hand and caught it with my left – the one Cazador wasn’t holding in a punishing, bone-grinding grip. I shoved it forward, not bothering to try to hit him, and he screamed as soon as it touched his clothing. Hmm. Useful. Then screamed again as his back lit up like the noonday sun, and let go of me. He stumbled away from me, then straightened, regaining his poise.

“You. Are going to *pay* for that little display of bravado,” he spat. “You arrogant little shit.”

He lunged forward, mouth agape. I fell backwards into a roll, coming up with the Blood of Lathander in front of me, raised above my head. His foot hit my stomach, and the air whooshed out of me as I fell backwards again, this time to land painfully on my back. Shit. I had to stop making that stupid mistake. I rolled and scrambled inelegantly to my feet, just as a wolf snapped and scored a strike on my arm. I stumbled, but an eldritch blast knocked it off its paws, and another hit Cazador as he swung down at me. It knocked him away from me, off the stairs, and I breathed a sigh of relief – too soon, because he rose up, floating, to land in front of me. SHIT.

He froze in place, and I finished the sigh of relief, feeling a brush of fur at my side, leaping away to land near another wolf. Fuck. They just kept coming. I lashed out and hit it over the head with the mace, and it fell down, stunned or dead, I wasn’t sure – I just turned to attack another. They were targeting me, for some reason, when I’d have expected them to swarm the

people who weren't holding holy relics. Oh well. As Gale always said, *Death is but a word away*. He probably meant it more cheerfully, but it fit this situation quite nicely. A wolf snapped at my heel, and I lashed out with a kick, following with a hard blow to the face with the mace. It howled and fell over. Vampire's servants really didn't take kindly to whatever magic was on this thing.

That reminded me – Cazador. I risked a look over my shoulder – Gale and Wyll were focusing their attention on the vampire, leaving the wolves to me. Lovely of them. I set my shoulders and focused on hitting hard with hand and mace, ducking the snapping jaws as best I could, especially those coming at me from behind, trying to tear out the tendons in my legs. I'd be easy game if they could manage that.

Cazador screamed, a high, thin wail, and the wolves surrounding me fell down, motionless. I hit one, just to be safe, and it just rolled bonelessly. Dead. I turned just in time to see Cazador disappear.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

Wyll shook his head. "That seems too much to hope for," he said, looking grim. "Let's go get Astarion."

With the vampire's withdrawal, the spawn were released from their suspension around the ritual circle. Astarion lay in a heap, not moving.

"Astarion," I said, running to him. "He's gone. We stopped it." I put a hand on his shoulder, and he groaned, sitting up.

"Ugh. That was horrible," he said. "Where is the bastard?"

"Vanished into thin air," Gale replied. "Do you have any idea –"

"Oh, I know exactly where he's gone," Astarion said, lip lifting in a snarl. "He's predictable. He'll go where he feels safe."

"Astarion?" one of his siblings faltered.

Astarion gestured a dismissal. "Now's not the time for family reunions," he said. "Let's go."

We followed him silently, back the way we'd come, past the waiting ranks of captive spawn. Back to the bedroom, with its waiting coffin. He pulled at the lid, and screamed in frustration. "ARGHHHH! Why won't it *move*?"

Gale stepped forward and muttered something, touching the lid. It opened slowly, creaking, to show an empty interior. Astarion screamed again. "NO! No, you arrogant little bastard! You're not going to escape and heal up somewhere in secret. Where the *fuck* are you?"

I stepped forward, mace held in front of me, still blazing, to look into the coffin. Cazador's form swam slowly into view.

"You sneaky asshole," Astarion said, calming outwardly. "You almost fooled me."

Cazador opened his eyes. “As though fooling you was ever difficult, son. You were ever a disappointment, with your weak intellect and weaker will.”

“That’s our friend you’re insulting,” Gale said, sounding honestly appalled, and the coffin lit up with sunlight.

Cazador screamed. Astarion laughed – a high, feral-sounding cackle – and pulled him out of his coffin onto the floor. The vampire landed on his knees, swaying.

“Bastard,” Astarion spat. “You still think you have the upper hand, don’t you? Arrogant fool.”

“Over you?” he said, raising his face to meet Astarion’s gaze. “Always. I will always be your master. You will always be a slave.”

Astarion’s face twisted, and his arm blurred in motion as he stabbed Cazador in the chest. “I. Am. Not. A. Slave!” he yelled, punctuating his words with strikes of his blade.

“I guess he decided against ascension,” Gale said.

We watched as Astarion stabbed, and screamed, until Cazador was a bloody pulp on the floor. Then he collapsed, sobbing, onto his knees beside the remains of his ex-master.

I came forward to kneel beside him.

“Don’t. Touch me,” he said, savage and angry.

“I won’t,” I said. “I’m just... here.”

“Oh, you are, aren’t you,” he said, raising his head. “Here to help, right? Help me right into death. I’m stuck, now. Forever stuck in this godsforsaken spawn form. Never ascendant, never even a true vampire. Just... me. Weak and pathetic and stupid, forever.”

“You’re none of those things,” I said, reeling with the emotion I could sense within him. I needed to show him he was wrong, but all I had were words, and they seemed horrendously inadequate to the job. “You’re brave and beautiful and our friend.”

“Friends,” he spat. “If you weren’t such a good *friend* I’d have power and freedom right now.”

“You’d be stuck,” I said. “In the same cycle of misery and fear that Cazador was stuck in. You think he was happy?”

“Happier than I am!”

“This was an illusion,” I said.

“An illusion I’d have liked to try!”

“We’ll find another way,” Gale put in. “There has to be something else we can do.”

Astarion stood, walked over to the coffin, and threw a staff to me. “Here,” he said. “The key to the cells. I’m sure of it. Go do your hero thing. I’m leaving. I don’t want to see any of you for a while. Whenever I look at you, all I see is what you’ve taken from me, with your lofty ideals and certainty that you know what’s best.” He turned and strode out of the room.

I watched him leave, and sighed. I’d done the right thing... hadn’t I? Hopefully I had. Surely killing thousands of people at once and condemning them to the hells couldn’t have been the right path to take.

“Well,” I said, lifting the staff. “Let’s go release some prisoners.”

“About that,” Wyll said.

I closed my eyes for a moment. The tone of his voice said I wasn’t going to like what came next.

“We can’t release these spawn,” he said. “They’ll go out into the city like a flood of death. Blood will run scarlet through the streets. They’ll kill, and maim, and drink people dry. You saw them; they were starving. They won’t have any control.”

“We can’t kill them, love,” I said. “Think about it. They’re innocents. They’re here because someone got them drunk, or lured them here for a night of passion. They’ve been starved and tortured. We can’t continue that abuse by killing them. They deserve a chance. The same chance we gave Astarion.”

“And look how that almost turned out – with an ascendant vampire on the loose.”

“So you’d kill them for the sake of the evil they *might* do.”

“This is my work. I know how these monsters think. I know the damage they can do! You’re being naive.”

“Naive, is it?” I snapped. “Very well. We kill thousands of people tonight. That’s one option. The other is that we release them, and say you’re right. Every single one is a ravening monster, desperate for mortal blood. At most, they kill one person each before they’re sated. One vampire can’t fully drain a person, even one my size; their stomachs aren’t large enough. The worst scenario is that almost as many people *out there* die tonight as would die in here if we kill them all.”

Wyll scowled at me. “And the next night?”

“The next night they’re no longer desperate and starving. And we hunt down and kill those who killed.”

“Thousands of spawn? That could take months. Years. All the while, innocents die.”

“As opposed to dying all in one tidy lump?”

“Shit. You’re not going to let this go, are you? You stubborn bastard.”

“I love you too,” I said, scowling back. “Wyll, I’m not killing these spawn unless I see them attack, or they admit they’re not interested in learning control. They deserve a chance. There’s always another dawn. *Always.*”

“Fuck. I should have known you’d pull out that one. There’s no new dawn for vampire spawn. That’s the point! Hells, Lathander hates vampires!”

“And I think Lathander is full of shit,” I shot back. “Something he has in common with you!”

“I protect the Sword Coast,” he yelled. “You’re going to destroy it!”

I took a deep breath and let it out. This was turning unhelpful, and I was making it worse, not better.

“We’ll send them to the Underdark,” I said more calmly. “Some amongst them must be natural leaders. They’ll bring the others in line once they understand the stakes.”

“Ha! Stakes indeed. Stakes for everyone!”

“We’re letting them go,” I said, glaring at him, banging the staff on the ground in emphasis. The stone on the end flared and went dim again. “They deserve a chance to prove themselves. That’s final.”

“It bloody well isn’t final! You can’t just go making these heavy-handed decisions because you’re so sure you’re in the right. You’re not. This is insane!”

“What’s insane is killing innocents who’ve already been tortured for centuries! What sort of monster would even consider that?”

“Ahh, if I might interject…” Gale said.

“NO!” Wyll and I shouted in unison, turning on him.

Gale pointed to the pale, shambling people clustering around the doorway. “I think perhaps the point is moot.”

I sighed. “I must’ve set it off when I smacked it down on the floor,” I said, half rueful, half triumphant. “Folks – we have a problem.”

“We heard,” Sebastian said. “We’ll go. To this Underdark place. Anywhere but dying here, like the cattle he treated us as.”

I nodded as one of Astarion’s siblings pushed through the crowd. “We’ll help,” she said. “I know the sewers. We’ll go down there. Only criminals and Bhaalists down there now. You don’t mind if we eat them?”

“Not in the slightest,” I said, grateful for the intervention. “Just avoid the Guild. They won’t take kindly to being attacked. Is there an entrance nearby? Limit the temptation as much as possible?”

“From this very palace,” she said, nodding. “We’ll help you control your hunger,” she said, raising her voice to talk to the throngs of vampire spawn in the hall. “We’ll take you somewhere you don’t have to fear the sun. It will be hard. It will hurt. But we’ll try our best to be better.”

Quiet murmurs of agreement or concern rose from the crowd of spawn.

“Thank you,” I said. “This is a grave responsibility you’re taking on.”

She shook her head. “After centuries as a slave? It will be child’s play. No beatings. No torture. No... dead rats.” Her face twisted in disgusted memory.

The spawn filed away, the hall slowly emptying.

Wyll sighed. “Well. You got your way. Gods grant you the strength to live with the consequences of your decision.”

Gale nodded. “A sentiment I share.”

I watched them leave, pensive. Had I just made a colossal mistake? Possibly. Probably. But...

“I couldn’t live with any other choice,” I said. “I just... I couldn’t live with the decision to kill them all. May the gods have mercy on me.”

“I know,” Wyll said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You couldn’t have made any other decision and still been you. I’m still furious with you. But I know that, too.”

“Ha. Thank you, love. I understand.”

“You two are truly peculiar,” Gale said. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or terrified.”

“I don’t know about you two, but I could do with some sleep,” I said, stifling a yawn. “It’s been a hell of a night.”

“Almost literally,” Gale said, answering with his own yawn. “Ugh. I agree. To bed.”

“What do we do with that?” I asked, gesturing at the bloody pulp that had been Cazador.

Gale raised a hand, and the pile of ex-vampire flamed white-hot. When I blinked away the spots in my vision and looked back, all that remained was a pile of ash. “I think that should do it,” he said, sounding satisfied. “Come on. Let’s leave this cursed place. I find myself in need of a mug of ale and a comfy pillow.”

Back at the Elfsong, Wyll and I went to our room, stripping off our armour and clothing in silence.

“You’re still angry?” I asked, when the silence got too much to bear.

He nodded. "I'm angry at the choice you made," he said. "I think it was a terrible one. But... I would have hesitated when it came to it. And regardless, I love you. I won't always agree with your decisions. I won't always like them." He sighed. "But I'll be here regardless, unless you become someone entirely different. I can't run away every time I don't like something you do, and I won't. I'll just... be angry for a while, I suppose."

I changed into a robe and sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't know how to do this," I said. "I... I'm not used to having someone be angry at me, and not..."

His face softened a little. "Not be scared for your safety?"

I nodded. "Do we hug? Do we avoid each other until emotions cool down? I don't know what to do." I felt my lip start to tremble and pressed them together. Now wasn't the time. I needed to let him have his chance to feel without having to comfort me.

"Thank you," he said abruptly. "For telling me you loved me in the middle of all that."

"Rules of engagement," I said, smiling a little.

"I can tell you're upset," he said. "And you're trying to hide it, you little fool."

"Perhaps not as comforting as you were trying for."

He snorted. "Shit. Come here, you silly gnome." He sat down next to me and held out an arm.

I scooped over to lean against him, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"Are you angry with me too?" he asked. "For trying to talk you out of it? For wanting to kill people outright?"

I frowned, thinking about it. "Ask me again tomorrow, when I've had a chance to sleep on it. But I don't think so. I understand why you wanted to do that."

"I think I understand your point of view, too. It's making it difficult to keep up a good head of self-righteous anger."

I chuckled. "Thank you," I said. "You kept calm enough that we could disagree vehemently and I didn't panic. I appreciate the consideration."

"Hard-learned," he said, looking rueful. "But to answer your question – I'd like to cuddle tonight. If you'd like. Cazador... that place shook me a little."

"Angry cuddles? Well, I'm always up for trying something new."

I woke to Wyll screaming. "Callie! Get away from her – NO!"

I reached out to touch his shoulder, and he sat up, eyes wide, and swung a fist at me. I dropped to the mattress, but it grazed my cheek and made me see stars for a moment.

“You bastard!” he yelled, rolling on top of me and grabbing for my throat.

Shit. I’d been stupid, and now I was going to die by my beloved’s sleepwalking hand. Typical. I tried to get my legs up under him to push him off, but didn’t have the room to manoeuvre. “Wyll!” I yelled. “It’s me. It’s Dash. Wake up.”

He grappled with me, trying to get his hands around my throat still, and I grabbed his wrists, pressing hard on his inner wrists, a pressure point that could hurt like all the hells if you did it right.

I must have done it right on at least one, because he jerked and looked at me with suddenly-clear eyes.

“Shit. What just happened?” he asked.

The door of the room burst open, Karlach and Shadowheart brandishing weapons.

“Oh, please don’t tell me we rolled out of bed and armed ourselves only to walk into a weird sex thing,” Shadowheart said, hands on hips.

“Nightmare,” I said, looking at Wyll. “I think we’re alright. Love?”

He nodded, rolling away and sitting up. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” Karlach said, starting to replace her greataxe on her back, before clearly remembering that she wasn’t wearing her usual armour. She wasn’t wearing anything except her weapons, I realised. Neither was Shadowheart.

I raised an eyebrow. “Apologies for disturbing your... sleep,” I said, watching Shadowheart flush. “Thanks for running to the rescue.”

“You’re welcome,” Shadowheart replied. “Do feel free to scream loudly any time you don’t need us in the middle of the night.”

They turned and left, while I laughed. “Well. That’s an interesting development.”

Wyll was silent. I turned to him, and realised he was shivering. The air was warm; he wasn’t cold.

“I’m sorry, love. What will help right now?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“May I hug you?”

He nodded, so I knelt next to him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. He rested his forehead on my shoulder, and I kissed the top of his head as he started to shake with sobs. I held him, silent, until he quieted.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

He nodded, so I leant away to take some clean hankies from the bedside table and handed them to him.

“Come and lie down?” I asked as he blew his nose.

We lay down, his head on a pillow on my shoulder, and I stroked his back slowly.

“I had a friend,” he said. “Early days, when I was just a kid playing at being a monster hunter. Her name was Callie. She was from one of the villages east of here. She fell in love with the life I was living. Maybe she fell in love with me, and I was just oblivious. I don’t know. But she wanted to be a monster hunter too. So, being two cocky and stupid kids, we went hunting a vampire.”

“Huh. I thought you told Astarion once you’d never killed a vampire.”

“I haven’t. She killed Callie. Right in front of me, holding me enthralled in her gaze. While Callie bled out and died.”

I winced. No wonder he’d been so adamant about the spawn. No surprise I’d given him nightmares. “Gods, love. That must have been terrible for you.”

“For me? What about Callie? Led by her friend into the vampire’s lair to die.”

I kissed his forehead. “You didn’t know better.”

“I did. I knew how dangerous they were. I just thought we were better. Smarter. Faster.”

“And you were wrong?”

“Fatally so.”

“Oh, sweetheart.”

“I killed her. As sure as if I’d done it myself.”

“And now I’ve loosed thousands of spawn who might repeat the tragedy,” I said.

“She was so scared. But... when I came out of the daze, she was lying on the ground, dead. And she just looked... surprised, and a little betrayed. As though I’d thrown a surprise birthday party for her that she didn’t want. I see that face in my dreams.”

“I’m so sorry, love.”

“None of this is your fault. My wilfulness. My stupidity. That’s what killed her.”

“Surely she had some responsibility, too.”

“She was just a kid.”

“So were you.”

“So I should just let it go?”

I breathed and thought about that. “How would you react to someone telling you this story?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, shifting fitfully.

“I suspect you’d think they were impulsive and made a bad choice, but you’d also have compassion, recognising that they saw their error and wanted to make it better, but couldn’t. And I think perhaps you’d tell them that they couldn’t hold onto the guilt forever; that they needed to learn from it so they didn’t make the same mistake, then move on.”

“That sounds more like you than me.”

“No, I’d tell them to imagine someone else telling them that story.”

That surprised a laugh out of him. “Thanks,” he said, snuggling close, an arm over my chest. “I don’t know if I can take that to heart, but I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask,” I said, squeezing his shoulders. “I love you.”

“Kiss me?” he asked.

I rolled over so he was on his back, me on my side next to him, head propped up on my arm. He looked up at me, his face vulnerable and a little uncertain. “Always, sweetheart,” I said, bending to kiss his mouth, letting my lips and tongue caress his.

His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled at me when I drew away to check on him. “That always leaves me feeling better,” he said.

“So I should stop?”

He grabbed me and rolled us over so he was on top of me. “Not on your life,” he said.

I grinned and pulled his face down to kiss him again.

A while later, he pulled away a little, nuzzling my neck. “Darling, is it too soon to ask if I can play with your dick?”

I pulled in a quick lungful of air. “Gods, love.”

“Is that a yes?” he asked, his eyes laughing.

“It’s an *I don’t care, please ask*, I think!”

“Oh. May I play with your dick, darling?”

“I’m tempted to say *no*, just to see the look on your face. But I can’t. I want you too much.”

“Mmm. Words I’ll never tire of hearing, dearest.”

“Please?” I asked.

He shifted a little, and his fingers slid over the loose trousers I’d worn to bed, tracing over my cock. “Hells. You’re hard already.”

“Can you blame me, with a sexy devil asking to touch it?”

He laughed and pulled apart the knot holding the drawstring. Then his fingers touched bare skin. He bent down to lick quickly over the head, and I gasped.

“Gods, Wyll. We’re going to have Shadowheart and Karlach bursting in here naked again if we’re not careful.”

His shoulders shook with laughter, but his tongue slid slowly down my shaft, and my mind turned firmly away from our friends to what he was doing. His hand moved down to stroke my balls lightly in time with the movements of his tongue, up and down, and I grabbed a handful of sheet.

He swirled his tongue around the head. I convulsed, trying to keep my breathing steady, failing miserably. I looked down to see him watching me, eyes crinkled in amusement.

“Tormentor,” I said, grinning, then gasped as his hot, wet mouth closed over my cock, sending a wave of pleasure through my body. “Oh... gods, love.” His tongue pushed up against the underside, sliding around it, and I shook, my head falling back, feeling the sensations of his mouth moving slowly over my cock, his breath on my balls, the scrape of one horn tip against my belly.

The soft, yielding flesh of the back of his throat pushed against the head of my cock, and I jolted, almost sitting up. He let it slide against my cock, pushing down so my cock slid further into his throat. It spasmed around me, and a thrill ran through me.

“Gods. Again, love.”

He took a breath and let it out, warm air moving over my saliva-wet cock, and pulled it back into his mouth. I pushed upwards, impatient, then stilled with an act of pure willpower. *Let him lead it.* His hand slid to my arse, pulling my hips up, encouraging me to move.

I thrust upwards again, feeling a wave of fierce pleasure when I hit the back of his throat. “This is alright?” I asked, and his spare hand squeezed mine.

I let him guide me to a rhythm, moving with him, pushing my cock into his mouth, trying to breathe through the euphoria. I reached down to pull his braids, holding his head still, so I could hit the perfect angle in his mouth.

“Squeeze twice to stop,” I said, worrying, despite the look on his face, that I would hurt or upset him. Wyll looked up at me, his eyes crinkling, his fingers stroking mine, and his attention turned back to my cock.

So did my attention, and I reeled under the renewed awareness of the sensations flowing through me. His mouth was hot and wet around my cock; his tongue pressed upwards against

it with every stroke, and I hit the point of no return. I squeezed his hand hard. “I’m close, love. Gods.”

I let go of his hair, lying back to focus on the feeling of his throat and mouth and tongue, all moving against and around my cock, until it overwhelmed me and I started to jerk, pulling away to give him some space, but he moved back to suck hard on my cock, making me cry out as I spilled my seed into his mouth in fast bursts, shaking with the intensity of the sensations coursing through me.

I fell back, shuddering, still lost in the aftershocks of the climax. Wyll moved back up to rest his head on my shoulder, gently kissing my neck. “My darling,” he murmured.

“Love,” I said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “You’re alright? I didn’t go too far?”

“Not in the slightest,” he said, stroking my chest. “I enjoyed that.”

“You liked me fucking your mouth?”

“Surprised me, too.”

I chuckled and kissed his forehead. “I love you.”

“Mmm. Me too. Love you, that is.”

“Would you like the same?” I asked.

“Tempting... but honestly? I think I need to sleep,” he said, yawning widely. “I’m more tired than I realised. Tomorrow?”

“It’s a date,” I said. “Start thinking about what you want me to do to you.”

“Mmm. The donkey’s dilemma,” he said, closing his eyes, his breathing slowing.

I frowned, trying to place the reference. An old philosopher – that was it. A donkey stuck between two piles of hay, incapable of deciding which it wanted, and starving despite the bounty available, because it couldn’t make a choice. I laughed to myself. Appropriate, complimentary, and obscure.

He opened his eyes to smile at me, then relaxed into sleep. I kissed his forehead and did the same.

Chapter End Notes

Hi folks,

You can probably see now why it took me so long to get this chapter out. It just keeps going. Holy hells. What a monster of a chapter. I hope you like it, though!

Love, Rowan

Cinnamon rolls and buns

Next morning, eating breakfast with the others in the communal rooms' lounge area, I thought about the work ahead of us and sighed. Yes, we had the netherstones. We had nominal control of the elder brain. But there was so much still to do. We needed to figure out where the elder brain was being kept. Get Astarion back, if he didn't turn up on his own. The Sharrans were still hunting Shadowheart. Karlach needed repairs on her heart. The to-do list was long and complicated – still.

“Fuck it,” I said out loud, startling a couple of people. “We're taking the day off.”

“Don't have to ask me twice,” Gale said, rotating his shoulder and wincing. “I think Cazador wrenched my shoulder. Wretched creature.”

“Want me to take a look later?” I asked.

“Please. I think it's healing acceptably, but you might see something I don't.”

I nodded. “Do you mind coming down to the Healing Hole? I'd like to check my setup, see if I've forgotten anything. Anyone else needing medical attention?”

Gale nodded; others shook their heads. Good. One consultation was enough, especially considering he'd probably need a massage or adjustment.

I held out a hand to Wyll, just standing up, and he pulled me to my feet. “Want to come out with me, love?” I asked.

“I'd love to,” he said, smiling at me. “Where are we headed?”

“It's a surprise,” I said, winking. “Nothing big. Just... I thought you might like it.”

His face lit up. “I love surprises!”

I grinned at him. “You say that like I haven't watched you opening random chests in enemy camps with the glee of a child with a birthday present.”

We dressed, and I led Wyll out to a bakery I'd found not far from the docks. The air had a particularly fishy smell in this part of the city, but I'd regained the habit of blocking it out now. It... mostly worked. The bakery wasn't fancy – the proprietor sold coffee and bread, and a few basic pastries. And cinnamon rolls.

We walked in, and Wyll sniffed.

“Fresh cinnamon rolls!” he exclaimed, and hugged me, one-armed, around the shoulders. “You remembered.”

“As if I'd forget a moment,” I said softly. “But we're holding up the line.”

We bought coffee and pastries – a soft, puffy, layered thing with stewed fruit on top for me; a cinnamon roll, of course, for Wyll – and sat down at one of the little tables inside.

“There used to be a wonderful bookshop somewhere nearby,” Wyll said. “I wonder if it's still here.”

“Not Sorcerous Sundries?” I asked. “Gale was raving about its books. I didn't see that many when we were there, though.”

Wyll shook his head. “No, although that shop is a marvel – a citadel of wonders more like! No, this one used to sell all the latest novels from all around Faerun and further. Hardly edifying reading...”

“But how else would we know which crystal to remove from Gale before he explodes?” I quipped, pushing the last bite of pastry into my mouth.

“Ha! Indeed.”

“Let's go try to find it,” I said, and Wyll's face lit up, so I returned cups and plates to the counter and we were on our way.

Later that afternoon, bookshop found, shopping done, and Gale's shoulder dealt with, we retired to our bedroom and reclined on the bed.

“You told me to think about what I want you to do to me,” he said. “You know... I have an answer for you, if you'd like to hear it.”

I leant against his side, head on his shoulder. “Like? I think I'd love that, darling.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer. “I love what we've been doing together, dearest,” he said. “Though I'd be open to exploring more. If you wanted to.”

I knew exactly what he was getting at, and I felt a stir of anxiety and concern. This was what I'd been worrying over.

“Hey,” Wyll said, “I felt that. You're tense. What happened?”

I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply, trying to find my centre and ground again.

He loosened his hold on me, moving back a little.

I laughed through the tears trying to surface, through the panic and fear, because here he was doing the perfect things to show he loved me while I was scared. Of him. What a ridiculous situation.

“I'm a little confused,” he confessed. “Dash, talk to me?”

I opened my eyes. Wyll was watching me, looking worried. “I set off a smokepowder bomb of some sort, didn't I?” he asked.

I nodded, trying to bring my breathing under control. "It's not you," I said. "Not really."

"I love you," he said. "It's fine. Just... talk to me."

"I know you wouldn't hurt me," I said, resting my head on his chest. "I know it."

"Can I make a guess?"

I nodded.

"This brought up a bad memory, and you don't know how to say no to me?"

I looked up, startled. His face was full of compassion, not frustration.

"Hey. Darling. I don't care if we never do more than we already have. I don't care if we take a step back from that, even. What I care about is you. You, and making sure you're happy and healthy. If I have that, I'm content."

I felt the tears rising again, and this time let them flow. "I feel so stupid."

"Oh, my dearest. Brave and resourceful. Not stupid."

"But it is. I love you. I *want* you. I just... I don't know why this is different."

"Well. If you need to answer that, what makes us different to other... dalliances? partnerships? that you've had in the past?"

"Being in love? Commitment? I suppose you're the first..." I sighed as the puzzle pieces fell into place. "Damn it all to the hells."

"Breakthrough?" Wyll asked.

"You're the first human I've been with since I left Baldur's Gate the first time," I said. "I'm sorry, love, this is a ridiculous thing to get hung up on."

"Dash?"

"Mmm?"

"Would you do me a huge favour?"

I felt a thread of worry, and shook my head. *STUPID*. "Hang on, that was in response to my own thoughts, not you. What's the favour?"

"Tell yourself it's alright to feel like this. It might not be rational, but it's clearly important. Just... tell yourself that. Please? Because obviously me telling you isn't working."

Tears rose yet again in my eyes. "Damn it, Wyll."

He chuckled. "May I hug you, darling?"

I nodded, and he squeezed me tight. I leaned against him, sighing.

“I know I call you my light,” he said, kissing my forehead. “But even the brightest sun casts a shadow. I'm not afraid of a little darkness.”

I felt muscles relaxing, letting go of the negative emotions that had gripped me so hard.

“Hmm. I think we discovered a new panic cure. Waxing poetic.”

He guffawed, a surprised burst of sound. “My darling,” he said softly. “I love you.”

“I wish I were less messed-up, though.”

“You're perfect.”

I scoffed. “A perfect partner would surely be up for you fucking them, after teasing you for so long.”

He stilled.

I looked up at him, concerned. “What?” I asked.

“Uhh... you might have misunderstood what I was asking for,” he said.

I blinked. “I don't understand.”

“I'm not sure how explicit to be. I don't want to set off another panic.”

“I think I'm fine. But confused.”

“I was going to ask you to fuck me. You on top of me. Your dick inside me.”

“Oh. OH.”

“It's fine for that to be off the table, darling. Just in case I wasn't clear.”

I nodded, suddenly thoughtful.

“It didn't occur to me that you'd take it any other way, to be honest. I thought I'd made rather clear what I most wanted from you.”

My mind flashed back to the bed above my shop, lying with my cock pressed against his arse, his voice hoarse as he told me he was desperate to have my cock. “Gods. I thought you were just in the moment.”

“Yes, but I was also utterly honest.”

I flushed, as the sensation of rubbing against his arse came back to me in startling detail. “I... think I'd like that,” I said slowly. “But if I don't reciprocate...”

Wyll snorted. “What did I just tell you? Multiple times?”

“You're really fine with whatever I'm comfortable with? Forever?”

He drew in a deep breath. “What is lovemaking to you?” he asked. “I don't know that we've ever talked about it.”

I frowned. “I suppose... hmm. It can be many things, can't it? From a simple roll in the grass with an acquaintance to sharing love and joy with a partner.”

“I wonder,” he said, eyes drifting away from me, “if maybe those *many things* are getting mixed up? I'm talking about loving you, dearest. And it feels as though you're talking about a... a transaction with a trader. That the offers have to balance perfectly, or someone loses. That's... not how I think about it. And it's not how I thought you would, either.”

Pieces started to fall into place. “Shit. I'm doing it again, aren't I? I'm sorry, love.”

He shook his head. “I'm not upset, dearest. Just concerned.”

“Why concerned?”

“Because I love you. And you seem to expect me to get angry with you for not doing things with me. And that's... hells, Dash, that's not the sort of person I'd ever want to be. I want our lovemaking to be fun. Loving. For that, I think we both need to be happy.”

“You're right,” I said, sighing. “I just didn't realise I'd be so terrible at all of this.”

He chuckled. “You're not terrible, you silly midget. We're just feeling our way through learning to love each other.”

“I thought we'd already done that.”

“Ha! It's confusing me a little, too. I've never done anything quite like this either.”

“Mmm. I suppose... we both have old pain and hurts that never quite healed, don't we? Things that were too big, or too difficult, to handle alone. Maybe when we find security and love, those old pains rear their heads again because they need to be healed, and we finally have someone to help us do it.”

Wyll's arms tightened around me. “I like that idea. That we can heal ourselves together.”

“Even if I'm a pain in the arse?”

He barked a laugh. “That's your insecurity talking, my dearest love.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, slipping a hand under his shirt to touch skin-to-skin.

“You're right, damn you,” I said. “I keep thinking of these things as obstacles. That they're stopping us from having the sweet, dream-filled time of our lives. But... that's a shallow dream, isn't it? Building these bonds, healing old wounds, helping each other to find new understanding – it's like a reflection of this battle we're in outside, but it's so much sweeter.”

“I like your view of the world,” he said. “It seems intensely, almost appallingly practical at times. But then I realise that you see beauty and newness in the middle of pain and misery. So much nuance and light even in the darkest scene.”

“Hmm. Advantages of a monk’s education, I suppose.”

“I’d like to kiss you,” he said.

I lifted my face to his, and his lips met mine. We kissed for a while, first for comfort, but soon arousal flared in both of us and the kisses turned deeper, more demanding, more fevered.

I drew away first, breathing hard. “Gods, love. I want you.”

“What do you want?” Wyll asked, eyes on mine.

I lay back, and he followed, lying on his side next to me. I smiled and stroked a finger slowly down his jawline, admiring him all over again. “May I touch you, love?”

His gaze heated. “Hells. Please.”

Taking my time, I slid my fingers down his neck, keeping the touch light, almost tickling. Over his shoulder. I sat up to keep the movement going smoothly, all the way down his back. I caressed his arse slowly, appreciating the feel of the muscles under my hand.

“This, love,” I said. “Gods. I’ve dreamt of having you under me for months. Sliding my cock into this beautiful arse of yours. I thought you were humouring me. Now I know you want it... I can’t think about anything else.”

His breath caught, and I slid a finger up the seam of his trousers. I felt a wave of pure lust, imagining my cock pressed against him again, that crevice open to me, those muscles flexing underneath me.

“I want to fuck you,” I said softly. “Until you cry out for me. I want to feel you climax with my cock deep inside you. Feel you shake. Hear those noises you make when you’re lost in pleasure. Gods, Wyll.”

I turned my attention back to his face, slack, eyes hazed. “Hells,” he said, shaking his head as though he was waking up from being glamourised. “Darling, I can’t think of anything I want more. Can we? Will you fuck me? Now?”

A thrill went through me at those words, feeding the warm glow building in my loins. “How would you like it?”

“Just as you described. I want to feel you on top of me. In me.”

Another thrill, and I shivered with the strength of the desire flooding me.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, reaching a hand out for mine.

“More feeling than thinking,” I said, focusing back on him, tracing a pattern on his hand with my thumb. “I’m so aroused, I might just pass out before I get a chance to touch you.”

“We can’t have that,” he said, smiling. He sat up, reaching to pull me closer. “Maybe I can fortify you with kisses.”

I laid my mouth on his, and heat ran down my spine like molten gold at the feel of his lips under mine, opening for me; the heat and passion in his kisses.

I pulled off my shirt and reached for Wyll’s, helping him guide it over his horns, and threw both into the corner. I straddled his lap and kissed him again, pressing against him, revelling in the feel of so much skin against skin. He ran his claws lightly down my back, and my head fell back as I got lost in the sensation. His hands reached my arse, and he pulled me tight against him, his cock conspicuously hard.

I rubbed my cheek against his. “I want you naked,” I murmured. “Please?”

“Hard to resist when you say please so nicely,” he said, grinning.

I let myself fall away to the side, and he stood next to the bed to unlace his trousers and let them fall to the floor. I watched, mesmerised, as he straightened, standing naked for me.

“I love it when you have no underwear on,” I said, admiring his form. “It’s such a lovely surprise.”

“Hells. I love seeing that look on your face, darling. You make me feel desirable again.”

“*Desirable* is certainly one way to put it. If you like drastic understatements.”

He smiled, a little shy.

I reached for my trouser laces, impatient to feel him against me again. He stopped me with a hand on mine. “I’ve never undressed you,” he said, and pulled the laces slowly out of their knot. He inserted a finger into the waistband, lightly tickling along my belly. I closed my eyes and bit my lip. He slid the trousers down, pulling the waistband out and over my thickening cock, and left them binding my legs.

“Alright?” he asked.

I nodded. “I trust you,” I said softly.

“Can I put my mouth on your dick, my dearest one?”

My cock answered by springing upwards, and I echoed it. “Gods yes, please.”

I was expecting him to start with his tongue, but instead he sucked my cock straight into his mouth, the tip sliding over the ridges of the roof of his mouth, then the soft firmness of the back of his mouth, and then the warm tight embrace of his throat. The burst of sensation was almost too intense to bear so quickly, but gods, his mouth felt amazing. He pushed further, his throat convulsing around my cock.

I groaned. “I can’t do this for long, Wyll – it’s too much.”

He came up for air, looking smug. “Some day, I’m going to do that until you spill your seed right down my throat,” he promised. I nearly lost control then and there.

Wyll released me from the bond of the trousers, then laid on his side facing me. “Fuck me now?” he asked quietly, and I had to stop and breathe for a bit, hand clasping his to let him know I wasn’t withdrawing.

“You,” I said hoarsely, “make it almost impossible to keep a shred of my control when you say things like that.”

His smile grew wider. “Why do you think I say them?”

“Tormentor,” I accused. He rolled onto his back and I knelt over him, straddling his knees, and admired the view. “Gods, you’re beautiful, though.”

Wyll’s eyes softened. “Out there, half the people I meet are scared of me. In here, I’m beautiful.”

“Always. May I touch you, oh star of my night sky?”

“Please, my sunrise. Wherever you want. I’m yours.”

I stroked gentle fingers down his cock, and it danced under my hands. “I want to taste you,” I said, moving one hand to lightly cup his balls. He lifted his hips in clear invitation, and I sucked his cock quickly into my mouth, mirroring his move from earlier.

He gasped, shoulders lifting off the bed.

I loved seeing him like this, abandoned to the sensations I was bringing him, so I slid my mouth as far over his cock as I could manage, exhaling, then let it slowly start to slide down my throat. The different skin textures might be fun to play with manually, but they turned out a little tricky orally. I don’t think Wyll noticed, though – he was too busy grabbing fistfuls of sheet and holding on for dear life.

His breathing turned ragged, and I backed off. I wanted him near the edge, not teetering over it.

“That’s... more intense than I realised,” he admitted when he got his breath back.

I kissed him gently, then asked him to turn over. He did, hope and concern warring on his face. I smiled. I’d only move to the final stage of his request when he knew exactly what he wanted.

I knelt between his legs, admiring the view. “Wyll, my love,” I asked. “May I put my mouth on your arse?”

He turned his head to stare at me, looking genuinely shocked. I waited, patiently. I was fairly sure this is something he would want... but I could be very wrong. “I don’t understand,” he

faltered. “I’ve never…”

“I’ll stop if you don’t like it,” I said gently, and with the reassurance, he nodded.

“I think I’d like to try,” he said slowly, and I smiled. While he was still watching, I licked my thumb slowly and deliberately, from pad to tip. Wyll’s eyes glazed a little, and I could tell he was getting back into the mood. I parted his lovely round arse cheeks and gently ran my wet thumb around the opening of his arse. His breath hitched, and I paused.

“Alright, love?” I asked.

“It’s good,” he said. “Just… surprising. I want to know what your tongue feels like there – OH!” as I bent to oblige, swirling my tongue lightly around his arsehole. “That’s… yes.”

I smiled and pushed my tongue slowly inside, giving him time to object or express discomfort. *Hnnnghhhh* was the only noise he made, so I began a rhythm of circles and thrusts with my tongue, until he was moving with me, pushing back against my tongue pushing into his arse. I slipped a hand between his legs and stroked his cock, so hard by now that it leaked droplets at the tip when my tongue moved inside him. I withdrew, and he murmured in protest.

I reached to take the oil bottle, still kneeling between his legs, thrilling at the sight of his bare arse open to me. “Wyll… may I fuck you?”

“Yes!” he shouted. “Hells, please, just… please.”

I spread oil over my cock, with special attention to the tip, and slid it slowly over his arsehole.

“I’m so ready,” he said through gritted teeth. “Dash, please…”

“What do you want?” I asked softly, as I slid the tip of my hard and aching cock inside the man I loved.

“Hells! I want your dick, Dash.”

I slid out, regreased, and slowly – finally! – slid my cock into his welcoming embrace. Wyll muffled a scream in a pillow, and I stopped, panicked. Had I hurt him? Should I have gone more slowly? Used fingers to help him open more fully?

“Don’t stop,” he muttered. “I promise you’re not – hells! – hurting me in the slightest.”

I took him at his word and pushed in deep. He was hot and tight all around my cock. I bit my lip, fighting for control. It had been a long time since I’d done this, and I’d been wanting Wyll for what felt like even longer. Part of me wanted to just let go and be lost in the euphoria spreading through me, but I needed to keep control. Make it last. Make sure Wyll enjoyed this, too. Gods, but this felt good. Sublime.

“My love,” I said, trying to focus on anything but the pleasure I was feeling. “You look like an angel fallen to earth.” I moved my cock inside him, admiring the long, lean sweep of his

back.

“Flatterer,” he said. “Hells!”

And that was the last intelligible thing I heard from him, as he shook and quivered under my slow, even strokes. Then my cock pulled my focus back to itself, and I groaned at the sensations I’d been ignoring out of concern for my beloved. His arse was firm inside and out, hot inside like the rest of him. With every stroke, I felt rings of muscle encircling, caressing, squeezing my cock. My rhythm deepened and sped up, as Wyll writhed beneath me.

“I can’t last much longer – gods, you feel wonderful,” I panted.

“I can’t... either,” Wyll gasped, shaking.

When he climaxed, I felt the convulsions as rhythmic pulses of muscles around my cock. It sent me over the edge, and I pulled out of him, then let go to be tossed by waves of pleasure that felt far too large for me, my cock sliding against his arse as he cried out, my seed spilling over him as I convulsed.

“Oh. My sweetheart,” I said, kneeling, feeling my legs shaking under me. “Are you alright?”

He turned over to pull me down beside him, kissing me hard. “Wonderful, darling. Thank you.”

“Was it... what you wanted?” I asked, hesitantly. He must have had other lovers – and normal sized ones at that. Could I be anything but a disappointment?

Wyll shook his head, but caught me before the wave of mortification could pull me away. “It was better,” he said softly. “I’ve never been touched the way you touch me. With that mix of love and wild desire. Stop... stop whatever bad thoughts are going through your head when your face drops. Please? They hurt my heart. You’re everything I want, everything I desire. You are the red of the sunrise; the yellow of midday; the orange of sundown in every day of my life. And,” he added with a grin, “you just made me climax so hard I might have strained a muscle, and I would give not a damn if that were the case. Thank you for giving me my heart’s desire, just because I told you I wanted it.”

“Love, you’re amazing,” I said, snuggling close.

“Hmm. Was my arse everything you imagined?”

I chuckled. “And more. I couldn’t have imagined how sublime it would feel to be inside you, love. Euphoric. Like sipping a wine labelled as Esmeltar, and finding it to be Exeltis. Not that I ever thought you were cheap.”

“Hmm. I think I’ll just appreciate the compliment,” he said, eyes crinkling with amusement. “I love you. Let’s clean up.”

Too much to do

The next day, I woke with the dawn, the first rays of sun straggling through the small window of the bedroom. I went up to the roof to meditate, sitting where the early sun could strike my face. I breathed in the light, pulling it into my gates, filling myself with light and energy.

Still so many things to do. So many things I could forget. One of our companions was freed from his shackles... but would need help coming to terms with his new existence, and the loss of the promise that ascending had held out. How would it feel, being confined to darkness and slavery for centuries, tasting freedom and sunlight, but knowing that your future now held only death or a return to the dark? Astarion might not have to return to slavery, but in my experience, such torments got all mixed up once you escaped them. For him, right now, losing the sun would probably feel like regressing to Cazador's kennels. Could we help him find a different future? Or would he be lost to the old, familiar patterns of brutality and hatred? There was only so much I could do to help... but I needed to find him soon and give that help. He needed to know we'd be there for him.

We needed to go look for Shadowheart's parents, and deal with the Sharrans once and for all. Rout them from the city, along with the Bhaalists and Baneites. Evil gods were one thing; followers of evil gods, who destroyed the lives of others? They needed to be gone. Umberlee, on the other hand... well. She was a conundrum. Wilful, evil, destructive... but her priestesses harmed no one, content to let the ocean take or spare its victims as Umberlee decided.

I sighed. Was I losing sight of my ethics in all of this, as Wyll had implied more than once? Perhaps. I didn't have a strong idea of right and wrong anymore. All I could do, instead, was look at harm and benefit. Who was hurting the innocent? Who was helping them? Who was taking away free choice from their fellow mortals? Who was giving them agency and hope?

That Sharran literature... they were targeting people who were depressed and mourning. It had been abhorrent, but oddly tempting, reading. All about how Shar could provide comfort and succour to the suffering. I hadn't lied to Shadowheart when I told her that oblivion felt appealing, back when Wyll and I had been separated and I fell into the depths of despair. I could understand the appeal. But I strongly doubted they were helping people through their troubles in that enclave of theirs. At best, they were taking people's money and giving them only temporary oblivion. At worst... I shuddered to think of the *worst* Shar might inflict, given her behaviour towards Shadowheart.

I needed to start opening the Healing Hole for patients. The shop was stocked, the herbs on the patio growing well, and people were in desperate need. How to let people know that I was opening, though? Hmm. Word of mouth might be fine, as long as I could attract a few patients to start with. Once everyone knew I was there, chances were I'd be overwhelmed. So... a slow burn might be better than spreading pamphlets all over the city. I could start on that this morning, perhaps, while everyone else was still gearing up and organising.

What else? Jaheira had mentioned something about reconnecting with old friends. The Harpers, I assumed. They would be valuable in helping to restore order to the city, if we could get them on our side. And in ameliorating some of the power vacuum we had created so far.

Gale... had been disappearing for hours at a time, lately. A new romance in the offing? I'd like to think so, but he didn't have that far-off dreaminess common to most people falling in love. He seemed more furtive, like he knew whatever he was doing wouldn't gain widespread approval. But what could Gale be doing that was so wrong? He was kind and forthright. He wouldn't be involved in anything underhanded. *Unless it involves ancient magics and new knowledge to plunder*, a little voice said in the back of my head. Damnation. I'd have to sit down with him and find out what was going on. It was probably harmless. Overspending at a book store, and embarrassed about the unwieldy luggage he was creating for himself. Something like that.

Halsin seemed content enough, although bothered by the laissez faire attitude to life that pervaded the city. I could see his shoulders slump whenever we passed by yet another refugee family, another body left sprawled in a back alley, another sick, dying animal. Perhaps he'd like to work with me at the Healing Hole for a while – find out how he could help in a unique way. Taking out Gortash had helped, but it could hardly undo decades, if not centuries, of inequality and injustice. There had to be a use for nature-loving druids in bringing a better sort of balance to Baldur's Gate.

Karlach – we needed to find Dammon. See if he had come up with something – anything – to help with her heart. The bastards that put it in certainly weren't concerned. Although to be fair, one of them was very, very dead. Maybe the Gondians could help. Her heart had been a prototype for something, and Gortash had received some infernal tech for the Steel Watch in return, as I understood it... but it had taken the Gondians to make it work and build the things. So they had experience with infernal machinery, as well as mortal technology. Surely they could help her. Surely they could build *something* that would work better and more reliably.

I opened my eyes and stretched. Well. As a meditation session, that had been one of the worst since my early days as an initiate. As a way of figuring out my priorities, though... not terrible.

Breakfast. I walked downstairs to talk to the cook.

"Morning," he said, as he dashed about the kitchen. "Bread, coffee, eggs? Can do you a big omelette today. Got a good price on some eggs – just don't ask what bird they came from or where I got them. Stewed fruit only – nothing fresh at the market. Lot of the farmers aren't coming in anymore. Too dangerous on the roads. That or they're all dead. Heavens forbend. If that's the case, we're about to be screwed nine ways to the hells and back."

I blinked at the torrent of information from the usually-taciturn man. "You're having trouble sourcing ingredients?" I asked.

"It's only getting worse," he said, deftly flipping a large omelette in one pan, stirring a pot, and lifting the lid of another to check on it. "Those bastards in the Upper City are fine,

though, I don't doubt. Get me some fresh greens, and I'll give you cheap meals for a tenday. Lot of wilted mess was all I could find."

I took the food and coffee back upstairs to the common rooms, lost in thought. I was used to the city and the sad fact that people starved and died here. I'd almost been one of them. We'd distributed coins to refugees where we could manage it discreetly – being followed by a horde of hungry and desperate strangers would hardly lower our profile in the city, let alone improve our chances of completing anything covert. But it sounded like there was a bigger issue at play than usual. Supplies from outside the city were drying up. If this continued, the city would destroy itself from the inside. Hungry citizens would be unhappy and uncooperative. Starving citizens, though? They would riot. Our team of adventurers could fight evil, sure. But hunger, mass violence, and the disease that would surely follow? That might be beyond us.

I put the tray down, poured myself a mug of coffee, and added a slice of omelette to a piece of bread. As I ate, people slowly left their beds, stretching and yawning, to join me in the lounge area.

"Why do you never sit on the chairs?" Shadowheart asked me, lounging on a sofa in a manner worthy of a courtesan. "You seem very fond of the floor."

"Short legs," I said, grinning at her. "Plus, they're so louche. Monks require none of your fancy comforts."

"Oh, but you'll happily steal all our cushions, Saer Austere?"

"Is this deviant giving you a hard time, love?" Wyll asked, flopping down to lounge on cushions on the floor with me.

"Terribly hard times," I said, laughing. "She thinks the floor is an inappropriate place for our leader to sit."

"Putting words in my mouth, thank you very much," she said, her face disapproving but her eyes alight. She rubbed at the back of her hand.

I watched, suddenly concerned. She hadn't mentioned it again, but it was clear that the old wound was still bothering her... and it seemed oddly connected to her behaviour. As though something inside her deeply disapproved of any softer emotion, anything not cold and bleak. Shar was using it to punish her still.

"Well," I said, putting it from my mind for now, "now that everyone's here and has coffee, we have a few things we need to get done."

Everyone nodded solemnly.

"First, I want to track down Astarion and check on him," I said. "And we can probably check on what happened with the spawn, too. If there were murders all over town, well... they're on my head, I suppose."

Wyll's hand covered mine, and my heart warmed. He hadn't agreed with my choice. He'd fought it as best he could. But it looked like he'd support it regardless, now that it was done. That was all I could ask; it was more than I'd expected.

"Shadowheart," I said. "I think we need to hit the House of Grief – that's what the Sharrans call it, right? – tomorrow. We need to deal with them... but we'll need to be careful if they have your parents. Any ideas?"

She shrugged. "Walk in the front door as though I'm a complete dunderhead, and see what happens?"

"You can't remember anything about the layout? Anything that might help us?" Gale asked.

She just shrugged again. "That would have put the enclave in danger were I captured, I suppose."

"Might we at least regain your lost memories while we're there?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want them, you know. My years with the Sharrans – I can't imagine there was any good in them. Perhaps I'm best as I am, with only the knowledge I currently hold."

"A blank slate," he said, face set in pensive lines. "I can see the appeal. I truly can."

"Mmm. As the only other person who's truly angered a goddess, I suppose you can," she replied.

"What will you be doing this morning?" Halsin asked. "I can assist you with finding Astarion, if he's willing to be found. Though I'm not sure he'll appreciate my sending rats to locate him."

I nodded at him, feeling a surge of gratitude. Someone who simply supported and helped was an immeasurable boon, with so many responsibilities tugging me in all directions. "Perfect, thank you," I said. "I want to open the Healing Hole for patients. If you'd like to help there, too..."

Halsin's face lit up. "I didn't want to intrude," he said. "Too many cooks spoil the broth. But I'd like to feel useful in this place. See if I can help to restore some of its balance, if such a thing is even possible."

"Ha! This place was born from pirates and scavengers, and their legacy always holds sway," Shadowheart said. "This city will chew you up and spit you out."

"Then we shall just have to be such a large mouthful that it chokes," Halsin answered.

I applauded. "That's the spirit! Right. Jaheira. You wanted to get in touch with people in the city. What do you need?"

"A couple of people to back me up if I get into a tight spot?" she asked.

I eyed her with concern. “This doesn’t sound like it’s going to involve just chatting to people.”

“Oh, it probably will,” she said airily. “It’s just that one of the chats must be with Nine Fingers.”

I heaved a sigh. “The kingpin of the Guild?” I asked. “You’re going to *chat* with the Guild.”

She nodded. “We’re old acquaintances. She won’t kill me, if that’s what you’re worried about. Probably. But she must have information – information I can’t get elsewhere. And I need to visit my harpers.”

“You need an armed escort for that?” Gale asked.

“Some of my girls like to shoot first and ask questions later,” she said, shrugging. “You don’t have to join me.”

“No, sounds like fun. Dangerous fun, but fun regardless. Think of the stories I’ll be able to tell. Meeting the infamous Nine Fingers. Socialising with Harpers, fresh from battle.”

“Oh, Gale. Sometimes you sound a thousand years old. Sometimes you sound like a teenager.”

“Right,” I said, cutting over Gale’s indignant protest. “Halsin with me. Gale with Jaheira. Wyll, you want to come with me? Everyone else, pick an activity.”

Wyll nodded. “At your side, please, darling,” he said softly, his hand squeezing mine.

I glanced at him, slightly concerned by his tone, but he smiled at me. Whatever it was could wait.

“Karlach, how about we make it a girls’ day out?” Shadowheart asked. “Help Jaheira reconnect. Maybe get our hair done.”

Gale snorted. “And what does that make me, pray tell?”

“A lucky man with three women to squire around the city?” Jaheira replied, raising an eyebrow as if daring him to disagree with her assessment.

“Oh. Uhh... a very good point,” he conceded. “Very well. Just one of the girls today.”

Shadowheart scoffed. “You’d have to lift many more weights to become one of us, dearie.”

“Everything alright?” I asked Wyll as we walked through the streets, looking for Astarion. Halsin was ahead of us, looking for animals who might do him a favour. “I got a weird feeling from you for a moment back there.”

“It’s fine,” he said, taking my hand. “It’s just... these last couple of days were intense. I’m feeling a little fragile. I want to be near you, if I can.”

I lifted our joined hands to kiss his knuckles. “Not a problem, sweetheart. Let me know if there’s anything you need from me.”

His smile turned dangerous. I grinned up at him. “That too.”

“Got it,” Halsin said, sounding satisfied. “A pigeon. Easy to bribe – she just wanted some cheese and bread. She’ll return to me here when she finds him.”

I looked around. There was a cafe nearby, with a couple of tables outside. “Do you have coin?” I asked. “You’d probably be best off sitting down as a paying customer, rather than lurking ominously.”

“Do I lurk?” he asked, chuckling.

“You’re entirely too big to do anything but lurk and loom,” I said, patting him on the arm. I’d have had to stretch a little to reach his shoulder. “Me? I couldn’t loom over anything larger than a peacock.”

“Well. You’ll be at the shop? I’ll be along once I have word,” he said, crossing the street to the cafe.

“Oh no, we’re alone,” Wyll said, eyeing me sidelong. “Terrible, that.”

“With the potential to be interrupted at every turn,” I said. “Whatever you’re thinking, it might have to wait.”

Wyll just smiled and took my hand again. “Come on, dear.”

We walked downhill to the shop, and Wyll waited, leaning on the doorjamb, while I unlocked it. When inside, he gave me time to look the place over – nothing seemed out of place – before shutting the door and kneeling in front of me, effectively trapping me between himself and the closed door.

“I know we have work to do,” he said. “But we have a little time to ourselves, and I want you.”

Desire flamed through me, despite my best intentions. I lowered my lips to his, and he pushed me against the door, pinning me, mouth hard on mine. My breathing quickened, my pulse racing. I slid my hands over his hips, onto his arse, and pulled him closer. Hardness pushed against my leg, hot and demanding.

“Gods, love,” I gasped. “Let me lock the door, at least.”

He moved an infinitesimal amount, just enough that I could twist to turn the key in the lock. Then his lips were back on mine, and I caught fire with the strength of his desire.

“May I touch you, darling?” he murmured, shaky. “Please.”

“Whatever you want,” I said, caught up in the moment. “Tell me what you want.”

In answer, he picked me up, strode the few metres to the back of the shop, and pushed me down onto the bed, hands going to the laces of my trousers. “Your dick in my mouth,” he said, untying, pulling my trousers and boxers down.

“Oh. Gods, love, are you sure that’s –”

His mouth closed over my cock, hot and wet, and I lost what I’d been about to ask. Warmth surrounded it, stroked it, stoked fires of arousal ever higher and higher in me, until I was panting, desperate, close to a climax.

“Wyll, slow down if you don’t want me to finish here and now,” I said unevenly. “Gods, your mouth...”

He took my hand in his, but continued. A quick finish it was, then, I supposed. With the bliss taking me over, I didn’t care – just wanted to get to that brief, shining moment of release. He started to suck, and I squeezed his hand hard as I let go, euphoria spreading through my body, shaking me, pushing my hips upwards to thrust into his mouth as his claws dug into my leg. Juices spilt out of me, the climax almost painful in its intensity and suddenness.

“AH! Gods, Wyll. My love. Oh, by all that’s holy,” I babbled, as he licked slowly and carefully over the now-overly-sensitive flesh. “Oh. Sweetheart. Gods.”

Someone knocked on the locked door. My eyes flicked to it, and back to Wyll. He was grinning at me.

“You look like a cat that got into the cream,” I said. “Sweetheart, I think we’ll have to wait for later until I can pay that back.”

“Not a trader,” he said, kissing my mouth before drawing away. “I wanted just that.”

I felt my face flushing. I’d done it again. But was it really bad to want some symmetry to our lovemaking? Hmm. “I love you,” I said, smiling at him. “My sweet love. That was... astounding.”

I pulled up my boxers and trousers, retying them, checking for stains or signs of what we’d been up to. The rumpled cover on the bed was the only evidence, and that was quickly straightened.

Wyll bounded over to the door to unlock it when he saw I was decently attired again, and let Halsin in.

Halsin sniffed the air, and his eyes crinkled in amusement. “Would you like me to come back later?” he asked.

Heat rose to my face again as I realised that I’d dealt with all the visible signs of our activities... but the smells of arousal and sex must be lingering strongly. “Now is fine,” I said, my voice sounding strangled to my ears. My eyes flicked to Wyll, who was smirking. *Bastard*, I thought at him with a wave of exasperated love, and his smirk widened into a grin.

“She found Astarion,” Halsin said. “Although... you might want to finish up what you need to do here, first.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, a little concerned.

“He’s on the roof at the Elfsong,” he said with a grin.

I sighed. “Well, don’t I feel like an ill-thinking twat,” I said. “Fine. Let’s give Astarion some space for now. So. I want to let a few people know about this place, but I don’t want to overwhelm myself while I’m still figuring things out. Any ideas, folks?”

“Where are people most likely to be sick or injured?” Wyll asked.

“Probably the docks,” I said. “Fishing boats can be dangerous places. Fish hooks, filleting knives, cutting lines... and then there are the fish themselves. Some of them bite back. Occasionally they’ll pull up something toxic that can poison with a touch.”

“That could be a good place to start,” Halsin agreed. “Fairly simple cases. Emergencies. You can make a difference quickly, where people’s livelihoods hang in the balance.”

I nodded, thinking it through. Injuries were common causes of forced retirement, when someone lost an arm or leg thanks to infection, or a broken bone healed badly. Unless there were fierce storms, I’d be unlikely to have sudden rushes of patients. One or two, maybe five or so if a boat capsized. And I’d see results fairly fast, giving me a chance to improve any aspect of my treatments that wasn’t quite working.

“I like it,” I said eventually. “Perhaps a couple of notices to put up at the docks, and a few at local businesses, if they’re content to advertise for me. I might be able to work out a reciprocal agreement of some type.”

“You’re more savvy about business than I expected,” Wyll said, raising an eyebrow. “Where did you pick up this sort of thing?”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t trying to run a business when I healed people before,” I said. “But I did need to survive. I charged for my services, where I could. I found that the head of a village could make or break my work, and my earnings. If they thought I was a useful asset, and someone underpaid me when they knew the person could afford more... well. Often public shame did far more than their conscience would have.”

“Huh,” Wyll said, looking thoughtful. “I mostly just wandered around tracking and killing monsters. People are generally quite grateful afterwards.”

“Funny, isn’t it? Save someone from a minotaur and they’re so appreciative they feed you and shower you with coin. Save someone from a local plague, and they’re half-convinced your treatment did nothing, and they would have recovered just fine without it,” I said. “Well. To be fair, occasionally they were right.”

Halsin chuckled. “The life of a healer is not an easy or simple one,” he said. “So. May we help with your notices? What do you want to say?”

“Let’s keep it simple,” I said, taking a piece of cheap paper, quill, and ink from a cabinet. I wrote, slowly and carefully:

*The Healing Hole
Heapside, near the docks
Healer in residence most mornings*

“There. What do you think?”

“Hmm. The Healing Hole sounds a little like a brothel, now I think about it,” Wyll said.

“Oh well. They’ll be sadly disappointed, then,” I said, laughing at the thought of sad would-be customers. “They can always head to the Mermaid. I hear you can buy almost anything there.”

“Hmm. I only ever bought beer,” Wyll quipped. “How many copies, do you think?”

“Ten?” I guessed. “We can always do more. But a couple at the docks, one in each of the shops nearby...”

“One at the door?” Halsin suggested.

“Yes. That.”

We set to work, carefully copying out the text. With three of us, it went quickly.

“Perfect,” I said, hiding a smile at the differences in the notices. Wyll’s were almost calligraphic, with occasional flourishes. Halsin’s were neat, with big block letters. And mine were... readable. Mostly.

We put up the notices, on the docks, in a couple of shops with friendly proprietors, and the rest on walls nearby.

“That’ll do,” I said. “Do we wait around just to get no visitors, or leave and risk patients galore turning up to an empty shop?”

“How about you two go, and I stay?” Halsin suggested. “I have nothing pressing to do this morning. And I note a book on your shelf that I haven’t read.”

I glanced at the scant selection of healer tomes. “You’re very welcome to it,” I said. “Thanks. That helps a lot.”

“Glad to oblige,” he said, turning to pick up the weightiest book, titled *Zan’s Guide To Herbal Remedies For Internal Troubles* .

We left Halsin happily reading, and headed back towards the Elfsong.

“You uhhh... surprised me a little earlier,” I said, taking Wyll’s hand. “I thought you’d be a little more privacy-focused.”

He guffawed. “Honestly, I thought so too. But... darling, ever since last night I’m having trouble keeping focus on duty and sensible behaviour. I just want to take you to bed so you can fuck me.”

A passing matron glared at him, and turned away with a sniff.

“Look what you’ve done to me,” he said, smiling down at me. “I’m so lost in thoughts of you, I barely know what I’m doing.”

“Hmm. A problem, to be sure,” I said, smiling back. It was difficult not to smile, hearing that he was harbouring such lustful thoughts about me. “Maybe we can try to assuage it tonight.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?” he asked, his tone playful.

“Then I suppose we try again. And again.”

“Mmm. I like the sound of this course of treatment.”

Regrets and reconnections

Chapter Notes

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

I climbed the ladder to the roof, looking around carefully. I'd looked here the night we'd defeated Cazador, but Astarion had been nowhere in sight. Gods, I'd been up here meditating just this morning. Perhaps he'd been elsewhere and come back. Perhaps I'd simply missed him – the man was getting exceptionally good at hiding in shadows.

“I knew you'd come hunt me down,” Astarion said. He was leaning on the balustrade, looking out over the city, back to me.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked, distracted from my mission.

“Well. First, that line would have worked on anyone. Second, scent. You smell like a rothe in rut, but a very small one.”

I laughed in a burst of surprise. “Damn. I should have bathed first. Sorry.”

“Oh no. It's almost nice to know someone else is happily indulging. Even if my happiness is finite.”

I joined him in looking out over the city. “It looks so much cleaner from up here, doesn't it?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “This sounds like the start of some damned monkish parable about how things always look better from further away.”

“Ha! I suppose it should have been. Sometimes I think I'm a rather terrible monk.”

“Well! Finally something we have in common. I seem to be an appalling excuse for a vampire.”

“Because you didn't take the power when you had the chance, victims be damned?”

He nodded, looking away.

“You did the right thing,” I said.

“Ha! Oh, how *nice* to hear that I did a righteous deed! My heart is lighter than air now. Thanks so much,” he said, words dripping with sarcasm.

“No. Well, yes, but that's not what I meant.”

“Ugh. Tell me, then.”

“You saw that diary. Cazador's master treated him the same as Cazador treated you. He was stuck – lost in a spiral of abuse and fear. And he was the most fearful one there. He tried to

hide it, I'm sure... but his entire life was about trying to keep himself safe. Like a scared squirrel, hiding in a tree. Sure, his palace was large and opulent. But did he ever just have fun?"

"Only when he was torturing someone," Astarion muttered.

"And that was simply the power that made him feel strong for a while. All he had was the control he held over others. He knew that if his control ever wavered, someone would gladly kill him. One of those closest to him."

Astarion shifted, restless. "What's your point?"

"You're not living in fear."

"I have a tadpole in my damned head!"

"It's bad, true. But you don't have to be paranoid about every shadow. People aren't coming after you. You have friends around you. People who care. People who won't stab you in the back as soon as you turn away."

"Oh, the friends thing again," he said. "Where were you when I had a chance at taking immortality for myself?"

"Protecting you from making a stupid mistake. If you'd done it... not only would the guilt of thousands of lives be on your shoulders, you'd have been a target for every vampire, vampire spawn, and devil who feared your new power."

He drew breath to answer, but paused. "Hmm," he said eventually. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I'll do my best to help," I said. "But I need to be sure that I'm actually helping you. I won't damn you to a short life and the hells. I want you to live."

"A bit late for that, dearie."

"You know what I mean."

He sighed.

"I'm sorry, though," I said. "Not for stopping you. But for the soul-crushing disappointment. I can't imagine how it felt to be so close to something that felt like the answer to all your problems, and have your closest companions tell you no."

"Hmm."

"Anyway. I should leave you be."

"No... stay if you want to. I have a flask of blood – don't ask – and a flagon of wine. Stay and get drunk with me. I want to stop feeling for a while."

I grinned at him. "Now you're talking my language."

When I finally left Astarion's side, the sun was setting. My gait was unsteady – the wine had been smooth, but strong. I focused carefully to climb down the ladder from the roof. It was a little difficult at the best of times, being designed for people so much taller than I, with longer legs. But now I had to hang on for dear life as I felt beneath me for the next step, feeling at every point as if I was about to fall into the void.

“Having a little trouble?” Wyll asked drily behind and below me.

I swivelled my head, losing my grip with one hand.

“Oh, you silly gnome,” he said, laughing, reaching up to steady me with a hand on my arse. “What on Toril were you doing with that wretched vampire?”

“Getting very drunk,” I said, with solemn dignity, which I promptly spoiled by struggling to reach the next step down. “Damn it! Why is this ladder so difficult?”

“Perhaps those two things are connected, my darling,” he said. I didn't have to turn around again to hear the smirk in his voice.

“Why don't you ever get drunk with me?” I demanded, managing to descend another couple of steps.

“Because you haven't asked me to, I suppose,” he said. “Would you like some help?”

I sighed. Getting down this ladder *was* taking an inordinate amount of time. “Please,” I said, my tone far less gracious than the word.

He put a hand under each of my arms, lifting a little so most of the weight was off my feet, but I could still move freely. I descended the ladder quickly and rather ungracefully, then swayed. Solid ground wasn't all it was said to be.

“Thank you, love,” I said, more appreciative now. “You're sweet and I love you.”

His eyes crinkled in amusement. “In vino, veritas,” he said. “I do like that you can be drunk or suffering from a terrible head wound, and you still tell me you love me.”

“Always, my handsome devil,” I said, taking his hand. “You're the light of my life. My stars. Someday, when bards tell the tale of our adventures, they'll sing of our undying love.”

“How do you get more poetic, the more you drink?” he asked.

“Magic.”

“Silly creature. Do you want to lie down?”

I shook my head, the movement making the room seem to sway around me. “Water. I think I need to drink something other than wine, or I'll wake tomorrow feeling like death came for me, beat me up, and decided I wasn't worth the trouble.”

Wyll's face was alight with laughter. "Come on. There's a jug of water and dinner in the common rooms. I think you could do with both."

"Or *you* could do with some wine."

"Mmm. I'm tempted to try and match you. It would be funny to everyone else, at least."

He took my hand, and we went to the common room's lounge area to eat.

"Gods. I'm hungry. I didn't realise," I said, biting into a slice of cheese.

"Did you eat lunch?"

I shook my head. "I went straight up to talk to Astarion."

"Silly. How is he, though?"

I sighed, the giddy feeling dropping away. "He's mourning what he could have had," I said. "I wish... not that he ascended; that rite was dripping with evil. But that he could have what he wanted. Without the bloodshed and the devils. Just... to let him walk in the sunlight. Live without hunger gnawing at him day and night."

Wyll nodded, his face drawn into sombre lines. He knew a little something about mourning lost opportunities, I supposed.

"I told him we'd do our best to help, though," I said, looking up at Wyll. "We will, won't we? You don't have an objection to it?"

He shook his head, face softening. "I'd do it for you, if not for our friend," he said. "You know I've never quite seen eye to eye with Astarion. But I hate to see him in pain, regardless. I'll help, if I can. Or support you, if I can't."

I leant against him, my head on his shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too, you lush."

"Hey! I'm not the one always found with a goblet in hand."

"Those are my dexterity exercises!"

"An interesting way to describe drinking."

Wyll snorted and slid an arm around my shoulders. "Such a tormentor."

"Mmm. You're my favourite person to torment, though."

"Drink more water, darling."

I gulped down water, and grimaced. "Add *Fix the water supply* to Florrick's list of things to do, please."

“Not as tasty as the wine, then?”

“Not by half.” I snuggled close to him, sliding an arm around his waist. “Thank you, love. For looking after me when I’m probably a terrible pain in the neck.”

“You’re one of the few adorable drunks I’ve ever met. No – scratch that. The only adorable drunk I’ve ever met. The others were merely tolerable. Or I was drunk too.”

I lifted my face for a kiss, and his lips grazed mine lightly. “Mmm. Did I mention I love you?”

“A couple of times,” he said, grinning. “Come on. Drink some water, silly creature.”

The next couple of hours were a bit of a blur, as the wine worked its way through my body. Eventually, the food and water won, and my mind cleared.

“Ugh. Why did drinking with Astarion seem like a great idea?”

“No idea,” Wyll said, looking amused. “Feeling better?”

“I think I need more water if I’m not going to have serious regrets tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe tea?”

“Mmm. Good idea. That and a bath. I get the impression I’m rather stinky.”

Wyll dropped to his knees in front of me, burying his face in my shoulder and inhaling. “Mmm. You smell good, even with wine breath.”

I bit my lip as a surge of lust went through me. “Gods. I have the self-control of a goblin just now. I want nothing more than to take you to bed.” I kissed the side of his neck, hands sliding over his hips, before I could rein myself in. “But I think a bath is definitely in order.”

“You could take me to bath instead?”

Another surge of lust, rippling through me and making itself at home in my loins. “Now *that* seems a plan with zero downsides,” I said. I checked the bathtub – cold but clean. “Do your magic, love?”

His fingers played over my back.

“Not that magic,” I said, leaning back against him, my side against him so he could continue. “Mmm. Actually, all your magic is good.”

He chuckled, dipping his other hand in the water. “All I have to do is remember to use the correct hand to add the heat.”

I looked up at him and grinned. “Utter failure. This hand is definitely generating some heat.”

He snatched his hand away from my back, looking worried... then chuckled as my meaning hit him.

I stripped, clambered over the edge of the tub, and sank into the warm water, groaning. "Gods, love. Perfect temperature. How do you do that?"

"Practice," he said, unlacing his shirt and pulling it off. "It's amazing how good I got after the hundredth cold bath in a dingy inn."

I watched him, admiring. "I really could have done with your skills while I was wandering the village circuits. I just had to meditate through the cold baths and dodgy water supplies instead."

Naked now, he climbed into the bath, moving slowly over to run his fingers lightly over my beard. "You have me now."

As he touched me, arousal flared again. "Gods, love," I said, pulling him closer. "Come here. I want to kiss you."

He pressed his lips to mine, and I slipped a hand to the back of his neck to hold him near while I kissed him, warmth spreading down my spine down to his hands stroking slowly over my arse.

"Let's find the soap and get clean," he said, drawing away a little. "Darling, I want to get you out of here and into bed."

"What do you want to do?" I asked. "Wait. If you tell me, I might just burst into flame on the spot."

"Good place for it," he said, reaching to snag the soap.

"True. Wash yourself for me?"

His gaze heated, and he leaned back to slowly move the soap over his chest. "Like this?"

I felt a jolt of pure lust, watching his hands move over his body. "Perfect, sweetheart."

"You're turning me into an exhibitionist."

"Mmm. Worthy of exhibition, I say."

He stood, leaning against the tub's edge, to slide soapy hands over his cock, hardening in front of me.

I looked up to meet his eyes, hoping he'd see the hunger I was feeling. "Love..."

"What do you want?" he asked softly.

"I want to put my mouth on that lovely cock, sweetheart."

He tilted his head back, closing his eyes for a moment. “Hells, darling.” He knelt to rinse off, then stood in front of me, water streaming down his front.

“Oh. There’s an image that will be burnt into my memories forever,” I said. “You’re not too cold?”

“Never,” he said. “Please, darling?”

I leant forward to grasp his hips, pulling him close, licking up his cock in a quick swipe of my tongue, tasting the faint hint of soap.

He grabbed the edge of the tub in one hand, and I grinned up at him. I took his cock slowly into my mouth, letting the textures of his skin slide over my tongue, shivering at the sensations it created. So odd that this would be one of the things I most enjoyed about making love to him.

I held his cock in my hand, exploring the head slowly with tongue and lips, knowing how sensitive it was. I looked up to see his face almost dreamy, focused intently on what he was feeling. I continued, using my mouth to caress him, until he started to make small noises under his breath whenever I moved.

I drew away, still stroking gently with my thumb over the soft skin. “What do you want, love?”

“Mmm. I want to climax with your cock in me.”

A thrill ran from my head to my feet. “Gods, sweetheart. How do you do that?”

“Do what?” he asked, moving away a little to kneel between my legs, hands sliding up my legs.

“Undo me with a few words,” I said, pulling him against me, biting his shoulder gently.

“Mmm. I never imagined, when I first saw you, that fires like these raged inside you.”

“I’m not sure they did,” he said, fingers stroking over my thighs, setting off slow pulses of pleasure through me. “I think you ignited them all, darling. I’ve never felt lust like I do with you. I want to lose myself in your touch.”

“Mmm. I’ll admit the feeling’s very mutual,” I said. “Speaking of which…”

He chuckled and moved away to stand and reach for the towels. “Come on, darling.”

I patted myself mostly dry and stood on the bed, beckoning him to close the gap between us. “Now I’m the perfect height to kiss you,” I said, following word with deed, lips and tongues moving against each other.

“Not quite,” he said, drawing away.

“Oh? What’s the perfect height? Do you prefer someone taller?” I asked, a slight frisson of sadness going through me. Work though I might to get over old insecurities, my height was

still a sticking point sometimes.

“This,” he said, pushing me backwards and snagging my ankle so I fell backwards onto the soft bed. I gaped in surprise, laughing, as he looked down on me. “The perfect height to kiss me,” he said, throwing himself down beside me. “My sweet darling.”

I pulled him down for a kiss, marvelling at the playfulness he was showing. Who would have thought, when we first met, that his pleasant, stoic exterior hid this level of fun and passion? But then, the reverse was probably true. I’d probably surprised him a few times, too.

For a few moments, I could enjoy just kissing him, skin to skin all over. Then he moved a little more on top of me, his cock digging slightly into my thigh, and nerves sprang to life everywhere we touched, fanning the heat building inside me. I slid my hands down his back, playing with the ridges on his skin, and he stiffened, breathing hard.

I watched his face as my hands drifted down to his arse, stroking, then dug my fingernails into the skin a little. He made a sound of arousal and bent to kiss me again, mouth hungry and demanding on mine, while I pulled him hard against me.

“Now?” he asked, drawing away. “Darling, I want you.”

“Tell me how you want me,” I said, dragging nails lightly down his back, watching him shiver. “What do you want from me?”

“Mmm. How about me on hands and knees?”

“Gods, love. Please.”

He got on all fours on the bed, and I knelt behind him. “How’s this?” he asked.

“Hmm... move your legs a little more apart. I’m a short-arse, remember?”

He chuckled and followed the instruction.

“Damn, your arse is lovely,” I said, hands slowly moving over it. “All that swordwork practice has done wonders for it.”

“Tease,” he said, grinning over his shoulder.

I picked up the oil and dripped a little straight onto the crevice of his arse, letting it slowly run down over his arsehole, and poured more into my hand. He shivered, and I grinned. I slid a thumb through the oil, then slowly around his arsehole, listening to his breathing change.

“Good?” I asked, taking advantage of the position to slip a hand over his cock and stroke it at the same time.

“Darling...” he said, strain and pleasure warring in his voice. “Wonderful, but I want more.”

I dripped oil over my cock, spreading it evenly, biting my lip as the near prospect of fucking him almost lost me all control. The pain brought a little clarity, a bit of focus, so I risked

moving up to slide the head of my cock teasingly over his arse.

“Faster, darling,” he said, his voice strained.

I slid slowly into him, watching his hands dig into the sheets. “You’re alright, love?” I asked.

“Perfect. Keep going, please.”

I took a deep breath, not moving, and let it slowly out. I was teetering on the verge of climax already, feeling hot, tight, slippery muscles all around my cock, flexing even when I didn’t move. It felt overwhelmingly good. My imaginings had been nothing compared to his reality.

“Give me a moment, love,” I said, stroking his thigh with one hand. “You feel too good. I need some control back, or this is going to go far too fast.”

“Flatterer.”

“Not at all,” I said, the conversation helping me to move my focus away from the pleasure washing over me. “A sad fact. Gods, love, you get me far too excited.”

“At least you’re good for my ego.”

I moved my hips a little, sliding out just a bit, and he made an inarticulate noise. I closed my eyes and breathed in and out, pulling in light, letting go of negative emotions. I found my centre again, breathing slowly, opening my eyes. If I could just get the energy flowing correctly through me... and then it clicked into place, and I had a measure of control back.

“You might get some energy overflow, sweetheart,” I said, pulling almost all the way out of him, pushing back in, as his back arched. I focused in on his reactions – his breathing, the noises he was making, the movements of his hands and feet against the bed as sensations flowed through him.

I pulled in light, pushed it through my gates, let it slowly pool in my lower gates, where an insistent warmth built and built. Wyll started to cry out with every thrust, pushing back against me, arse muscles flexing under my hands, increasing the pleasure I felt with every stroke. He lifted his head, and I heard his breathing change, deepening and slowing. With a fair idea of what he was trying to do, I reached forward to drag my fingernails slowly down his back, to either side of his spine. Sure enough, his gates lit up, shining with a gentle light.

I pushed into him again, pulling in light with every thrust, pushing it through my hands into him. Could I use my lower gates that way? I’d never tried. Could it do harm? At least thinking about this was taking my focus away from the gorgeous arse I was currently fucking. Harm seemed unlikely, so on my next thrust, I pushed energy through the lowest gate into him, trying to open it so that his energy could flow back into me as well.

“Hells,” he gasped, gates flaring. “I don’t know what... keep doing whatever that is.”

I bit my lip, keeping my attention on the rhythm of my movements and the flow of energy back and forth. *Don’t let it get unbalanced. Keep it moving and circulating. Feed it with light and love.*

“Love,” I said unsteadily. “I can’t keep this going. I’m about to explode.”

“I’m close. Hells. Go wild, darling.”

I released my tight control on the energy flow, on my libido, on everything. I shoved into him hard, letting the energy burn and flare between us, and withdrew to slide against his arse, light pulsing with the climax taking me over, spilling my seed over him. Wyll shouted as he shared some of my sensations, and I watched the light go through him in waves, shaking him. I moved a hand from his hip to his cock, stroking it, palm still wet with oil, and he cried out again as he started to jerk, clutching huge handfuls of the sheets, back arched as he lost himself to the climax.

“Baldur’s bones,” he said, collapsing onto his side and looking up at me. “That was…” He closed his eyes.

I felt a stirring of concern, so wiped off my hands and joined him. “You’re alright, love?”

He laughed, opening his eyes to stare at me incredulously. “Alright? That was… transcendent. I’m more than alright. I’m positively giddy.”

“Oh good,” I said, reaching out to him. “I’d hate to be the only one to enjoy it.”

He responded to the mute request, cuddling close, face against my neck, one horn rubbing gently over my cheek. “That energy work is potent,” he said. “I could barely move for a while there. Just lost in the way it flowed through me as you fucked me.”

I kissed his forehead. “It’s a lot more powerful with someone I love,” I said. “I’ve never experienced something like that. Gods, love. To think I was doing that just to hold off a climax a little.”

“Mmm. Feeling your energy inside me. It was like touching your soul.”

I smiled, though he couldn’t see it. “I love your soul,” I said. “Damn. I love every part of you.”

“Hmm. Even the pieces I haven’t shown you?”

“Perhaps those most of all,” I said. “I like the idea that there’ll always be something new to learn about my love. Whether it’s something you learn or something you pull up from the depths of the past.”

Wyll’s shoulders heaved, and I pulled away the little that I could, worried.

He raised his head to smile at me – a genuine, happy smile. “Thank you. You take a lot on faith.”

I shook my head. “Evidence, love. I might not know all of you, but I’ve seen enough. You’re mine.”

“Mmm. Music to my ears, always.”

“Gods, we’re sappy bastards.”

He laughed in a brief burst of surprise. “True. But you’re my sappy bastard.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies if you're finding the chapter numbering inconsistent!

Occasionally I'll have a lightbulb moment and realise that I forgot to cover something that feels important, way back at the start. It's rarely anything truly integral to the story; just insights or indirectly-connected game points I forgot to touch on. So I'll sit down, and two hours later have an entirely new chunk of story. Sigh.

In this case, it was [Wyll adjusting to his new form](#). And this time, the new chunk actually hit in the middle of a blasted chapter. So I split the chapter up, added the new chunk of story to the old chapter, and created a new chapter for the second half of the old chapter. That's why the chapter numbering might seem odd if you've been reading along as I post.

If you find this bugs the hells out of you, please let me know, and I'll find some other way to deal with my chaotic writing style! 😊

Love, Rowan

Darkness and darkness again

We were at the Healing Hole when the messenger found Wyll the next morning.

“What's up?” I asked.

“Father wants to see us. At the palace.”

“Huh. Both of us? And is it urgent?”

“No, just *at your convenience*. But maybe we could close up a little early here, and go see him?”

I nodded, tying off a bandage on a fisher's hand. “No working for a couple of days,” I told her. “You get Chionthar water into that bandage, your hand will be blown up like a pufferfish in no time. And the pain will be indescribable. I know having no income will be difficult, but I can talk to the Open Hand temple if you like.”

The fisher's mouth set in a stubborn line, and I sighed. *Damn* these stubborn types.

“If your hand falls off, all you'll be good for is net-mending,” I pointed out. “I understand. You have rent and food and all sorts to worry about. But short-term hardship is better than struggling the rest of your life.”

“Like you'd understand struggle,” the woman said, a slight sneer on her face.

“Grew up in the outer city,” I said cheerfully. “I know poverty. I know how easy it is to end up a beggar on the streets. Listen to me.”

She rolled her eyes, but I had a sneaking suspicion she'd take my words on board – at least for the next day. That would probably be good enough.

“Would you please check outside, love?” I asked. “Do we have a line?”

Wyll stuck his head out the door. “One more,” he reported back.

“OK. We'll tell people we're closing soon, I'll see the last patient, and then we can head to the upper city. Alright?”

“Perfect.”

“Father,” Wyll said, inclining his head to his father. Grand Duke in name again. We were in a small office off the audience chamber – a little more private than other options, but still rather austere.

I eyed them both, concerned. Wyll was so touch-focused with me. Was that because I wanted it, or because he was actually the type to want physical contact... but had never received it?

Maybe an experiment was in order.

Ulder Ravengard looked... tired at best. There were lines of stress on his face that hadn't been there when he was staying with us – even though his experiences beforehand must have been intensely stressful. Were the headaches still occurring? Was he not receiving proper treatment?

I stepped forward. “Saer,” I said. “I’ll admit – I’m at a loss for how to address you. What would you prefer?”

“Call me Ulder,” he said, smiling. “I think you’ve well earned the right, Dash. How are you?”

“Might I request something that might offend you?” I asked, doing my best to seem deferential.

“Go ahead,” he said, a look of mild amusement flitting across his face.

“May I hug you?”

Wyll coughed beside me. I wasn't sure if he was shocked and alarmed, or hiding laughter.

“I... hmm. I... certainly,” he said. I was irresistibly reminded of Wyll, the first time we'd kissed. The look of confusion on his face was so similar to my love's.

He knelt on one knee, and I came forward to hug him, arms around his shoulders, for a moment.

“Thank you,” I said, stepping away. “If you hadn't already noticed, I'm sure Wyll can tell you all about my predilection for hugging people. Not least those I'm almost related to.”

“I think he'd hug a goblin,” Wyll said, fondness in his eyes as he looked at me. “Uhh... not meaning to cast aspersions. Father, what's this summons about?”

“I've been following your progress through Baldur's Gate,” he said. “You've eliminated a good portion of the Bhaalist cult that's been plaguing the city. Lord Cazador is no more, and rumours have it that he perished in the middle of the darkest black rite.”

Wyll nodded. “I haven't quite had a chance to finish writing up the report for you.”

I raised an eyebrow. How had I been unaware of *that*?

Ulder waved a hand. “I'm sure it will be most thorough. However, that wasn't my point. You've slain the Chosen of the three death gods. You've rid the city of problems that have plagued it for centuries. When the people find out what you've done... you'll be heroes. Both of you.”

“I'd never try to usurp you, if that's your concern,” Wyll said quietly. I reached out to hold his hand, and he squeezed my hand tightly.

“Far from it,” Ulder said, shaking his head. “Wyll, I’m... tired. My time in Avernus was... difficult, at the risk of underexaggerating. The Absolute, this worm in my head... I find myself struggling to manage the workload I must. Counsellor Florrick is always on hand to help. But she is no ruler. She has the cleverness, the insight... but not the interest.”

“What do you need?” Wyll asked, face alight with curiosity.

“I need a successor.”

“Father, no. Some time away, a bit of rest...”

“... and I’ll still be brain-addled and tired,” the grand duke finished. “Wyll – I want to propose you for grand duke. The council is gutted. The parliament is cowed, and half of them are dead. The city needs people to lead it out of this terrible chaos inflicted by Gortash. Inflicted, though it pains me to say it, by me.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Wyll said quickly. “The gods of death –”

“Infested a city that I led, while I led it,” Ulder said. “No, ultimate responsibility *does* lie with me. Besides. I told you. I’m not fit to continue in this role. I’m weakened, and I’m not sure I’ll ever fully recover.”

“Dash?”

I sighed. “Ulder, do you mind if Wyll and I talk privately? Is there a room we can use?”

“This one,” he said. “I have work to do. Wyll, come find me when you have an answer for me.” He left, and Wyll seemed to relax a fraction.

“Well?” he asked. “What should I do?”

“What exactly are you asking of me here?” I asked. “Do you... have you already made a decision and you want me to know it and want it too? Do you have no idea what you want and need help sorting that out? Are you asking for my ethical opinion? Or are you asking what I, your betrothed and lover, selfishly want from my life with you?”

Wyll blinked.

“All of those probably have completely different answers,” I said, burying my face in my hands, “and I don’t know what you’re asking from me.”

“Hey,” Wyll said, putting a hand on my knee. “I think we’re both a little emotional. What’s going on?”

I straightened and took a deep breath, trying to relax. Something about this had set off waves of anxiety, and they weren’t going away. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel ready to make a choice like this on the spur of the moment.”

“Should we take some time to talk about it? After we deal with the Sharrans.”

I ran my fingers through my hair and nodded. “That would be nice. Is there any reason a fast decision would be good?”

“Well, it would put my father out of his suspense. But no, you’re right. I don’t need to make this choice right now. We can stop and think it through. Unlike some of my other decisions.”

“Mmm.”

“Your lack of answer occasionally speaks volumes, dearest one.”

I shook off my distress and smiled fondly at my intended. “Come on. Let’s give your father your non-answer, deal with Shadowheart’s problem, and then talk about whether you should take up the offer or not.”

“Deal.”

We stood outside the House of Grief, observing the people drifting in and out.

“This looks very sedate for a Sharran cloister,” I said. “I expected more black. Maybe a new moon or two.”

Shadowheart snorted. “We can be subtle.”

“Oh yes. That circlet you used to wear was very subtle,” Wyll said, chuckling.

“People often don’t see what’s right under their noses,” she said, shrugging.

Gale hmphed. “Some of us, perhaps.”

“Shall we?” I asked.

The team nodded, and we entered the cloister.

“Shadowheart,” the person at the desk said, standing, her lip curling. “You actually came back to face the consequences of your actions?”

“Do I *know* you?” Shadowheart asked. “Or did I specifically ask for memories of your face to be removed, for some reason? Ugliness? Annoyance? The grating sound of your voice?”

The guard rolled her eyes. “Go through. Submit to the heart mapping. Surely you remember that much, at least.”

Shadowheart raised her chin and walked through the doors, further into the cloisters. We followed as she underwent a quiet questioning, and her interrogator left the room.

“What now?” I asked her.

“Further in,” she said, her face grim. “Further down. You know, you don’t have to help me with this.”

“Of course we do,” Wyll said, his voice warm. “You’re a friend. Friends help each other with their troubles.”

“A curious ideal,” she muttered, but led the way down multiple flights of stairs, down into a cavern in the rock.

“Why do these people always choose underground lairs with huge caves?” Gale asked. “Sure, it’s warmer underground, but not that warm. The draughts alone must be murder on the knees in winter.”

“You’re getting soft, Gale,” Wyll said, elbowing him gently.

“*Getting* soft? I’ll have you know I’m in the best physical shape of my life.”

“Was your previous shape a potato?” Shadowheart slung backwards over her shoulder.

“I’ve never been so disrespected in my life,” Gale muttered, a smile quirking his mouth upwards.

“Now now, children. Focus,” I said, trying to hide my own smile.

Downstairs, the might of the Sharran enclave was arrayed against us.

“Holy hells,” Wyll said softly. “That’s a lot of firepower.”

“So are we,” Gale said. “Dash. Up the stairs and corral them through the choke point at the bottom?”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Ice and Hunger of Hadar might slow them down a smidge.”

“That’s Gale and I sorted,” Wyll said. “You and Shadowheart at the front?”

I nodded. “Be my big strong eldritch protector?”

He grinned at me. “Cute. But always, darling.”

The Sharrans just... ran into the darkness and cold of Wyll and Gale’s spells. And fell over, from what I could see. Got up, and fell over again. A few, more thought-inclined people attacked around the edges of the darkness, but most just congregated in the choke point – easy enough for Shadowheart and I to pick off with bow and arrow. We were ready for a hard hand-to-hand fight, but only an occasional person made it through, to be picked off with ease.

“This is embarrassing,” Shadowheart muttered to me. “The cream of the Sharran military, and four people are destroying them. You and I are barely even necessary.”

“Perhaps the darkness seems a little too homey,” I said, grinning sideways at her as a fighter – a justiciar, I’d guess from the armour – stumbled out of the darkness towards us. I hit him a couple of times, following it up with a kick that sent him flying back into that deadly dark cloud. He fell over and lay still.

Eventually, just one person remained standing against us.

“Mother Superior,” Shadowheart said. “An interesting welcome.”

The woman in front of us sneered. “You were always the disappointment, *Shadowheart* .” The way she said it sounded like a curse. “To me. To Shar. To everyone you ever came into contact with.”

“Not to us,” I said. “She’s a valuable member of the team. A pity you couldn’t use her strengths. But then, inflexibility *does* seem to be your *raison d’etre*.”

“Me the disappointment?” Shadowheart demanded. “Me? You’re the one that was the disappointment. You couldn’t even corrupt a single Selunite child to Shar’s side successfully. You always feared me. Always hated me. And it poisoned your entire mission. You arrogant, *stupid* woman! Shar must be so furious that her high priestess couldn’t manage a single, simple order.”

“How dare you?” she said, drawing herself up. “You disobedient brat!”

“Enough,” Shadowheart said. “You’ve said more than enough. Time to go be with your precious Shar. If she even bothers to collect your soul. I suspect she won’t.”

She hit out at the woman with her glaive, and I followed with a flurry of open-hand blows with energy behind them. A single burst of eldritch blasts hit from behind us, and she went down, her body emitting the faintest plume of smoke.

“She was the closest thing I had to a mother,” Shadowheart said, staring down at the corpse. “I should be sad, shouldn’t I?”

“Feel whatever you feel, honey,” I told her. “Where would your parents be?”

“Through here, I think,” she said, a look of determination crossing her face. “Come on.”

She led us through a door to another chamber, smaller this time. Sure enough, two people – an elf and a human – hung from restraints.

I shuddered. Cruel, leaving them like that with no way to take weight off their shoulders. At best, they’d be crippled with pain for weeks. At worst, it would be permanent, and the shoulders would fuse from the abuse.

Shadowheart ran to let them down, and fell to the floor. A dark, cold presence filled the chamber.

“Shar,” Gale whispered. “She’s taken Shadowheart. Again.”

Shadowheart struggled to her feet, her face grim.

“What happened?” I asked her, giving her a shoulder to lean on.

“I have a choice,” she said. “Sever myself from Shar forever, or save my parents.”

“Hmm. I think I recognise this game,” Wyll said. “It’s not one you can win.”

“Let us go,” pleaded the elf. Her father.

She looked at him with anguished eyes.

“Jenevelle. Darling. We’re so glad to see you again, our beloved daughter,” he said. “But you must let us go. Put us out of this misery and pain, finally. Be our mercy blow.”

“I only just found you!” she cried. It was the cry of a child, lost and alone in the woods, finally finding her home only to realise it was a mirage.

“Sweetheart,” the woman said. “It’s wonderful to see you yourself again. But your father is right. We’ve been wracked with pain for decades. All we seek now is the peace of death. Life... is too painful.”

“We can heal you!” she sobbed. “Dash, tell them.”

“I can help, if you want me to,” I said. “I’ll be honest: I don’t know how much I can help. But I can definitely ease your pain. Bring you a semblance of a normal life.”

“And live knowing our daughter is still bound to that bitch?” he spat. “That’s not a life I want.”

“But I love you!”

“And we love you, our darling sweet Jenevelle,” her mother said. “We’ll always love you. We’ll always watch over you.”

Shadowheart turned anguished eyes to me. “What do I do?”

I shook my head. “There are no right and wrong answers here. Just what you know in your heart that you need to do, one way or another. I trust you.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, then straightened, her habitual look of determination slipping back onto her face. “You’re sure?” she asked her parents.

They both nodded, and she laid a hand over each one’s heart in turn, sobbing as she stopped their hearts and they slumped from their restraints, suddenly limp and lifeless. Motes of light swirled around her and through her, as though in one final farewell.

“Mummy!” she called out, a fierce keen of loss, and fell to her knees.

I knelt beside her, and she fell into my arms, weeping. “I’m so sorry, honey,” I said softly. “That was the most unfair thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I tortured them,” she said, her voice dull. In shock, the medical part of my mind told me. “Before I left. I was the main person bringing them pain and misery. *She* made me forget who they were. Over and over. So I would keep hurting them. Her idea of irony, I suppose.”

“Come on,” I said gently. “They’ll be with you. They love you still. I know it’s not what you hoped for, but you still have love. You have worth.”

She sighed and got to her feet, swaying. We made our slow way out of the cloister, unhindered by the remaining Sharrans. What more could they do to her? They’d already struck the worst possible blow.

“Can we raze the place to the ground?” Gale asked, his voice savage.

“Tempting,” I replied. “Let’s wait until tomorrow to make a decision. Hot heads rarely make good choices, and right now I’m both furious and in total agreement with you.”

We put Shadowheart to bed with a calming tea, and updated the others on the happenings that afternoon.

Karlach’s face grew positively savage. “I wish I’d been there,” she growled. “I’d have ripped off their arms and beat them to death with them.”

“Very disarming person, you are,” Gale said.

“Ha! Not the time for jokes, pointy-head. I want to hurt someone.”

“You’re going to get your wish if you let those flames get much higher, sweetie,” I pointed out. “But Shadowheart could really use some comfort tonight, I think.”

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll be sensible. I’ll go drink a couple of pints and chase them down with water. That should cool me down.”

“Can we leave her with you?” I asked.

She nodded, the flames wreathing her shoulders dying down. “You can trust me,” she said. “I won’t burn her to a crisp. Promise.”

“That would be handy,” I said, daring a quick pat of her arm. It was still hot. “Thank you, honey.”

“Go. We’ll look after her,” Gale said, shooing Wyll and I out the door.

Out in the hall, Wyll and I looked at each other.

“Feeling a little displaced?” he asked. “You’re usually the one looking after everyone.”

I shrugged. “A little, but also a touch relieved. It’s nice to see everyone looking after each other. Especially after a decision like that. It must be horrible, but having loving friends around... I hope it helps a bit.”

“I’m sure it will,” he said, his face turning slightly sad. “Come on. You could do with a rest.”

“I’m fine,” I said, and immediately yawned. “Alright. Maybe a bit.”

“Come on,” he said, a smile on his face again. “Come to bed, silly creature. Shadowheart’s in good hands, and everyone else will be fine for the night. Let’s get some sleep.”

Parents and perspectives

“Shadowheart must be devastated,” Wyll said, stripping off his robe and trousers. “By all the hellbeasts in Dis, that was one of the worst things I’ve ever seen done to a person.”

“An ironic twist on what Mizora did to you,” I said, following his example and checking the water in the tub. My exertions hadn’t been as intense as I’d expected, but I was still sweaty and itchy. “*Your parent or your freedom* seems a popular motif lately.”

“Hmm. I hope she’ll be alright. That was brutal.”

“Karlach will look after her. I’ll talk to her tomorrow, too. Once the tea has a chance to work, she should sleep, at least.”

“Huh. You can send half-elves to sleep?”

“Sort of. It’s a little tricky. Herbal teas work a little differently on elves. Either she’ll sleep, or it will help her go into a deeper meditative trance. I’m honestly not sure which. Regardless, it should relax her and let her rest a bit.”

“Interesting.” He poked a finger into the tub, shuddered, and concentrated. Steam drifted up.

I dipped a hand into the water. “Oof. That’s... warm.”

He grinned at me. “I might have gone a little overboard.”

“Eh. I could probably do with a hot bath. I’m feeling oddly tense.”

Wyll laughed. “Oddly? Really?”

I thought back over the day. The Healing Hole patients. Ulder’s offer. The Sharran cloister. “Alright, fine. It has been a hell of a day.”

“Come on,” he said, climbing into the tub, extending a hand for me to grab. “Come get warm and clean, darling. If you’re lucky, I might even give you a massage afterwards.”

“Hot baths *and* massages? How did I get so lucky?” I asked, clambering over the side with his rather welcome help. I cuddled up to him, the water taking some of my weight and soothing sore, stressed muscles.

“No idea,” he said, kissing my hair. “You must have won some sort of frontier lottery.”

I chuckled, closing my eyes and relaxing against him. “It’s the only possible explanation.”

A good soak and a healthy amount of soap later, I was feeling relaxed and clean, if a little limp and squishy. Wyll and I lounged on the bed, neither of us quite ready for sleep, but not keen on anything requiring much more exertion, either.

“Can we talk about the practical aspects of your father’s offer tomorrow, love?” I asked, yawning. “Talking is fine, but thinking at the same time feels too difficult.”

“Fine by me. Ugh. Such a huge decision to make.”

“Mmm. You seem anxious about making it.”

“Can you blame me? This could decide my – *our*, sorry – future for decades to come,” he said, placing a pillow on my shoulder so he could rest his head there without a horn digging into me. He moved closer, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“Are you worried about upsetting Ulder?”

“Hmm. I suppose I am,” Wyll said. “I... hells. The weight of my father’s expectations. I hated being at odds with him. I hated the idea that he didn’t want me near his city. But now that I’m back, and we’re reconciled...”

“Tell me,” I said.

“I feel nervous all the time. As though his judgement could fall upon me at any point. That I’ll only disappoint him again.”

“As if you could ever be a disappointment.”

“Ha! We’ve clearly moved in very different circles.”

“Why your father in particular, though?” I suspected I knew the answer... but I wanted to see if Wyll did.

“I suppose... he loomed so large when I was a child. He was always such a bombastic leader. Full of energy. Full of courage. And he was the only parent I had. He wanted so much for me, expected me to follow in his footsteps. First in the Fist, then as a commander, then in the city.”

“That’s a lot of expectation to put on a child.”

“Hmm.”

“It sounds like he’d be disappointed if you didn’t perform exactly as he wanted?”

“That’s a rather uncharitable way of putting it.”

“Inaccurate?”

“Perhaps not.” He sighed. “But surely all parents want the best for their children?”

“I think most loving ones do,” I said thoughtfully. “But not all have specific milestones that their children must hit, or they’ll be upset. Or disappointed, or angry.”

“What was your mother like?”

I smiled, remembering her. “She was sweet,” I said. “Very fond of cuddles, although some days she’d be a little overwhelmed by touch, if her work had been intense that day. When I was young, she’d cuddle with me before she started work, and tell me a story. Or read a book. Then tuck me into our bed to sleep. I think those are my favourite memories of her.”

Wyll’s face was a little sad, and I stroked his back slowly. “Did she have ambitions for you?” he asked.

I thought about that. “She wanted me to be happy and healthy, more than anything else. But then... there weren’t many options open to us, here. She wanted me to stay at school, and learn useful skills, so I’d be able to make a living, at least.”

“I... can’t imagine a childhood so free of... restrictions.”

“But your father gave you time to be a child and play, right?”

“Well. He was often busy, so I’d often sneak off to do my own thing. I was often with tutors, or sparring, though.”

“It sounds a rather cold existence,” I said. I didn’t want to push him, but gods, I wished he’d recognise that his relationship with his father had its negatives. Quite a few of them, in my admittedly biased opinion.

“It... was,” he said, rather unwillingly, I thought. “When I discovered lovemaking with friends... hells. I dove straight in. Being held, feeling loved... it was amazing. Until I got burnt. Over and over again.”

“Ahh.”

“Hmm. Just found a key to understanding me, did you?” he said, drawing away a little to smile at me.

“More your early reactions,” I said. “And the dichotomy you mentioned once. About chastity or debauchery, no middle ground.”

“Did you ever worry about disappointing your mother?”

I thought about that. “While she was alive? Not really. After she died, and I was essentially whoring myself for food... I hoped she couldn’t see me then, from the afterlife. She’d have been so upset to see me living like that, loving someone like Jurgen. And I knew it.”

“What do you think she’d think of you now?”

I smiled, a memory of my mother’s face coming to mind. “I think... she’d be proud. Of everything. She’d love what we’ve done here. She’d be curious about the Healing Hole. But... I think she’d watch you and I together, and be most proud of that.”

“Of you and I?”

I nodded. “She’d have loved you. I think she would have been wary of you, at the start. A human, and a member of the ruling class in Baldur’s Gate. Same as some of her clients. She’d have worried that you’d treat me as a passing fancy, and break my heart.”

“Hmm. Half right, to my eternal regret.”

I kissed his forehead. “But then... I think if she saw us together like this, she’d be so happy. To see me with someone who loves me so fiercely, and so gently, all in one.”

“She sounds so sweet.”

“She was,” I said. “You know... I hadn’t thought of it like this before, but I think she did the same sort of work that I do. Oddly enough. She didn’t tell me much about her work, obviously, but she seemed to spend a lot of time cuddling with her clients, more than sleeping with them. Judging from some remarks I overheard from the other whores. As though they hired her for some mortal kindness and care, more than as a whore. Mortal connections were important to her. She was the peacekeeper of the place. Always stepping into arguments and calming everyone down.”

“So, mindhealing, in a sense?”

I nodded. “In her own way.”

“I’m feeling oddly envious,” he confessed. “I wish I’d known my mother. I wonder if she’d have been like yours.”

“Not many mothers are, I think.”

“Hmm. You know, you’ve never spoken of your father.”

I noted the gentle change in topic. He still wasn’t ready to explore his relationship with his parents in too much depth. “I don’t know who he was,” I said. “My mother wouldn’t say anything about him. Said that he might have contributed to my physical essence, but he had nothing to do with my heart or soul.”

“Sounds mysterious.”

“I always assumed he was a casual fling. That he scarpered as soon as my mother announced her pregnancy.”

“What a fool,” Wyll said. “Missing out on getting to know you. I can’t imagine my life without you anymore.”

“Rather full of tentacles, I’d imagine,” I said, grinning.

“Hmm. Ignoring the fear of turning into an illithid, I mean. Meeting you, joining our group. It quite literally changed my life.”

“Mine too. I’ve found healing with you that I never even realised I needed.”

He threw an arm across my chest and squeezed. "I love you."

"It's interesting to look at other relationships through the lens of the three circles, though, isn't it?" I said, returning to the previous topic. "My mother was definitely an emotional relationship. And physical. Lots of kind words and hugs. She taught me a few things, like metalwork, but she was definitely more about the other two."

"And my father was all about the intellectual connection. They sound like polar opposites."

"I'm a little surprised you and I have meshed together so well," I confessed. "Given the disparities in our backgrounds, our upbringings."

"And yet, not long before we met, we were living rather similar lives, weren't we? Traipsing around the countryside. I, fighting devils and goblins. You, fighting disease and death."

"Huh. I hadn't thought of it like that. As though we met in the middle."

"A pity we never met, back then. I wonder if we would have gotten along, had we not been forced together."

I chuckled. "I thought you were nice enough when we met, though a bit of a show-off."

"Oh. Your first view of me must have been intense. Jumping down off that wall like a hero of old!" He laughed. "I'll admit, my flair for the dramatic sometimes gets the best of me."

"I absolutely adore it, love," I said. "I was wary because I thought that was all there was to you. Just a showy display with a hollow heart. How wrong I was."

"Hmm. The Blade persona is a little strong, I'll grant. I suppose I'll have to find a new one, if I take up this life Father's offering."

"Do you worry that you'll just end up in a never-ending cycle of seeking your father's approval?" I asked. "If you let him propose you for Grand Duke?"

He stilled, thoughtfulness etched on his face. "Perhaps I am," he said slowly. "Here I am, decades of experience behind me, and I'm still seeking my father's approval above all else, aren't I?"

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. This was a point I thought he needed to explore before he made a decision, or either choice could quickly end in disaster. "That had occurred to me."

"And you don't think I should?"

"When we're children," I said slowly, trying to tease out my thought to make it clear, "we seek our parents' approval because they're our moral compass and our primary teacher about the world. When we're adults, though, we should have our own compass, our own ways of learning what we need to. We shouldn't be relying on a single person for that. And sometimes, when we forge our own paths, our parents will disapprove, because it's not what they would have done. But we're not them, and we shouldn't try to be."

“Being just like my father used to be my only desire in life,” Wyll said, pensive.

“But now you see the differences between you, and the flaws that you don’t want to emulate.”

“Flaws?” Wyll asked, startled.

I bit my lip. I didn’t want to list out his father’s flaws for him. “Everyone has flaws,” I said instead. “Sweetheart, your father might have strengths that you don’t – but you have strengths that he doesn’t, too.”

“Like what?”

“Keep in mind I haven’t known your father long?”

“I’ll try to keep the offence-taking to a minimum,” he said, smiling up at me.

“Empathy. Warmth. You see the little people, everywhere. You notice them and care for them.”

“And my father doesn’t?”

I frowned. “A look at the Fist here tells me something of the sort, at least. They’re corrupt. If someone wants justice from the Flaming Fist, they must pay for it. The poor... they can’t afford justice.”

“And my father’s ultimately to blame for that, not Gortash?”

“The Fist’s reputation long predates Gortash’s rise to power.”

“Hmm.”

“I suppose it’s difficult to stay warm and caring when you have an entire city to govern, though,” I said, trying to imagine the scope of the challenge. “It must be easier to switch off emotions and detach yourself a bit.”

“Lucky I have you by my side, if I choose to stay and follow in his footsteps,” he said. “I can’t imagine you ever turning cold. You would be by my side, wouldn’t you?”

I tightened my arms around him. “Love, whatever we choose to do, we do it together. I won’t follow you blindly, but I won’t abandon you, either. You’re mine, Wyll Ravengard.”

“Mmm,” he said, his eyes falling closed. “Say that again.”

“You’re mine, sweetheart,” I said, laying a hand on his jaw and stroking his cheek gently. “Mine. Until the day you tell me otherwise, you’re mine. Body, heart, soul, and future. I lay claim to them all. Till the mountains crumble and the seas turn to dust. And beyond. You’re mine.”

“Why does that make me feel so at peace?”

“One of the dangers of being a mindhealer is the temptation to think we know others’ motivations.”

He chuckled and opened his eyes, watching me with a fond look on his face. “Is that your way of saying that you think you know exactly why?”

“Mmm. Do you want to hear it, and see if I’m right or wrong?”

“Certainly.”

“Your relationship with your father was the most important thing in your life all through your early years, when we learn all of our deepest lessons about life. And then suddenly, that relationship was severed when he threw you out of the city.”

“Ah. And then you tell me you’re never leaving my side.”

I nodded.

“And I feel secure. At peace. Because I trust you to... hells. Not do what my father did.” He stayed quiet for a while, a faraway look on his face. “I trust you to not do what I did to you. More of the same. Drawing away, leaving, when angry and disappointed.”

I felt a wave of anxiety at the thought. Gods, I hated being abandoned.

“I... think I just realised something,” he said slowly. “That I handle conflict badly, like my father does. At least, conflict with those closest to me. He... he handles conflict well as the diplomat, the duke. But as a father, perhaps... yes. If I upset him, he was withdrawn and cold.”

“Is that why it upset you so much?” I asked, seized by a thought. “When you came back from your time away, and I was closed off from you? Defensive?”

“Huh. Perhaps. Although also because... hells, Dash, you felt like a different person. And I suddenly realised that I had done that. That I’d made you change your reactions to me because you didn’t want any more pain from me. That I’d accidentally ripped you to pieces. Darling, it wasn’t just that you’d changed how you responded to me. It was realising that you’d done it because I hurt you so profoundly.”

I blinked away tears. The past was done and healed – I didn’t need to be crying over it anymore.

“Hey,” he said, his voice suddenly gentle. “Don’t hide how you feel from me, dearest. Please.”

“I’m regretting bringing that up,” I said. “I don’t want to feel old pain over again.”

He sat up and held out his arms. “Come here? I want to hold you and comfort you.”

I thought about telling him I was fine... and sighed. Clearly I wasn’t. Instead, I sat between his legs, side pressed against his front, head on his shoulder. “Thank you,” I said. “You’re

sweet.”

“My darling,” he said, stroking my hair. “I love you so much. You light up my very life.”

“Same, my stars.”

“What would make you feel better?”

I relaxed against him, breathing in that scent of sulphur and sweat, and thought about it.

“Kisses,” I said eventually. “Nothing too intense. Just... ground me back in the present. What I have right now. The best of my life.”

“Come lie down with me.”

We lay down, and his lips touched mine, caressing gently, over and over. I closed my eyes and let myself focus solely on that sensation, how he felt against me, the feeling of warmth and safety in his arms, the odd sense that nothing could go wrong in my world when his lips were moving over mine.

“Mmm,” I said eventually. “I feel good. Thank you, love.”

“It’s hardly a hardship to kiss you,” he said, eyes crinkling with amusement. “I could kiss you for an eternity.”

Deliberations

I woke the next morning to odd sparkles obscuring part of my field of vision. Huh. A stray Blindness spell must have just grazed me the previous afternoon. I stretched and checked for muscle pain – nothing. Just a weird aftereffect, then. I got up, meditated, and retrieved breakfast from downstairs. The sparkles faded, and I could see properly again. Excellent. That had been annoying.

“What’s on for today?” Wyll asked, joining me at the small table. “Healing Hole soon? Then are we hunting down something evil, or taking some time off?”

“Why don’t we hunt down something nice, for once?” I asked. “If you could do anything you wanted this afternoon, what would it be?”

He raised an eyebrow and grinned at me.

“Apart from that,” I said, laughing. “Not that staying in this room with you doesn’t sound appealing, mind you.”

“Hmm. You know... I think I know just what we need. Can I surprise you?”

I wasn’t quite as fond of surprises as Wyll was, but the idea of having some relaxation time I didn’t need to plan and think about? Right now, that sounded wonderful. “Wonderful, sweetheart,” I said, enjoying the excitement on his face.

I drained my coffee and stood. “Right. I’ll get dressed, and we can head off? I just need to check in on Shadowheart first.”

“Perfect,” he said, taking a bite of a croissant. “See you in the common area soon?”

Shadowheart was awake and eating when I entered the common rooms, her face closed off. Karlach sat beside her, uncharacteristically quiet, drinking coffee. I winced. Karlach with extra caffeine in her system? She didn’t seem to need it in the slightest.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Shadowheart, sitting down on the floor nearby.

“Sick of people asking me how I’m feeling,” she shot back.

“Fair,” I said, shrugging. “I’m asking to see if there’s anything you want to talk through, I guess.”

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine. Thank you, but – I just need time, I think. To grieve and let go. What they did...” She shuddered.

I nodded. “Let me know if there’s anything I can, or you need to talk. Day or night. It’s fine. I love you.”

“Thanks,” she said. But I noticed that it was Karlach that she inched towards for comfort.

“Hey, darling,” Wyll said, walking into the lounge area. “Ready to go?”

I nodded and stood, feeling a wave of mild nausea as I did. Hmm. Maybe the breakfast pastries were a bit dodgy this morning.

“Are you feeling unwell at all?” I asked him.

“I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Nothing important.”

When we arrived at the shop, two people were waiting in line out the front.

“Be right with you,” I said, unlocking the door and heading upstairs to open the doors to the patio. The weather was nice; we’d want a breeze coming through as the day warmed up.

The first patient was simple; a gash on his leg from a dropped saw. It was jagged but shallow, so I cleaned it out, added an antiseptic salve, and bandaged it lightly. “Keep it dry for a couple of days,” I said. “If it gets wet, come back for a new bandage. Too much moisture in a wound can cause infection.”

The man left, and my next patient came in, cradling her left arm in her right. “Broken?” I asked.

“Just sprained, I think,” she said. “I fell. In the kitchen. Stupid of me.”

I took her arm and felt carefully down the two bones of her forearm. She winced when I reached her wrist, but the bones felt fine under my fingers. However, it was starting to swell.

“Looks like a sprain,” I said. “I’ll bandage it, and try to limit your use of it, if you can. I’ll give you a sling to use. But first we need to get this swelling down a bit.” I wrapped it tightly in rags, filled a large bowl from the roof cistern, and sat her down with her wrist in the water, where the breeze from the open doors would cool the water a little.

“I wish I had ice to use,” I said to Wyll, who was rolling bandages he’d taken from the clothesline upstairs. “It would make such a difference sometimes.” I pressed a hand to my temple – all the things I needed to worry about were making my head hurt.

“Headache, dear?” he asked.

“Mmm. Too many things to remember and think about.”

“You could let me think about some of them. You don’t need to do everything alone, you know.”

I smiled at him. “I’m still not used to having help, love.”

“Independence is a fine trait, but not when you’re drowning.”

“Mmm,” I said, mixing a pain relief tea for my patient. “Fair point. I wonder if something was wrong with those pastries this morning. My stomach is churning.”

“I don’t know – I’m still fine. Nausea *and* the headache?” he asked. “Are you sure you’re not coming down with something?”

I frowned. “Not that I can – oh,” I said, as puzzle pieces slowly slotted into place. “I’m an utter nincompoop. It’s a migraine.”

“Ahhh. That would explain it. What do you need?”

I indicated the dry herbs in front of me. “Funnily enough, this. I’ll package most of it for the patient, but I was going to brew her a cup to drink now.”

“So two cups’ worth?”

I nodded, pain spiking through my head. “Ow.”

Wyll kissed my forehead. “I’ll handle it, darling. Go sit down. Or lie down. Something.”

I sat down against the wall, watching Wyll make a pot of tea, then wrap the herbal tea carefully in brown paper.

“Are there instructions to write down?” he asked me.

“Just what you did,” I said. “Add about a tablespoon to boiling water. Steep for five minutes, then drink.”

Wyll nodded, wrote that down, and stuck the piece of paper to the package with a dab of glue. He poured out the tea into two mugs, took one to my patient, and brought another to me. He stepped outside for a moment, then came back in, smiling.

“Only one person outside, and it wasn’t urgent,” he said. “I asked them to return tomorrow.”

“That’s rather high-handed of you,” I objected.

“I know you,” he said, sitting down next to me. “You’re likely to overwork yourself and make things worse. Darling, I’m not sure you’re thinking very well right now. It took you candlemarks to figure out what was wrong.”

“Huh. Migraines can do that. Fine. You’re forgiven.” I drained the mug, still slightly annoyed, but recognising the truth of his argument. I was hardly going to help patients if my thinking capacity was diminished.

I went to check on my one remaining patient. Her wrist was still swollen, but it wasn’t much worse – which was about all I could hope for without ice or snow to dunk it in. I unwrapped and dried it. “I’m dabbing on some boneset balm,” I said, doing my best to be gentle, knowing I was hurting her regardless. “I’ll give you a pot to take home. Then I’ll wrap it

properly. I'll give you a sling, too. I know it's difficult, but try to rest it in the sling as much as possible. The less you use it, the faster it will heal." I followed my words with actions, bandaging her wrist a little more loosely, but using a couple of bandages to give it more support.

"Thank you," she said, proffering a couple of silver coins. "I'll try."

"Well," Wyll said when she'd left. "Do you think she really fell?"

"More to the point, was she pushed?" I asked. "That thought occurred to me too. Not much I can do to help unless she asks, though."

"Why?"

"Because there's nowhere to go," I said, shrugging. "Her wife, husband, parent – whoever it might be – won't let her out of their control easily, if that's what's going on. And with so many refugees, there just aren't enough safe places to go around."

"That's... monstrous."

"Yes. Also reality, sadly."

"How are you feeling?"

I turned to close the door and stumbled slightly.

"Oh, you little fool," Wyll said, voice warm. "Upstairs. Go lie down. I'll clean up here and come up to check on you."

"*Fine.*" I walked upstairs, drew the curtain, and lay down on the bed, closing my eyes. As soon as darkness hit, I realised the light had felt as though it were stabbing my eyeballs. Ugh. I really was slow-thinking right now. Clattering noises came from downstairs, echoing through my skull, and I winced.

"Here, darling," Wyll said, placing a steaming cup next to the bed. "Willow bark and chamomile. Did I get that right?"

"How the hells did you know that?" I asked, picking it up and sniffing at it. It smelt exactly like those ingredients.

"It's difficult to love a healer and not pick up a few helpful tips," he said. "*Willow bark for pain. Chamomile to make it taste less like an ogre's arse,*" in a pitch that sounded unnervingly like me.

I snorted, then regretted it as it reverberated through my head. "Thanks, love." I sipped slowly at the hot liquid.

"Welcome," he said, smiling at me. "Feels like the least I can do for the hero of the hour. Word is spreading about our defeat of Cazador."

I put down the mug and lay back down. “Come cuddle me, sweetheart? We might need to put off your surprise for another day though, sorry.”

“Already done,” he assured me, climbing onto the bed and lying down. “Come here, darling.” He held out an arm.

I rested my head on his shoulder, cuddling close to his side. “This feels better already, love.”

“Sappy bastard,” he said, his voice soft. He spread a wet rag over my head, and I groaned. “Better?”

“Mmm.”

“Would you like me to tell you stories?”

“Please.”

I closed my eyes and let Wyll’s soothing, quiet voice wash over me, lulling me into relaxation and sleep.

When I woke, what light there was in the room had changed, and I could hear gentle movements downstairs. I stretched, then moved my head experimentally. Still a slight ache, but nothing like the stabbing pain it had been earlier. I sat up, and noticed a full mug sitting on the bedside table. I smiled. Wyll had left tea for me. I sniffed it – same as the last batch. Chamomile and the bitter bite of willow bark.

I drained the lukewarm brew and stood, swaying slightly. Hmm. Still not back to normal, but better than I’d expect from a migraine aftermath. My thinking didn’t feel as foggy as I’d have expected, either.

“Afternoon, gorgeous,” Wyll said, smiling at me with broom in hand. He’d been sweeping.

I chuckled. “Here we are trying to decide if you should be a duke, and you’re performing menial labour for me.”

“Ha! If I’m ever too good to sweep out your shop for you, please smack me over the head until I come to my senses.”

“Thanks for the tea, love. I’m feeling better than expected.”

“Must have been the heaping spoonsful of love I added to every mug,” he said, and I laughed.

“I thought it tasted surprisingly sweet.”

“So. What’s up for this evening?” he asked. “I want you to rest up, though. No harebrained exploits, please.”

“You’d have made an excellent healer, you know,” I said, feeling a little grouchy. “You’re very good at the authoritarian decrees.”

“Hmm. I wonder whether that skill would help me as ruler,” he said, smirking a little. “But I’m best at looking after you, darling.”

“Duke of my heart!” I said, with an extravagant bow. I straightened feeling a tiny bit dizzy – damn. I really did need to take it easy.

“Hmmpf. I can see that becoming too big for my britches will never be a problem with you around,” he said, eyes dancing.

I grinned at him. “How about we get something to eat on the way back to the Elfsong? Then perhaps a beer? It might settle down the last of these collywobbles.”

“Done,” he said, stowing the broom in its cupboard and locking it. “I’ll just make the bed upstairs, and we can go.”

“I can do that!”

“But you won’t. Ridiculous creature.”

I sighed. Being in a relationship was requiring some mental adjustments I hadn’t expected.

Back at the Elfsong, Wyll insisted on making another mug of tea for me.

“You’re spoiling me,” I said, leaning against him, sitting on our bed.

“By making sure you’re as well as possible?” he asked. “You’re easily spoilt.”

“Ha! Shall we talk through your options? I feel much more able to think now.”

“You’re sure?”

“*Yes*, mother.”

“Fine. But drink your tea. So. What do you think?”

“I’d rather explore what you think, first. What are the positives to letting your father put you forward as Grand Duke?”

“Assuming he’s successful?”

“Assuming.”

“Hmm. Insight. Courage. Justice. Strategy. These are principles I learned from him; and principles I could use to lead Baldur’s Gate into its next chapter. I trained for this all of my early life.”

“Seamless, strong leadership might well prove an important factor in the recovery and reconstruction period especially,” I observed.

“Mmm. Though I doubt Father and I will stop butting heads simply because we’re on the same path.”

“Do you think he can step back and allow you to take the leadership? After so many years at the reins?”

Wyll shrugged. “I think it might be difficult. But – Father is weary. This ordeal shook him. If he’s so ready to step down, he might be content to simply let me be.”

“Right. That’s the first problem.” I said. “What are some other positives to this proposal?”

Wyll frowned. “The people already know me, I suppose. Not in this form, of course, but by reputation. They know I care for the people of the coast. They will trust me not to be another Gortash.”

I nodded. “Good. Anything else?”

“Being a Ravengard will help. My father is widely respected, if not loved. In that sense, I’m not just known for myself. I’m also a known quantity through him. People will assume I’ll reign similarly to my father.”

“Better the devil you know?” I said.

His mouth quirked in a slight smile. “Quite.”

“Anything else?”

“I can’t think of anything,” he said.

“I can think of one huge point that you’ve missed,” I said, taking his hand, seeing his eyebrow twitch upwards in almost offended enquiry. “How about – you have a city that’s recently been flooded with refugees from Elturel, and you, though human at heart, look more like them than any other patriar?”

Wyll frowned.

“When I grew up in Baldur’s Gate,” I said carefully, “do you know how many people in power were gnomes?”

Wyll shook his head, the frown on his face not shifting.

“None. We were all avoiding the city like the plague or staying very carefully out of sight to avoid calling the wrong sort of attention to ourselves. And you know what people saw when they looked at me? They didn’t see... a person who could become powerful or a leader. They saw someone who would skulk in the shadows or betray the city.”

Wyll’s mouth relaxed as he started to grasp my point, but the furrow in his brow remained. He was still straining to understand.

“Think how the druids talked about the tieflings. Outsiders. Parasites. Trouble. They had trouble seeing them as important; as... worthy. Think what it would mean to the tieflings. To have such a shining example in front of them; to be able to point to you and say that being touched by the infernal does not make one lesser or evil. That it can make one heroic, or a leader, and *good* .”

“Oh.” Wyll looked stunned. I don’t think he’d ever considered that his new form could actually be a power for good.

“What are the negatives?” I asked, moving on. “Compared to Gortash, I can’t imagine you have many egregious flaws.”

“I’m inexperienced in governing. My father trained me in the ideology and practices of shrewd government, but... that was a long time ago, and none of it was practical application.”

“But you’ve led forces in battle and helped to adjudicate squabbles around the Coast, right?”

“Hmm... I suppose so. But I think you have far more expertise at those things than I.”

“And your father and I would be with you,” I said, shrugging. “You forget that whatever you do, you don’t have to do alone. I won’t follow along behind, passive and meek. I *will* be a partner in your life endeavours, love, and I expect the same from you.”

Wyll made a face. “A valid point,” he granted. “I think I’ve been alone and reliant on my own resources far too long – I forget that that’s not my life anymore.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m ill-inclined to compromise. In fact, my father and I fought over that exact thing. That politics required him to work with people who were evil, or selfish.”

“Haven't we done the same thing?”

“Hmm. Some of our allies – temporary or otherwise – have been a little unconventional, I’ll grant.”

“So you’re not really that inclined against compromise. At least, I’ve never found you to be that way. Unless you count goblins.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure how to feel about that.”

“How would you rate the Blade's effectiveness in creating change against your father's?”

“Since meeting you? I think I might rival him, if I took credit for everyone's work. Before that... well. A few villages saved from goblins... for a while, anyway. It's possible they're all razed by now, which lessens the sense of accomplishment somewhat. But...” he sighed. “My father is a champion for good just as I’ve always striven to be. And he has led the entire Sword Coast to a better future... well, until the Absolute. Your point is that sometimes being the solitary champion is the idealistic but naive option, isn’t it?”

“That’s... a matter of opinion. Some might say pure motives will win, eventually. That the legend of the Blade of Frontiers might inspire people long after they forget a single grand duke of Baldur’s Gate.”

“That’s a lot of might.”

“The Fist is hardly a group with a reputation for being upstanding citizens, either.”

“Hmm.”

“How about alternatives?” I asked. “You seemed to have at least an idea of what you want to do after all this, if you don’t take this path. What is it?”

“Basically, what I was doing before – but as my own person,” Wyll said, shrugging. “I don’t think I can be the Blade of Frontiers anymore. But I could still do good out there in the wilderness. Cleaning up after the horrors unleashed by the Absolute. It will be... terrible out there, for a while. Especially in what used to be the shadow-cursed lands. A lot of rebuilding will be needed.”

I nodded, thinking.

“Whatever I do, though,” he said, taking my hand. “I want you by my side. I want a partner in life. Not just...” he sighed. “You’re right. I keep talking as though this is my life, my decision to make; but it’s not. It’s our life; our decision. I want to make it together. Hells, I want to be by your side. I’m sorry if I sound all...”

“Duke’s son?” I asked, raising an eyebrow and poking him with my free hand to show I was joking around.

He smiled in relief. “Quite. So tell me – what do you want to do?”

“Hang on. Let’s finish going through this, then we can focus on me. Alright?”

“As long as you’re aware you’re important here.”

I nodded, my heart warming. *Gods, this man.*

“Do you think you can help as many people as the Blade as you could as grand duke?” I asked.

“A farmstead here, a village there – perhaps. Probably not. Whatever I could do would be a mere drop compared to all the work that will be needed.”

“Important work, though.”

“I wouldn’t be rebuilding or planting fields,” he said slowly. “I’d be... coating myself with more and more blood. In a very good cause, mind you. The best, I’d venture to say.”

“Are there others who could hunt devils with the sort of skill you’ll wield after you shed your pact powers?” I asked.

“Well, there’s Karlach. Not that she’ll be caught dead going into Avernus again. All of our group, for that matter, could do that work if they wanted to. But realistically – not now, but maybe there should be.”

“Like a school for monster-slayers?”

“That could be an intriguing proposition.”

“What would serve the people of the Sword Coast more right now – a monster-slayer, or a strong and welcoming Baldur’s Gate?”

“Huh. There’s value in both, isn’t there? But wielding a sword, satisfying though it is... it’s not going to have half the effect of a better, happier, safer city nearby.”

I stayed silent and let him think it through. Yes, I had my opinions – but I also had a lot of trust in my beloved.

“I’d been thinking of this as a return to a life of privilege and wealth, or a continuation of my life of dedication to the people,” he said slowly. “But you’re talking about both choices as being lives of service, aren’t you? Just different in scope. And I need to decide where I can do the greater good.”

“And where you’re better suited,” I said. “Where you *want* to be is important too.”

“I want to be out there,” he said immediately. “But... I wonder if that’s because it’s familiar, and simple. And there are no complicated ties out there to confuse and dismay me. Which seems a terrible reason to choose it.”

“That’s a good point.”

“Then, there’s you. You wanted to live here, in the city. To stop your life of wandering. If I went back to my previous life... either you’d give it up, give up the Healing Hole, to come with me, or we’d be separated a lot of the time. I don’t like either of those options.”

“Hmm. I did tell you that I want you above all else, sweetheart.”

“Still. Tell me. What do you want?”

I took a deep breath. “For myself?”

He nodded.

“I still want the Healing Hole. And a community around me. But if our adventures taught me anything, it’s that it’s not a place that makes a community – it’s people, with a shared purpose. I... think I could be happy out on the road now. With you.”

“Hmm.”

“But seeing the House of Grief today, I realised something. The mindhealing I learnt at the monastery... no one seems to offer it here in Baldur’s Gate. And so many people are in so

much pain inside. That's how the Sharrans grew so much power. I suppose I could do that anywhere – gods know the villages around here probably need something of the sort too. But... I grew up here, and the need is so, so great here. Maybe I could gather others who know the lore. One of the tenets I learnt early: *Go where the need is greatest; help where the helpers are few.* ' That feels like Baldur's Gate just now.'

“A healing hall for the mind and body?”

“The Open Hand might have something to say against that.”

Wyll's face hardened. “Then they should have taken more care to keep their hands ‘open’ when refugees flooded the city. I know their head priest was killed, but the attitudes I saw were appalling. Besides: if there's a need they aren't filling, they can hardly complain if someone else steps in.”

“Hmm.”

“It sounds as though you think I should take the offer of being put forward as grand duke, dearest,” Wyll said, his face softening again.

“That... would be my opinion, yes. Not that I'd be distraught if you choose otherwise. I'm still not thrilled at the idea of sharing the highest power in the city. In some ways, I don't really want it. The attention, the envy, the... criticism. It won't be easy.”

Wyll's mouth drew down into sadder lines.

“But,” I said, “I love the idea of taking on a new challenge with you, beloved. And striving to pull this city through its troubles into a better future. I think we could do it – together. And I think we probably owe it to the people to at least try.”

“Dearest.”

“Mmm?”

“You're just proving what an excellent grand duke's consort you'd make. Unless I can talk them into making you the grand duke; then I can be the consort.”

“Heavens forbend.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking my empty mug and putting it on the bedside table. “For being honest, but also helping me to think through our options. Calmly and rationally. No shouting. No telling me that I should already know who I am and what destiny I have in store.”

“As if I would,” I said, stretching up to kiss his cheek. “You know I trust you to make the right decisions when you have everything you need to make them.”

“Mmm. I suppose the Mizora incident gave me a few doubts about my capacity to make choices under pressure.”

“Hopefully there won’t be too many demons kidnapping your father for a ransom of your eternal soul, though.”

“Ha! I’d hope not.”

“May I kiss you?”

He bent and touched his lips to mine, and the familiar, dear sulphur-tinted warmth washed into me. “Mmm...” I said, drawing away. “I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to having you so near, so... touchable.”

“I hope I never get used to it,” Wyll said. “Gods, you bring new depth and joy into my life every day. I want only to be the better person you already see in me.”

I closed my eyes and relaxed against him. There would be time soon for more killing, and struggle, and a new order. But right now, we could take a few moments just to enjoy each other.

Wet morning

I woke to a grey, stormy pre-dawn. Rain beat against the windowpanes, and a cold draft seemed to swirl around the room. I shivered and pulled down the covers, then reconsidered. I had my very own bedwarmer nearby... and it would be difficult to complete the day's planned tasks in heavy rain. Maybe we could take the day off instead.

I slipped carefully out of bed, put on a robe, and went downstairs to order coffee and pastries for everyone. I left the majority in the main suite, and took the rest to our private room. I poured a mug for each of us, left them on a bedside table, and then, finally, took off the robe and got back into bed. Wyll, as usual, was sprawled across the bed, tangled in a blanket, face down. I didn't quite understand how that was comfortable with his horns, but it seemed to work for him.

I lay down next to him and fitted myself against his body, drawing a blanket over both of us. Gods, he was warm. It was like putting on a shirt that had been left to dry in front of a roaring fire. He stirred, muttered something that might have been "Love you," and snored.

A while later, I woke to Wyll sitting up and slurping coffee.

"My saviour," he said, smiling down at me. "You spoil me. Coffee and pastry without ever having to leave bed. I'll grow fat and lazy."

I grinned. "I have some ideas on how you can avoid such a horrible fate."

He put down the mug. "Oh?"

"Mmm. You need regular workouts."

"But where would I find someone willing to train with me on such a demanding schedule?"

"That is a terrible dilemma."

He eyed me. "You said you have some ideas?"

"Tie me up."

His face flared with heat, then dimmed. "You know I don't go in for debauchery."

"Is it really debauchery if you're with the one you love?"

He looked... uncertain.

"I won't push if you honestly don't want it," I said, resting a hand on his knee. "But... love, I've seen the look on your face when you have me trapped underneath you. Part of you likes it when I'm feeling helpless and lost in what you're doing to me. I'd... like to explore that."

“But doesn’t that make you remember... things? Doesn’t it upset you?” he asked, turning to lie down, curled around my sitting form. “I don’t want to do that to you.”

I thought about how to express this next bit. “When there’s trust, as there is between you and I, it can be like... replaying the memories, but having control. Knowing that no harm will actually come. Rewriting them, so they have less power. I’ve... heard it can be healing. And quite shockingly sexy, as well.”

Wyll nodded, thoughtful. “I think I see. I’m not sure, though. It’s...”

“Too much like your own experiences?”

He nodded.

I felt a flare of disappointment, but let it go to be felt another time. “I love you, gorgeous giant man,” I said, and bent down to kiss his cheek.

“You’re not mad?”

I laughed. “Look at us, beloved. We found each other, against all odds. We’ve survived, against even more ridiculous odds. Your father somehow approves of me. We’re betrothed. And as a result, I have a wonderful, fierce, passionate man in my bed, in whose veins runs poetry instead of blood. What do I have to be angry about?”

He uncurled and pulled me down beside him. “May I kiss you, dearest?” he whispered.

I melted into his arms, and his lips touched mine, and parted. His forked tongue slipped slowly over my lips, raising twin trails of fire. I tensed, pushing into him, wanting more, and he deepened the kiss, moving a hand to my hip. “May I touch your dick?” he asked, and I nodded, body flaring with desire.

“Gods, I love how you touch me,” I murmured.

He turned away for a moment, and when he kissed me, his fingers slid around my cock, warm and slick with oil. I gasped. One moment nimble fingers danced in patterns over the skin – at another, his whole hand slid slowly up and down.

“Dearest,” he asked, and I tried to focus my eyes back on him. I was having some trouble. “I want to suck it.”

I nodded. “Gods, Wyll... I might die, but I’ll die happy.”

He grinned, the happy grin that used to be so rare. He bent down and slid his mouth over my cock.

I gasped. Would I ever get used to the heat, and the feel of that forked tongue moving over such sensitive skin?

He looked up to check on me.

I nodded. "I think I'm going to lose the use of words soon."

He reached up to take my hand in his, then turned his attention back to my loins. He sucked my cock further into his mouth. I could feel the ridges on the top of his mouth on the tip of my cock. Then the texture changed to the spongy back of his mouth, and the tight depths of his throat.

"Gods, WYLL..."

He backed off, then pulled my cock in again, exhaling hot breath over my balls as my cock went down his throat. I lost myself in sensation as he continued, warmth and wetness and tightness combining with the slide of his lips and tongue. The tip of one horn grazed my thigh. It should have been an irritation, but instead it contributed to the flood of sensation and made me groan.

As the crest approached, I fought back to rationality and stroked his hair.

"Love, I'm close..." I said, expecting him to back off. He squeezed my hand and continued, and I remembered something he'd said a while ago: *Someday, I'm going to do that until you spill your seed right down my throat*. The mere memory took me over the edge, and I let it take me, thrill me, while I revelled in doing exactly what he wanted – my cock shoved deep down in his throat, past the point of swallowing, emptying my seed in warm spurts where he could only accept and receive, one of my hands gripping his, the other grabbing one of his horns for purchase.

I let go of the horn, dimly realising I might have crossed a line, and collapsed back against the pillows. "Gods, Wyll," I said. "Are you alright? I didn't hurt you?"

He crawled up to collapse beside me, mouth wet and smeared, eyes soft. "Never better, dearest one. Although grabbing my horn took me by surprise."

"Mmm. Me too. I'm sorry. That feels like something I should have asked about."

"I liked it," he said, sounding surprised.

I turned my head to look at him. "Really? Hmm."

"Why hmm?"

I just raised my eyebrows and let him see rude thoughts swimming in my eyes.

"Oh," he said, looking both uncertain and intrigued. "Hmm."

"Will you kiss me?" I asked.

He turned to take a handkerchief from the bedside table, and I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "I'm all..." he said, gesturing helplessly.

"Maybe I like you all... messy," I said.

His eyes flared with heat, and his wet mouth was on mine, hungry. He tasted mostly of our shared sweat, and that ever-present faint hint of sulphur. His cock pushed against my leg, demanding, and I broke away to take a breath.

“Gods, I love feeling your cock so hard,” I told him.

He slid himself slowly along my hip, watching my face as I gasped. “Why does that undo you so?” he asked, looking curious, but not stopping.

“No idea,” I said, and drew him down into another kiss.

“Hmm...” he said a while later. “I have an idea. But – do you trust me?”

“With my very soul,” I said, touching his cheek. “What is it?”

“I want you on your stomach,” he said. “I want to play with your arse. Nothing for you to worry about,” he said quickly, seeing a flash of concern on my face. “I’ll ask first. At every point. I promise.”

I thought about it, and felt a growing curiosity. I trusted this man. He’d trusted me. I wanted to see – feel – what he’d decide to do with me. And wasn’t this close to what I’d asked for? Hmm...

I flipped over onto my stomach, a pillow under my hips. I folded my arms and rested my head on them. I expected Wyll to start with my arse, but instead his fingers, oily again, stroked my shoulders and trailed lightly down my back, in a slow, soothing rhythm, until my muscles relaxed.

“May I touch your arse?” he asked, and I nodded, a little drowsy. His nimble fingers stroked over the cheeks of my arse, between my legs, cupping my balls in a gentle caress, brushing along the space between balls and arsehole, never quite touching it.

“Alright?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Mmm... it’s good, but I feel like you’re going very slow,” I said. Not quite a complaint.

“What would you like, dearest?” he asked.

“Touch my arsehole?” I asked, and an oil-slick thumb slid around it immediately. I gasped.

“Like this?”

“Mmm...”

He touched me with his thumb a similar way that I’d used my tongue on him once... circling, alternating with a light pressure to push the ball of his thumb just slightly into my arse. With every movement, the warmth in my lower belly grew. When I started to push back against his thumb, groaning, he stopped, and I grumbled.

“Dearest...” he said, voice soft and hesitant, “I want to slide my cock over your arse.”

I felt a flash of worry, and then a much deeper flush of arousal. “Please,” I said, voice breathy.

He moved around, and then his cock was slipping slowly over my arsehole instead of his thumb. It was larger, of course, but also harder, and – gods, those odd bumps were there for *pleasure* .

“Don’t stop,” I said, turning my head to watch him. His face was intent, teeth in his bottom lip. “Push my arse cheeks together against your cock.”

He did, and we groaned simultaneously as he moved against me. “Hells, Dash, why does this feel so good?” he asked.

“Don’t care,” I said, breathing hard. “Gods, Wyll... I want...”

“Anything, dearest,” he said, focusing on me. “What do you want?” His cock slid against me again, and decided me.

“Can we try your cock inside me? But slowly. Just a little.”

He stopped, sitting back on his heels. “Darling, why?”

I turned to stare at him. “*What?* ”

“Are you trying to make me happy?”

Shit. He thought I was asking out of duty. “Sweetheart, I want this. Because I’m hopelessly aroused by the feel of your cock on my arse. I feel ready to try. That’s all.”

He smiled a little. “You’re sure? It’s because *you* want it, not because you think I do?”

“Come here,” I said, turning onto my back, holding out my arms.

He lay down next to me, pressed against my side.

“I want to at least try having you fuck me,” I said, stroking his face. “Sweetheart, I want you. I understand if it’s too much strain, having to go slow, be careful. If you don’t want to, just say the word. I’ll drop it.”

“My darling,” he said, and pulled me into a kiss. “I just wanted to be sure.”

My eyes filled suddenly with tears. “You’re the sweetest man.”

One of his hands drifted down to my hip, stroking gently, and my body remembered what we’d interrupted. I turned to press against him, a hand on the back of his neck to get a deeper, longer kiss. He was still hard against me, and as soon as I registered that fact, arousal flooded me again.

“Love, please?”

He pushed me gently onto my back, picking up the oil and reapplying a generous amount.

“Do you have any idea how wonderfully sexy you look, doing that?” I asked.

“I have some idea,” he said, grinning at me. “Considering you’ve teased me with a similar display.”

I flushed, watching his hands move over his cock, spreading the glistening liquid over it, knowing *why* he was doing it. Lust was filling me to the point I was having trouble thinking about anything but the sight in front of me, and what I wanted.

He slid an oily finger down my cock, and I groaned as it twitched under the light touch.

“Let me kneel between your legs,” he said. “I want to see your face.”

I moved so he could do just that, trying to keep my breathing steady, but excitement was building in me – and a little anxiety. This pleasure could change to pain so easily.

He slid the very tip of his cock over my arsehole, and my back bowed before I realised what I was doing. “By all the gods of light, Wyll...”

He pushed just a little, and my hands clenched in the sheets, pleasure pulsing through me.

“Alright, darling?”

“Perfect. A little more?”

He pushed in a little more, then started to thrust very slowly, his lip caught in his teeth, face intent.

“It’s not too frustrating?”

“Darling. You feel wonderful. Stop worrying.”

I gave up and closed my eyes, breathing in light, feeling the pleasure that was building, relaxing my muscles. I hadn’t done this for so long... and never with someone like Wyll. It felt good – no pain, no fear. Just that slow slide against sensitive nerves that was sending pure pleasure flowing through me like sweet treacle.

“That’s better, sweetheart. Tell me to back off if it’s too much.”

“Gods, you have no idea how good your cock feels,” I said, eyes still closed, reaching out for his hand. He grasped it, his palm warm in mine.

He leant forward to slide into me just a little deeper, and his belly stroked my cock just as he hit new nerves inside me. Sensation pulsed through me from two places. and I cried out, pleasure turning to bliss as my whole body caught fire with the physical feelings and the arousal sparking between us.

“Hells,” he said, and I opened my eyes to see him grimacing, trying to keep control, I guessed, to fight against the urge to just shove deep inside me and spill every bit of his juices into me.

I squeezed his hand, tried out say something but only inarticulate noises came out as I started to shake, the sensations taking me over. I let go, cries falling from me as my back arched, pushing me up against him as the climax took me and shook me over and over again, seed pulsing from me, uncontrollable.

Wyll withdrew then, gasping as his cock slid against my leg, then hot juices spilled out over my thigh and belly, setting off aftershocks of my climax, making me writhe against him as he jerked.

He breathed hard, forehead on my shoulder, chest heaving. “Hells, darling,” he said, kissing my shoulder. “That was... I have no words.” He rolled over to his side and moved up to curl around me. I rested my head on his shoulder, slowly stroking his chest.

“My sweet love,” I said. “Gods. Thank you. I can’t imagine how frustrating that was for you, but it was wonderful.”

“Frustrating?” he said, laughing. “Hells. You silly gnome. Just watching your face would have been enough to send me to the heavens themselves.”

“Sweet-talker,” I said, smiling up at him.

His face turned solemn. “Darling. Every moment in your embrace is magical. Please don’t do that.”

I frowned. “Do what?”

“That thing you do, where you’re certain I’d be happier if you were different. Taller. Less you.”

I closed my eyes as the truth of his words hit me.

“I love you,” he said softly. “You bring me such joy. Such indescribable pleasure, too. I’ve never made love like this, darling. I never want for anything in your arms.”

“You’re sure of that?” I asked, still feeling deeply uncertain. How the hells could I measure up?

He sighed. “I don’t know how to convince you.”

The illithid parasite stirred in my head as he reached out mentally to me, and I let him in.

My face, close to his, so dear to his heart. The body that made his dick stir even in the middle of battle as he saw me jump past, my face alight with joy. The desire he felt whenever my hands touched him, caressed him, made him shout with pure pleasure. How he felt when my dick slid inside him, as though every movement sent him to a new heaven, and he would be lost, forever, drifting in the astral planes, in eternal bliss.

Slowly sliding his dick into me, the tightness to my arse, the worry that he'd hurt his one true love. The way my arse squeezed him as I convulsed underneath him, the intense physical pleasure mixed with a fierce joy in the look of abandonment and ecstasy on my face. If he could only keep that look on my face forever, he could die with a happy heart. Watching me climax, feeling the grip of it pulse through me around his dick, the triumph of knowing he'd brought me to this point. Feeling his own climax take him over, flooding him with bliss to match mine.

Watching his seed spill over my dark skin, slide down into the fold between loins and leg. Wishing he could start over again right away and live in this moment of pure joy forever.

“Oh, love,” I said, burying my face in his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said, voice worried. “Dash...”

“I’m alright,” I said, lifting a slightly teary but smiling face to his. “Thank you, sweetheart. I... gods. I have trouble grasping sometimes that you feel the same way about me.”

He smiled, face a little sad. “Never doubt it, darling. We won’t always be able to share ourselves mind to mind this way, the Triad willing. But I’d do anything to make you more secure in my love.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your love I was struggling with. It’s your lust. I... I guess I thought it came from your love, not... ugh. I don’t know.”

“No, I understand, I think,” he said slowly. “My new form... I think I’ve felt similarly.”

“I suppose you have,” I said.

“Except,” he pointed out, “I asked you for help, darling. I wish... that you'd ask me how I feel about you if you're feeling insecure. I want to tell you you're beautiful. That I love every centimetre of your body.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “It’s just...” I paused, trying to work out how to say it. “You’ve had this form for months. I’ve had mine for decades. And people have been telling me it’s wrong for just as long. I don’t always realise I’m doing it, I think, because it’s just background noise. Like I often don’t notice the birds singing. Those ideas are just there.”

“Hmm. Alright. I think I understand that,” he said, kissing my forehead.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” I said. “For challenging me. You make me feel so loved, when you tell me to stop being mean to myself.”

“And where do you think I learnt *that*?” he asked, grinning at me.

“Some passing vagrant, no doubt.”

“My silly darling,” he said, rolling on top of me. “Gods. I’ve laughed so much since I met you.”

I looked up at him, enjoying his weight on me and the smile on his face. "I love you," I told him, and pulled him down for another kiss.

Accidental explosions

“Speaking of vigorous workouts,” Wyll said quite a while later, “the rain seems to be clearing – and you and I haven't sparred for a couple of days. Would you like to?”

“Hmm. Snuggling up to a nice warm devil, or out in the cold, fighting,” I mused aloud. “The monkly thing to choose would be the sparring.”

“*Monkly?*” he said, laughing. “I had no idea you were so erudite.”

“Beast,” I said, poking him in the ribs, grinning to see him squirm away. “I'll make up words if I want.”

“And I shall defend to the death your terrible choice of verbiage,” he teased, eyes soft.

“My knight in... well, briefs,” I said, grinning at him. “But all this maundering is getting us nowhere. Let's spar, love.”

We dressed and climbed up to the roof. It was a little soggy in places, but good enough for sparring – it's not like enemies considerately kept battlefields dry and clear for us.

“Let's go,” I said, gesturing for Wyll to take the first strike.

He lashed out, and I ducked under his fist, coming up to land a blow on his thigh.

“Ow!” he said, grinning at me. “How am I supposed to hit you when you're tiny and fast? It's like trying to swat a mosquito!”

“Oh, you go for the throat when you're losing, don't you?” I teased. “Short jokes the best you have? Can't get any value from having twice my reach?”

He launched a flurry of blows, driving me into a corner between the wall and balustrade, and I felt a flash of instinctive fear. Before I managed to let it go, I kicked out with one foot, and Wyll went tumbling with a bright burst of golden light, to lie motionless, crumpled on the tiles.

“Shit!” I ran over to Wyll. “Wyll! Sweetheart.” I picked up his wrist to check for a pulse. It was strong, and he stirred, shaking his head. Probably no spinal damage, then. *Oh, by all the light. What had I done?*

He sat up, looking more than a little dazed. “What in the hells was that?”

I knelt down behind him, feeling gently up his back. “Can you feel this?” I asked, pressing either side of the base of his spine.

“Yes, and it doesn't hurt – I think I landed well. You've taught me that much, at least.”

“Thank all the gods,” I said. “*Shit* . For a moment I thought I’d killed you. Wiggle your toes.”

He moved his toes obligingly. “I’m *fine*, ” he said, pulling me into a hug. “But darling, what in the names of all that’s holy was that flash of light?”

“No idea,” I said grimly. “I think we need to talk to Gale.”

“So you felt cornered, and when you kicked out, light erupted?” Gale asked.

I nodded. “I didn’t say anything. I don’t remember making any gestures. It certainly wasn’t deliberate.”

“Hmm. If you were a child, I’d say you were a sorcerer. As it is... I think you’d have known if that were the case.”

“I think I’d have noticed,” I said, remembering a sorcerer I’d fought alongside once, and the unnerving experience of being turned into a cat when she lost control over her magic.

“You know,” Gale continued, looking intrigued. “It’s not common, but sometimes a god chooses a person, rather than the person choosing the god.”

“Lathander,” Wyll said.

Gale nodded. “That would be my guess.”

“Hang on,” Wyll said. “Didn’t you do something similar at Rosymorn? I remember being surrounded by githyanki, and then you yelled something, and there was a flash of light and bodies flying everywhere. Except we were fine.”

I frowned. “I forgot about that. I thought that was just a lingering effect of the connection to Lathander.”

Gale and Wyll both looked at me with similar patient expressions. As though they were waiting for me to come to a conclusion that seemed obvious to them.

“Oh,” I said, as realisation sank in. “You’re saying... you think I’m a cleric of Lathander now?”

Gale nodded. “It would seem a likely conclusion to make.”

“But I never wanted this! Hells, even when I was a devout monk, I never wanted to be a cleric!”

Gale shrugged. “Sometimes the gods bestow their blessings for their own reasons. Or take them away.”

“How do I get rid of this?” I demanded.

“I’m not sure you can,” Gale said, an oddly sad look in his eyes. “If I’m correct, you’ve been marked with the god’s favour. Though perhaps a priest of Lathander would know more than I. Do you know any?”

I shook my head. “None living. Although... perhaps the keeper of the Stormshore Tabernacle could help?”

“Hmm,” Wyll said. “The previous incumbent was renowned for his knowledge of the divine. It might be an idea.”

“Want to come with me?” I asked them.

“I’d rather not,” Gale said, shifting uncomfortably. “You go ahead. Let me know what happens, though. I’m interested.”

Wyll took my hand. “It seems a little precipitate?”

“I don’t want to risk hurting or killing you by accident, love,” I said, squeezing his hand in mine. “I love you.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

A small figure greeted us on entry to the tabernacle, and I started. A rock gnome. Another one. And in the tabernacle. Pure coincidence, but it sent a chill down my spine regardless.

“Greetings, traveller,” the keeper said, smiling at Wyll and I. “I’m Vicar Humbletoes. Weary from the road and seeking to commune with your god, holy one?”

“Well. I guess that answers *that* question,” Wyll muttered.

“Not exactly,” I said to both of them. Was he sensing my old connection with Lathander? Or something new? Or were they the same thing? I wasn’t sure how to ask.

“How may I serve?” he asked, his face curious.

“I... have a problem,” I admitted. “We thought you might be able to help.”

“I live to serve the gods, and connect mortal souls to their divine spark,” he said. “But you would seem well able to commune with your god on your own power. What is it?”

I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling utterly mortified. “I don’t know what I am.”

He tilted his head. “Do you really not know? Or do you not wish to know, for some reason?”

“Can you help me figure it out?” I pleaded.

His face softened. “This is no ordinary calling, is it?”

I lifted my shoulders in a shrug. “How should I know? But I doubt it.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “Wait.” He fetched three stools, and we sat down in the middle of the tabernacle. “Now. Tell me all.”

“I was a monk of Lathander,” I explained. “I left the order. Years ago. Broke with Lathander, to my understanding.”

“Hmm,” he said, examining me with oddly unfocused eyes. “Then what?”

“Then, I came to the ruins of Rosymorn Monastery,” I said, a surge of pain rolling through my chest. Wyll’s hand found mine and he squeezed gently. “I touched an old statue of Lathander, and made some sort of connection with it.”

“I heard about what happened to it,” Vicar Humbletoes said. “And rumours of something more, a month or more ago. It’s said that Lathander smote the intruders and drove them from the place, burning and screaming.”

I winced. “Not quite, but close.”

“It was you?” he asked, face alight with curiosity now.

I told him the story, as best I could remember it. Regardless of whether he could help, someone should probably know the truth of what happened, apart from the wild stories that must be circulating. Shit. I hadn’t thought about the tall tales probably going around about our exploits. We were all Jaheiras in the making, like it or not.

“Hmm,” he said at the end. “So you’re part of the group that’s been racketing around town, creating dismay in the hearts of our villains. But what brings you here?”

“Twice now, I’ve lashed out with an explosion of light that sent people flying,” I said. “The first time, we were in battle, and everyone I hit was an enemy. I’d just communed with Lathander. I had the mother of all migraines. I didn’t think much of it, and I didn’t much care – just assumed Lathander gave me a once-off helping hand in destroying the people who’d slaughtered his monks.”

“The next time?”

“This afternoon,” I said. “Against Wyll,” I lifted our joined hands. “We were sparring, he backed me into a corner, and bang – a flash of light, and he was thrown halfway across the roof.”

“And what do you ask of me?”

“I need help figuring out what I am.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to hurt Wyll again! Or anyone I care for.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“What do you mean?” I demanded, feeling anger starting to rise. Wasn’t *I don’t want to kill my loved ones* a good enough reason to seek help?

“Is there a reason that you’re asking me what you are, instead of asking how to control or remove this gift?” the vicar asked.

I opened my mouth for a scathing retort, and paused. Why was I asking *what* I was?

“Because I turned away from Lathander,” I said slowly, working it out as I spoke. “And it feels as though he’s claimed me again, without a word of agreement from me. I don’t like it.”

“The gods do have their ways,” he said, laying a hand gently on my knee. “But tell me. Did you ever really walk away from Lathander? Or did you in fact take him with you when you left?”

I stared at him. “I was angry at him. I didn’t want anything to do with him!”

“Are you still angry at him?”

“I –” I sighed. “No. I think... after I saw Rosymorn, I understood a little better what happened. And something Wyll said stuck with me. That the gods’ mistakes are always writ large, because they have so much more power to wield. Their mistakes must intrinsically be greater than mortals’.”

“That sounds uncommonly erudite for me,” Wyll said, his tone amused.

I glanced at him. “I might have cleaned it up a bit.”

He laughed, and I turned my attention back to Vicar Humbletoes.

“I don’t mean to invalidate the emotions you’ve felt on this journey,” the vicar said. “But, child – I don’t think Lathander ever left you. You might have thought you broke with him. I can understand why you would. But he’s the god of new beginnings. Perhaps he was just waiting for a new dawn with you.”

My nose prickled, and tears welled in my eyes. Somehow, the vicar’s words rang true. Once, they would have infuriated me; the idea that the god dared to dog me regardless of how I felt. But now... now it felt like maybe, just maybe, I’d never been as alone as I thought I was.

“Shit,” I said.

“Very expressive,” the vicar said, a half-smile on his face.

“So I’m a cleric now? How did I move from being a monk to being a cleric? I don’t understand.”

“Nothing about being a monk precludes your being a cleric,” he noted.

“But why?”

He shrugged. "I can't tell you exactly, but I can tell you what I observe, and my thoughts."

"Please."

"You read, to my senses, as a cleric of Lathander. His mark is upon you. You carry his holy weapon on your belt. You carry the very power of the dawning sun in your heart."

"So it's not just the mace?" Wyll asked.

The vicar shook his head. "No, it shines with its own light – but you shine more brightly still."

"How do I avoid hurting others? Aren't spells supposed to have a spoken component? I could have sworn I yelled out *something* at Rosymorn."

Wyll nodded.

"Some favoured souls experience their clerical powers a little more like a sorcerer would," he explained. "It sounds as though you might be one of them."

"What's a favoured soul?"

"A person favoured by the gods and given new powers," Wyll answered. "Huh. Something just surfaced from childhood lessons. I learnt about this, for some reason."

The vicar nodded at Wyll. "They're clerics, but they don't follow the usual path to such powers. They're selected by the gods themselves."

I buried my face in my hands, letting go of Wyll's. "I don't want to be a cleric!" I almost wailed.

"If you truly seek to renounce your powers, there are ways," the vicar said.

I sighed as Wyll rubbed my back gently. "Except we're in the fight of our lives every other day, and we need all the help we can get, don't we?"

"If my sources are anything near correct, then yes," Vicar Humbletoes said. "Your party seems quite uhhh... active."

"Someone has to be," I said absently. "So. How do I avoid hitting out at people I care for with spells I barely know I have?"

"Gain control," he said. "You keep up with your meditation practices, yes?"

I nodded.

"Then you know how to do this from a martial perspective. All you need to do is apply it to the realm of godly powers, too."

"Hmm."

“Do you need anything else?” he asked.

“No, I think I’ll stop wasting your time with my soul-searching,” I said. “Thank you. For your time, and your wisdom. Can I make a donation to the tabernacle? Help with its upkeep, or your wages, or some such?”

“Usually I’d say yes. But you’re trying to save the entire city. I think we’re well and truly even.”

“You’re sure?”

“May I hug you?” he asked, his face oddly wistful.

I realised with a start that perhaps this man was desperately lonely. Not many rock gnomes in this city, as I knew all too well. Not many huggers, either. I opened my arms and pulled him into a hug.

“Thank you,” he said against my shoulder. “I’d count this payment enough, regardless.”

I drew back, searching his face. “Are you alright?”

“Kind touch is hard to come by, without paying for it at a brothel,” he said with a slight smile. “That’s all. Thank you. I must be about my duties.”

We left, but I made a mental note to go back whenever I could. That gnome was lonely, and perhaps he’d make a good friend.

“Well. That was interesting,” Wyll observed. “So I’m betrothed to a cleric, am I?”

“And you thought the gods didn’t like you,” I said, grinning up at him as we walked. “Does it bother you, love? Are you concerned about these new powers lashing out at you?”

“I’ve never been much of one for the gods,” he said. “But it appears the gods have other ideas. Wouldn’t be the first time, I’m sure. Darling, whatever you are will always be fine with me. Unless perhaps you throw in your lot with Bhaal himself. That might be a problem.”

I snorted.

“But,” he said, his face soft as he looked down at me, “I’m not worried, no. I think I understand what happened. I backed you into a corner, and your fighting instincts took that seriously. If we keep things light, and I avoid setting off your fear into the bargain, we should be fine. Besides, I can take a few blows.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I said. “Gods, I thought for a moment I’d killed you. I don’t ever want to feel like that again.”

“Then we train,” he said, face determined. “And we get you conscious control of these powers of yours.”

I sighed. “A cleric of Lathander,” I said. “The irony is annoying. Why couldn’t some other god claim me, if one had to?”

“Because you didn’t pledge yourself to a different god?”

“Hmph. I hate it when you make sense.”

“Then thank Lathander it happens so rarely, I suppose.”

I laughed.

“Ah, there it is,” Wyll said, his voice warm.

“What?”

“Your smile. I love your smile.”

“Damn,” I said, smiling at him some more. “You make it very hard to stay in a bad mood.”

“I know. I’m the worst,” he said with blithe unconcern.

“Brat.”

Why did I let them out alone?

The next morning felt... odd. We were sitting around the common lounge area, eating breakfast, most of us sipping coffee or tea. All normal, so far. Except Jaheira and Gale seemed to be vibrating with their own, personal excitements.

I eyed them carefully. Both had been disappearing off and on lately, sometimes with each other, sometimes – from what I'd noticed – alone. And while I was completely uninterested in trying to police my friends' behaviour like a stern parent, I was starting to feel uneasy. Secretive missions could land us in trouble we really didn't need now we'd actually gotten this far.

“Gale?” I asked. “Do you have any news to share?”

“Ahh... actually, I do,” he said, managing to look proud of himself and a little shame-faced all in one. “We've been looking for rare tomes that might tell us something about the crown that elder brain was wearing.”

Books. Right. That didn't sound so bad. “Do tell,” I said, feeling resigned. “What did you find?”

“The Annals of Karsus!” Gale said, leaning forward. “Right under our noses! Rather literally, in this case. It was in the basement of Sorcerous Sundries.”

I closed my eyes. He said *was*, didn't he? “You stole it?”

“Lorroakan will never even notice it's missing,” Gale said, waving an arm airily. “He doesn't go down there. Too dangerous for him.”

“And you discovered this how?” I asked. Just how much damage control would I need to do?

“He seduced the book seller quite thoroughly,” Jaheira said, looking amused. “She is utterly smitten with our wizard.”

“That's... not great, but I suppose we've done much worse,” I said. “So. What did you discover?”

“That sliver of Netherese magic I sought to return to Mystra. The one that proved my undoing, in more ways than one. It's not just a random piece of magic, caught outside time and space itself. It's the Orb of Karsus!”

I blinked at him while I tried to dredge up old history lessons from my time in the monastery. “Weren't there three Karsite artefacts? Things he imbued with his version of the Weave?”

Gale nodded. “My mistake wasn't in obtaining the orb. My mistake was in being utterly ignorant of what it was, and how to use it.”

“I’m not sure those were your only mistakes,” Shadowheart muttered.

“Yes, yes, my motivations were very wrong. But. But. Imagine what I might achieve now that I understand!”

I frowned. “I’m not sure I do, yet.”

“Karsus’s orb was a battery of sorts. The idea was that you feed in magic – the Weave, or the Karsite Weave. And then you have a store of power to draw on at any time. You never run out of spellcasting power.”

“But it can explode? Isn’t that your whole deal?” Wyll asked.

“ Yes, but only because I haven’t been using the power it produces!”

“Do you even know how to cast spells using the Karsite Weave? Does it even exist?” I asked. “I thought the Karsite Weave just... fizzled out, or something.”

“It *is* the Karsite Weave, in a sense,” Gale said, almost bouncing in excitement. This was the most animated I’d seen him in weeks. “I’d have to modify every spell to draw upon the orb instead of on the Weave. But yes, I think it’s possible.”

“This sounds like something that would upset Mystra,” I said. “Surely you don’t want a god angry at you. Again.”

“With this power, I could *be* a god,” Gale said. “And one that actually cares about mortals. Not the uncaring, remote disinterest of the current pantheon, too scared of Ao to achieve anything of note. I could be a god with the heart and mind of a mortal.”

“It sounds a little as though you’re planning to challenge Ao himself,” Wyll said. “I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t care much for the gods, but this sounds like suicide.”

I sighed. *Stupid!* Gale had been in the depths of despair back in the shadow-cursed lands, and I’d somehow assumed that his new positive attitude was a complete recovery. I knew better. I knew that severely depressed people contemplating suicide didn’t suddenly improve – they started masking better. Or they switched paths to one that was less overt, but still rampantly self-destructive. And here we were. With a wizard friend who was feeling great – on a high from finding the perfect path to annihilation. And I had no idea how to talk him down before he did something inescapably stupid.

“Can we sit down and talk about it later, Gale?” I asked. “Just you and I, maybe Wyll? I’d like to explore it a bit more.” When in doubt, put it off until later, I suppose.

He nodded. “I don’t see what there is to discuss, but certainly.”

“Jaheira?” I asked, turning to my other, and far more imposing, problem child. “How about you? It sounds like you’ve been helping Gale? Is that all you’ve been up to, or have you had a secret mission this whole time, too?”

“I found Minsc,” she said in a rush. “My friend. I found him.”

“The... hero of the city who used to be a statue?” Wyll asked. “That Minsc? The famous ranger?”

She nodded at him. “Yes, the one and only.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were looking?” I asked. What was the problem?

“He’s... the Stone Lord,” she said slowly.

“The what lord?”

“The Stone Lord. A challenger for the role of the ultimate crime powerhouse in this city.”

“Minsc. Is a crime lord,” Wyll said, disbelief in every word. “I don’t believe you. He’s a *hero*.”

“He is also under the thrall of the Absolute,” Jaheira said flatly.

“Shit,” I said, and my opinion was mirrored by the others sitting around the room.

“Quite,” she said. “Ever since I last saw him, years ago, when we first stumbled across the beginnings of this cult. I need your help freeing him. As we freed Grand Duke Ravengard.”

“My father is still suffering the ill effects of being under the Absolute’s sway,” Wyll said.

“And... Jaheira. I don’t know how to put this gently. He was only under its thrall for weeks. Minsc... years? His mind may never recover.”

She nodded, her face grim. “I know. And yet... I left him there, when I ran. I ran to fight another day, and I cannot regret that... but I regret it deeply regardless. I must try.”

I nodded. “This sounds like a volunteer-only mission to me,” I said. “But I’ll help.” I looked at Wyll.

“You have my sword,” he said. “Minsc was my childhood hero. If there’s any chance we can save him... we have to try.”

“Rescue a washed-up has-been who’s probably insane,” Astarion said. “That’s the task for today? I think I can be more useful painting my nails. At least you’ll have something pretty to look at when you get back.”

“Typical Fangs,” Karlach said, grinning at him. “I’ll come. I’d love to meet your hero friend, Jaheira. Ahhh! On a mission with the High Harper! I’m so excited.”

Jaheira’s answering smile looked a little forced. “My thanks to you all. May the gods look kindly upon us. After lunch, Dash?”

I nodded. “Anyone have anything to talk about? News? Dramas? Medical emergencies?”

Everyone else shook their heads or stood up. Thank all the light – that had been *quite* enough for one day.

“Right,” Wyll said, walking in from outside the shop. “It’s still fairly early, and you’ve cleared your lineup in record time. No more patients. Want to lock up?”

I nodded. “Definitely, love. I know it’s nowhere near noon, but I could do with some food. Maybe some wine, after those bombs dropped this morning.”

He grinned. “It just so happens, I carved out some time in our busy schedule. I have just the thing.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. Remember that date we put off because of your headache?”

“Oh! But love... I’m going to be hopelessly distracted. Are you sure you want to do something special when my head’s all over the place?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, dropping to one knee and holding out his arms. “Come here, darling.”

I went to him and rested my cheek against his.

“It’s not a big thing,” he said, rubbing his cheek against my beard. “Think of it as a change of scenery. That’s all. We can talk this all through and worry and speculate. I just want to do it somewhere different.”

I laughed. “We do get a little bogged down in the Elfsong, don’t we?”

“Hmm. Come on, love. I’m going to wash up quickly. Then we’re off, if it’s alright with you.”

“Did you water the plants?” I asked, gripped with sudden worry. What else had I forgotten about?

“Yes. And swept your floor,” he said, chuckling. “It’s fine. Everything’s under control. You’re stressing.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. He was right, damn him. “I am.”

Wyll led me down a cliff path to a small, sheltered alcove in the rock. Laid out on the floor of it was a blanket, with a picnic basket, wine bottle, and lute next to it.

I looked upward. From the top of the cliff, this had been impossible to see. We were still high above the beach. Before us spread the Bay of Balduran, meeting a light blue sky, a single ship sailing past. “Gods. This is... maybe the most tranquil view I’ve seen since Rosymorn,” I said. “Thank you, love. I can feel my mind relaxing already.”

“Hopefully that’s not an omen,” he said, opening the basket. “I hope you don’t mind that I brought the lute. I thought... I haven’t heard you play it much lately. And I thought you

might play it for me.”

“It’ll be terrible!” I protested. “That’s why you haven’t heard me play it. I’m far too rusty to subject other people’s ears to my playing. Especially at the Elfsong, where the ghost reigns supreme.”

“I don’t care,” he said, handing me a slice of apple. “I just want to see you lost in the music, dearest. You could sound like mating cats screeching in an alleyway, for all I care.”

I crunched the apple, considering. “You’re sure?”

“Silly. I’m sure. If my ears start bleeding, I promise to stop you.”

“Well. You asked for it.”

“Exactly,” he said, handing me a wedge of cheese and opening the wine bottle, pouring out a glass.

I regarded the pale yellow liquid dubiously. “Maybe none for me. I need to be focused for rescuing Minsc.”

“It’s weak,” he said. “You’d have to drink this all day to get drunk. I picked carefully, darling.”

I leant against him, looking out at the water, nibbling on the cheese. “You really thought this through, didn’t you?”

“I was going to have near-naked men dancing for us, but that would distract from the view.”

I laughed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Mmm. I love you too.”

“It’s perfect, love. Thank you. I didn’t realise how much I needed some tranquillity and peace.”

He threw an arm over my shoulders and squeezed gently. “It’s a tough job you took on. I can see it wearing at you. I wish you’d delegate a little more.”

“Oh, because letting this lot out by themselves is turning out so well!”

“Ha! A fair point you have. Well. Do you want to talk about it?”

“It would help, I think,” I said, lifting my face to look up at him. “Do you mind?”

“Already told you I didn’t.”

“Hmm. True. Alright. Minsc. Are we really just going to waltz into a den of thieves and kidnap their leader? And then somehow sever the Absolute’s control over him? What if he’s hostile?”

“We were willing to take that risk for my father.”

“True. But that was your father! He’s family. And he’s the current ruler of the entire city. There were a few more ramifications to just leaving him be.”

“I think Minsc is family to Jaheira,” Wyll said, looking thoughtful. “They’ve been together through so much. I’m sure you’ve heard the stories and the songs.”

“Hmm. Good point. What else?”

“If we don’t do this, Jaheira will go alone. We risk losing the harpers if she does.”

I nodded.

“Minsc is a famed hero. Having him on our side, with Jaheira... I’m not sure we need more publicity, but that would definitely cement us in the public mind as being firmly on the side of good.”

“Valid.”

“We’d also strike a blow against the Absolute. Except...” he frowned and fell silent.

“What?”

“Who’s controlling the elder brain?” he asked. “We killed the three Chosen. We’ve shared out the control between us, and so far that seems to have worked. It hasn’t reverted to chasing the Grand Design and turning everyone into mind flayers. Yet... it hasn’t stopped working to the ends Gortash and Orin had it seeking, either.”

“Maybe it’s like an automaton,” I suggested. “With the crown on, perhaps it’s more a case of giving it an order, and it will continue working towards it until explicitly given something else to focus on.”

“Then should we? Try to convince it to do something else?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should ask our dream visitor.”

“If we can get a straight answer out of the slippery bastard,” he said.

“You’re not a fan?”

“So far, he’s been our salvation,” Wyll said. “I can hardly fault him for that. But he’s such an unreliable narrator. He reminds me of Mizora. She doesn’t lie, either. She just tells the truth in such a way that someone draws all the wrong conclusions. So our dream visitor sets my hackles to rising.”

“Hmm. You’re right, they do have similar styles.”

“Let’s make that a problem for another day,” he suggested. “We’ve already agreed to help Jaheira. It sounds as though we’re in agreement about it being a good idea.”

“Or at least, not as bad as the alternative,” I agreed. “But Gale. Shit. I feel an utter fool.”

“For what? Not seeing what he was up to?”

“No,” I said, putting down my glass of wine. “Because I should have realised that he’s still on a path to self-destruction. I was taken in by the external happiness and positivity. I should have looked deeper. I should have seen *why* he was happier.”

“Why was that? I don’t follow.”

“Because he found a different path to self-destruction. One that offers the sort of wild reaching for power that appeals to people who’ve lost all hope on the mortal plane. He’s not reaching for godhood, so much as reaching for yet another way to go out with a bang.”

“Do you think that’s how he thinks of it?”

“On the surface? No. I think he’s just finding himself oddly obsessive about this, but convinced it’s a good idea. Deep down, though? I think he knows that even if he manages the impossible and masters these items as their creator failed to do... even so, Mystra would erase him from existence with barely a thought, simply for intruding on her domain.”

“She’d really kill someone she used to love?”

“She seems the pragmatic sort, at least where her own convenience is concerned.”

“Oof. Very cynical, darling.”

“Mmm. If Lathander wanted a cleric who’s less cynical about the gods, he should have chosen someone else.”

Wyll snorted a laugh. “If your analysis is correct... what can we do for Gale? How do we help, without pushing him further down the path to destruction?”

“Tell him we love him, and make sure he truly knows it?” I said, shrugging. “I don’t know, love. I’m not sure there’s anything we can do that will actually help. I’ll try, but I could just make things much, much worse.”

“Worse than Gale getting blasted into atoms by Mystra?”

I sighed. “Good point. Although I guess she could decide to obliterate all of us, instead.”

“True. I’m starting to appreciate Ao and his edicts against divine meddling a little more.”

We sat in silence for a while, drinking wine to wash down the early lunch, watching ships sail past on their way to and from distant shores.

“Would you play for me?” Wyll asked. “If you’re truly uncomfortable, I won’t push it. I’d just... I’d like to hear you play.”

I smiled at him and picked up the lute, checking the strings, sounding the notes and tightening or loosening to tune it. “You know full well I can’t resist a plea like that from you, sweetheart.”

He smiled, lying back on the blanket to watch the water. “Play me something from your childhood.”

“It’ll be raunchy,” I warned.

“Perfect,” he said, laughing. “Just what you and I need. More raunch. Seriously, darling. I missed knowing you back then. I wish I had. So show me a little of young Dash.”

I strummed a chord and winced. One string was still out of tune. I fiddled with the tuning pegs, finally getting the right note to stick, and launched into *The Mermaid With Two Tails* .

“Hmm. I remember this,” Wyll said with his eyes closed. “I wonder where I heard it?”

“Probably one of those brothels you’re always frequenting,” I said, teasing.

“Ha! Given some of the taverns I stayed in out on the road, that’s not entirely missing the mark,” he said. “Keep going, love. You sound wonderful, by the way.”

I grimaced. I was missing more notes than I hit, my grasp on the lyrics was shaky at best, and I was strumming a lot of simple chords to make up for not remembering the lyrics. But he’d been right – I hadn’t played in an age, and I *had* missed it. I segued into *The Wizard’s Staff* .

The beloved ranger

Jaheira had tracked Minsc to a part of the sewers we hadn't visited yet. We crouched in a storage area, overlooking a lair that had clearly been in use for a while – it was furnished with beds, tables and stools, and even a kitchen area.

“Oh goody,” Astarion whispered. “I love sewers. This is turning into a lovely little trip. Full of shit and piss. Why am I even surprised at this point?”

“No idea,” Jaheira whispered, elbowing him. “Everyone loves the sewers. They seem to be prime real estate. Bhaalists, vampires, Guild... and now, if my eyes don't deceive me, some renegade mercenaries. Wait – there he is.”

The man towered over the other people in the lair, striding confidently. Beside him, a hand on his arm now and then, was... Jaheira?

“Everyone out to the surface,” I whispered.

“But we're all ready!” Jaheira objected.

I gestured to the hatch, and turned my back to scale the ladder. Jaheira made a quiet sound of disgust and followed.

“What?” she demanded when we got up to the gardener's shack in which the entrance was concealed. “Why did you abort that mission? What's going on?”

“Are you so old your eyes are failing, High Harper?” I asked, grinning at her, evading her answering swipe at my head. “Minsc had *you* with him.”

“He what?” she exclaimed, turning to head back down the ladder.

Wyll seized her from behind, careful to hold her so that her arms were disabled. We'd seen how deadly she could be with her scimitars.

“What the – oh. You think she is me, or I am her.” Jaheira sighed and slumped. “Stupid. How do we come to a solution?”

“Can doppelgangers steal memories, or just bodies?” I asked Astarion and Wyll.

“Memories,” Wyll said, looking grim. “We can't know which is which.”

“So we have no way of knowing which Jaheira is the right one, because the doppelganger could have borrowed any memory we could ask about.”

“Of course we have a way,” Astarion interjected. “Think about it. Why would the Absolute need Jaheira nearby when it can just control Minsc with its tadpole in his skull? Clearly this is the doppelganger.”

“But why would the doppelganger tell us that Minsc is here?” Wyll asked.

“That... would be odd. Unless it has no more use for my old friend, and decided to kill two birds with one stone,” Jaheira said, her voice flat. “Have us kill Minsc, or Minsc kill us. It wins, no matter what results.”

“And now the doppelganger is helping us,” Astarion said. “Ugh. This is hurting my head.”

“Two plus two hurts your head,” Jaheira shot back.

“You’re too old and senile to be poking fun at *my* mental state,” Astarion said.

Jaheira laughed, her face lightening.

I watched her, and came to a decision. “Let’s go get Minsc free,” I said. “Guys, if this Jaheira steps even slightly out of line, knock her out. Let’s try to knock out the other Jaheira too if we can, rather than killing her. I think she’d prefer brain damage to death.”

“And if it’s a doppelganger?” Astarion demanded. “What then?”

“Then it should hopefully revert when it’s unconscious,” I said. “Anyone else have other, useful information?”

“Anything I offer would be suspect anyway,” Jaheira pointed out. “I don’t understand why you are trusting me even this much. It’s utter madness.”

I nodded. “It is, isn’t it?” I turned to go down the ladder again, my back to her. If she struck – well, that’s what Wyll and Astarion were for. But her show of humour had the ring of the real Jaheira to it, unless she’d been replaced well before we met her in the shadow-cursed lands. To tell her that now, though... if I was wrong, she’d just know more about how to put up a good pretence.

“Off you go,” Astarion hissed above me. “I’ll be watching.”

I motioned Wyll to take a shot at Minsc’s Jaheira, and to our Jaheira to step out into the light. They did so, Jaheira shooting me a confused look.

“Argh!” Minsc yelled. “My wichlaran! You! Doppelganger! You will have regrets. Large, black regrets!”

“Same old Minsc,” I heard Jaheira mutter. “Hey! Bonehead!” she yelled. “Do you not know your oldest friend, in the flesh?”

“You lie!” he shouted, but his face twisted in momentary doubt.

I took the opportunity to slip down the side of the platform and drop to the ground. I saw Astarion doing the same on the other side. Good man. I ran to hit one of his henchmen, and he changed forms in an instant, his arms growing long and clawed. Shit. Just what I needed – an enemy with incredibly long reach. Then I grinned, ducked and stepped in very close, driving a foot up into its genitals and an elbow to follow. It doubled over with an *oomph* of

expelled air, and I hit it hard in the neck, hearing a snap. It crumpled. I ran to the next target, just as an eldritch blast knocked her onto her knees.

“Thanks, love!” I yelled over my shoulder, and heard both Jaheira and Wyll laugh.

Disposing of this person was easier, since she was already dazed by the blast. Two blows, and she was crumpled at my feet, blood dripping from her pointed doppelganger ears. Were all of these people doppelgangers? Why? This was a weird dispersal of resources – unless there was something I was missing. Something about Jaheira, perhaps, and why the Absolute had been impersonating her. If, I reminded myself, Minsc was even tadpoled. Orin would have found it funny to nudge us into killing a hero of the city for no good reason. This plot might have outlived her. It *would* explain the doppelgangers. All except Minsc’s Jaheira. Who was not showing the slightest dismay at the fact that her companions had been shown to be doppelgangers.

That thought decided me. I raced to her prone body and crushed her windpipe, wincing as I did so. If I was wrong... just pray a revivification spell would work, I supposed. Minsc’s Jaheira gaped at me, jerking as she tried to get air... and turned into the now-familiar doppelganger form.

“Thank all the hells,” Wyll said behind me, just as Minsc roared and ran past me.

I turned, to find him on top of Wyll, about to smash an axe into his face. I jumped, landing behind Minsc, grabbing him around the throat in an elbow chokehold.

He fell backwards onto me, no doubt trying – successfully – to crush me. Blasts jolted the body on top of me, and then he went still.

“Shit,” Wyll said, staring down at his childhood hero.

“Tell me he’s not dead!” Jaheira yelled. “Minsc, you bastard, you can’t be dead!”

I felt lungs draw in air – and felt envious. I wanted to be able to breathe freely too. “He’s breathing,” I gasped out, and someone pulled him off me. “Oh, thank all that’s holy. He’s heavy.” I crawled over to Minsc to check his pupils – they were even and round. He might recover from this fairly well, with any luck. If we could get the famed Madman of Rashemen to actually lie down for long enough to recuperate.

Minsc roused, groaning.

“Careful,” I told him. “You got a few nasty blows. Although I considerably cushioned your fall.”

His eyes moved to Jaheira. “You’re alive!” he said, sitting up. “I saw them kill you!” He looked around. “Uhh...” The idea that his attackers were trying to help seemed to nonplus him completely.

He screamed and held his head.

This one – you cannot bring him into your camp, the voice of our dream visitor said in my head. His mind... he brings only chaos.

“And bravery,” I said out loud. “And a reputation for kindness and loyalty. You might not value such things. I do.”

“Help him!” Jaheira demanded, moving around to kneel at Minsc's back, to support him.

Besides, I thought silently, We need Jaheira. We can move freely partly because her presence vouches for us. Everywhere.

She will understand, the dream visitor said.

“She will not,” I said firmly. “You will *not* destroy the alliances I have so carefully built! What is it that Minsc knows, that you don't want us to know? Did you know each other, in the months before you found us?”

Fine, then. He said. But I do not approve. I have told you the truth, and you continue to mistrust me. An alliance cannot be built on the sand.

Later, when we finally got back to the Elfsong, I realised just how tired I was – my legs almost gave out underneath me as I climbed the familiar stairs. When we reached the door of the common rooms, I caught Wyll's eye and motioned towards our room with my head. We peeled off from the group, and I shut the door behind us with a sigh.

“By all that's light. Why am I so tired?”

“Ha! No idea. You've only healed multiple people, fought shapeshifters, and been squished by the mighty hero Minsc,” he said, grinning at me. “The day after having a migraine. You should be bursting with energy.”

“Hey! Less sarcasm, thanks,” I said, smiling back. “Let's bathe?”

Wyll heated the water in the tub, and we heaved very similar sighs on submersing ourselves. “Just a quick scrub?” Wyll asked. “I want to cuddle with you.”

“Mmm. Sounds wonderful.”

I soaped and scrubbed myself, and climbed out of the tub, reaching for a towel.

“Here,” Wyll said, hooking it with his longer reach and depositing it in my hand. “Short-arse.”

“Giant,” I said, laughing. “Thanks, love.”

Clean and dry, finally, we collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

“Mmm,” Wyll said, kissing my shoulder. “I've been wanting to do this all day.”

“Kiss me?”

He pulled me closer. “Kiss you. Touch you. Be with you.”

I pressed against him for a moment, just enjoying the feel of his skin against mine. I rubbed my cheek against his neck, and laid soft kisses down his throat. He let his head fall back, breathing deep. I trailed fingers lightly over his collarbone, watching him shiver.

“Gods, I love touching you,” I said softly. “My sweet love.”

His hands slid down my back to stroke slowly over my arse.

I kissed down his chest, to the arrow scar above his breast, letting the scar caress my lips as they moved over it. Then down to lick his nipple.

Wyll made a sound of pleasure, and I smiled up at him before returning to the task at hand. I traced circles around his nipple with my tongue, hearing his breathing change, and slid a hand down to his hip, stroking slowly.

“May I touch your cock, beloved?” I asked.

He opened his eyes, looking dazed, and nodded. “Please, darling.”

I licked a finger, and traced slow, wet circles around the head of his cock as I teased his nipple on my tongue. His cock firmed under my touch, and a thrill went through me. I loved seeing him react to me like this. “Where do you want my mouth, love?” I asked.

“Hells. On my dick, dear. I want your tongue where your finger is.”

I moved down to circle the tip of his cock – hard now – with the tip of my tongue.

He groaned. “That. Yes.” I felt his hand stroke my hair, and his hips pushed his cock closer.

I took the hint and slipped my mouth over it, taking my time to taste him, exploring the head of his cock with my tongue. He jolted, and I looked up, pausing my play. “Alright, sweetheart?”

“Never better,” he said, eyes closed. “That feels wonderful, darling.”

I bent back to it, taking in more of his cock into my mouth, letting it slide over the roof of my mouth, pushing upwards with my tongue to create a contrast in sensation. The ridges on his cock rubbed over my tongue, making me shiver in reaction. I set a slow rhythm, guided by his breathing. When it started to speed up, I paused.

“Keep going, love?”

He nodded, gasping.

I took his cock back into my mouth, sliding a hand around to his arse to pull his hips upwards, encouraging him to move in unison with me. He cried out softly with each stroke,

and I let it go deeper and a little faster with every stroke.

“Baldur’s bones. Darling.”

I dug my fingernails into his arse, loving the feel of the control I had over him in this moment, and he cried out, loud. I paused to check, and he shook his head wildly.

“It’s good,” he said, panting. “Please, darling...”

I went back to it, and tasted salt and sulphur. He was close. I reached up to take his hand in mine, and moved to a shallower, faster rhythm, my tongue stroking his cock with every movement. His hand squeezed mine, and I started to suck just as he grabbed my hair with his other hand, shaking, shoving into my mouth as he emptied himself in hot, frantic spurts into my mouth. He jerked in my grasp for long, intense moments, his back bowed, head thrown back, inarticulate sounds spilling from him with his seed.

I expected a quiet cuddle for a while afterwards, but he pulled me up to him and kissed me, hard, his tongue pushing into my mouth, hot and demanding. Arousal burst into flame within me, and I pressed against him, deepening the kisses further, sliding my tongue against his, nipping at his lips with my teeth.

He growled and pushed me onto my back, straddling my hips in one fast movement, holding my shoulders as he bent to kiss me again. I pressed up against him, feeling a thrill of lust and a slight pulse of fear. He could do whatever he liked to me in this position. I was practically helpless.

He drew away, stroking my cheek gently. “Is it alright, darling?” he asked. “I’m not being too rough?”

I shook my head, grinning, breathless, the vestiges of unease draining away with the careful query, so he bent to kiss me again, biting at my lips until I cried out for him.

“I want to oil your dick, darling,” he murmured. “Then I want you to fuck me. Will you fuck me?”

I reached up to kiss him again, hard and demanding. “I’ll fuck you until you scream for me, sweetheart. Until you spill your seed a second time for me, so I can lick it from you.”

He stared at me with wide eyes for a moment, then pulled me up to kiss me again. “Hells. How do you get me this fired up?”

“Oil. Now.”

He bit his lip and reached to grab the oil from the bedside table, dripping it slowly down my cock. The cold oil was a shock, then his hands curved around my cock, sliding up and down as they spread the oil evenly. I groaned, the simple movements sending pleasure radiating through me.

He slid forward and placed the tip of my cock at his arsehole.

“Gods, Wyll. Help me go slow. I don’t want to –”

He pushed backwards decisively, and my cock slid into him. I cried out – the sudden sensation was overwhelming. He rose on his hips and shoved back down, until I got so lost in the rhythm that I started to move with him, pushing up into him, groaning at the feel of those rings of muscle clenching around my cock, so everything was hot and slippery and pulsing.

“Fuck me, darling,” he murmured. “Harder, don’t worry about going slow. I want fierce today, not gentle.”

I grabbed his hips and shoved into him, holding him in place, pushing upwards, setting a pace that was hard on my back... but oh gods, it felt like the heavens themselves, sliding into that hot, slippery embrace over and over. I didn’t want to let loose entirely, but I let my fingernails dig into his skin hard enough to leave marks when we were done.

He panted and met my gaze, eyes shrouded with arousal. “Perfect, dearest. Hells. More.”

A surge of pure lust went through me. I wasn't being gentle, but he didn't want me to take it down a notch – he wanted more of the same. Gods. If I'd known bedding him would be like this...

“On your back,” I said, and he rolled away to lie waiting for me. I reiled, pulled his knees onto my shoulders, and pushed my cock back inside him. At this angle, I had a lot more freedom of movement, and I took full advantage of it, using long, fast strokes, watching his face for signs of discomfort, but all he showed was an overwhelming enjoyment. “You’re good, love?” I asked, and at his nod, kept going.

Pleasure surged through me in slow waves, building in intensity as I moved.

“Gods. I’m close, sweetheart,” I said, biting my lip, trying to draw it out a while longer. I slid a hand under his cock, letting the rhythm of my thrusts move my oily palm against him.

“Dash! Hells, Dash,” he said, his face vacant as he lost focus, starting to concentrate solely on the sensations I was creating for him.

I grimaced, trying desperately to keep control, managing by the skin of my teeth, then remembering to breathe properly just as he started to convulse underneath me, muscle contractions pulsing, gripping my cock. I stroked his cock as he spilled his seed once more, over his belly and my hand, head back, arms flung out, abandoned to the climax. The sight of him lost to pleasure undid me entirely.

I licked my fingers to taste his juices. Just as I thought I couldn’t feel more, a new wave of arousal crashed over me. I arched my back, letting it fill me, and thrust hard into him, then withdrew to let out my own juices over his belly, gasping as the climax grabbed me and shook me.

“Holy hells,” he muttered, as I leant on his legs for a few moments, gathering my spent strength to move.

I looked at him, feeling a stirring of concern. “I didn’t hurt you, love? I got carried away.”

“Anything but,” he assured me, unwinding his legs from my shoulders and pulling me down beside him. “Ye gads. I didn’t expect you to take me quite so literally, but that was just what I wanted, too. Thank you, darling.”

“Thank *me* ? Gods, love. You’re sensational.” I cuddled against him, my head on his shoulder, rubbing my cheek against his skin. “Gods, you feel so good.”

“Hmm,” he said, wrapping his arms around me. “That was amazing, but cuddling you might still be my favourite part.”

“Oh?” I said, tilting my head back to see his face. “Maybe I should be trying harder, then.”

“Ha! Any harder, and one of us might just rupture something.”

“Worth it. But... hmm. Speaking of... turn over for me?”

He rolled onto his side, away from me. I ran a hand over his arse, checking the marks I’d left in the soft skin, looking for broken skin or blood.

“No, you’re fine. I just needed to check I hadn’t damaged you,” I said, laying a kiss on one cheek.

“Worth it.”

I laughed. “Stop throwing my words back in my face. Monster.”

He rolled back over and pulled me close. “Kiss me, darling?”

“Always,” I said, laying a hand on the back of his neck to kiss him, slowly and very thoroughly.

Visiting the past

“I have a request,” I said over lunch with Wyll.

“Anything,” he said, polishing off the last of his roast vegetables. “What is it?”

“You’re very trusting,” I said, grinning at him across the table. “What if I asked you to kill your father for me?”

“Two points. One: it would undo all your good healing work, and you wouldn’t let that happen. Two: perhaps I’d simply agree, then let time work its usual cruel magic.”

“Hmm. You did learn something, being pacted to a devil.”

“Ha! My thanks, I think. Seriously, though – I assume an assassination isn’t on the cards?”

“No, but it might be a little out of your comfort zone,” I said. “I... want to go to Sharess’ Caress.”

Wyll blinked. “To... visit a whore? I’m not sure how to take that.”

I laughed. “No. I... I don’t know why. I just want to go back. See the place again. It’s like an itch in my mind, my memories. It’s bothering me.”

His face softened. “I think I can understand that, dear. What’s the request?”

“Come with me?”

“Oh! Is that all?”

I nodded.

“Of course. You didn’t even have to ask.”

“Really? You’d just follow me into a brothel, without a murmur?” I asked, smiling fondly at him.

“To the very corners of Toril,” he declaimed, spreading his arms dramatically. “Dens of vice and debauchery. Even to the hells, should there be a need. I’ll be at your side.”

“You’re quite a ridiculous man, you know that? And very adorable to boot.”

“You inspire me. But seriously: I promised you exactly that, darling. I intend to follow through.”

“Mmm. My sweet love. But I can take someone else, if you’ll be uncomfortable.”

“No, I’ve been there before. Once; maybe twice. I’d like to have a drink there again.”

“Deal. I’ll buy you a drink, and anything else your heart desires.”

“Ah. Sharess' Caress. How the hells did Baldur's Gate’s premier brothel end up being in Rivington?” Wyll asked.

“Goodness. Can't have people like this in the upper city, love. Might improve the tone.”

“Ha!”

We walked in, and I paused at the threshold, dumbstruck. It all looked... exactly the same. Most people coming back to a childhood haunt say it looks smaller, but this place was just as I'd remembered it.

“Can I help you lovely people?” a woman in a slinky dark dress asked. I eyed her. The dress showed off her figure, but it was long-sleeved and high-necked.

“Are you the proprietor?” I asked.

“Why yes, dearie – I am,” she said, extending a delicately-manicured hand. “Mamzelle Amira, at your service. How may I be of assistance?”

We shook hands as I smiled at her. “I’m a bit of an odd case, sorry to say. My mother used to work here. I wanted to visit again. Remember the old place.”

“Oh!” she said, her demeanour changing from professional friendliness to something more neutral, but honest. “Come through to my office.” She led us through to a room that looked more like a comfortable library than an office; a roaring fire, comfortable chairs, low oil lamps, and shelves of books.

“I don’t really need to take up any of your time,” I said, taking a seat on an ottoman in the lushly-appointed space. Wyll sat near me on a chair. “I just wanted to have a look around, really.”

“You’re very welcome to do so,” she said, smiling. “Welcome back. What’s your name? Who was your mother?”

“I’m Dash,” I said. “My mother... her working name was Rosabelle. I’m not sure what her real name was. I don’t remember her ever telling me. It was before your time – about twenty years.”

She nodded and pressed something on a low table, releasing a small drawer. “I asked partly because my predecessor left something that she found in Rosabelle’s room, just in case. She thought it near-worthless, but for the emotional value. And it’s small, easy to store... so I kept it.”

She held out a silver ring, inlaid with tiny garnet roses. She was right: if I’d come across something like this in a random chest in the wilderness, I’d have thrown it into our collection of junk to offload at the next merchant. But my breath caught in my throat. I remembered,

clear as day, cuddling up to my mother, her arm around me, that ring glinting in the light. It was hers. Something that belonged to *her* .

I took the ring, staring at it. “I never thought I’d see anything of hers again,” I said. “Thank you. Thank you so much for holding on to this on the off-chance I’d someday walk in here. This is... I have no words. What can I give you for the trouble?”

“Just buy a couple of drinks, and we’ll call it even,” she said, smiling at me. “You’re very welcome, dear. Have a wander around, see what’s what. A lot has probably changed since you saw it last. I must attend to other customers, but please – if you need anything at all, please do ask one of our lovely servers.”

“I will. Thank you again,” I said, walking out of the office with her, letting her shepherd us to the bar.

“So. Any memories catching you?” Wyll asked as we walked up the stairs, looking around at the decor and customers, solicitously served by people in skimpy outfits. He skilfully evaded a young-looking man in tight shorts and a blowsy, ruffled shirt, smiling apologetically.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I spent much time up here. Too dangerous, for those underage. No matter how well you screen your clientele, some will still assume that anything they want is on the menu.”

Wyll grimaced, catching my meaning. “Appalling.”

“I mostly hung out downstairs, or out in the streets. But I’d like to see what they did with my mother’s room.”

I made my way to the third floor. Everything looked different. The carpets were a different shade of red, and not the swirling pattern I remembered. The paintings had changed; gone out of style, I supposed. Even the furniture had been replaced. But my feet trod an unerring path to her room, regardless. I tried the door – to my surprise, it was unlocked.

“Security not a big concern?” Wyll asked.

I shrugged. “Most of the luxury in a brothel is skin-deep. Try to sell anything you steal here, and you’ll be outed as a cheat.” I stared at the room. It had a library theme, with a large four-poster bed featuring anchor points for handcuffs and chains. “This is... it’s all changed. It doesn’t even look like the same room.” I sank my hand into my pocket, letting my fingers play over my mother’s ring – proof that *she had been here* . “Let’s get out of here,” I said. “This has nothing for me. No fond memories. It’s just... not hers.”

“Are you alright?” Wyll asked, a hand on my shoulder, thumb stroking lightly. “You seem unhappy. Shocked?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what I expected. It’s been almost twenty years since I left.”

“Would you like a hug?”

“Always, love,” I said, turning as he knelt and resting my cheek against his, one horn brushing my forehead. “Mmm. I don’t really know how I’m feeling, but this helps.”

He drew back to kiss me lightly, then stood. “Downstairs?”

Back on the ground floor, I sniffed. “Hang on.” The scent of roast pork hung on the air, tempting in its richness and the hints of gravy. I walked around the bar to a small door, and went through. “Chorizo,” I said, staring in shock at the dwarf within. Everything else was different, but this kitchen and its cook looked exactly as I remembered them.

“This is *not* a themed room,” he snapped, whirling away from the stove to chop vegetables. “It’s an actual kitchen, I’m not a whore, and I’m very busy. So please remove yourselves and head back to the entertainment.”

“I’m not a customer,” I said.

His head turned as he dropped his knife. “Well, as I live and breathe. Rosabelle’s brat!”

I grinned at him. “I was pulled in here by the scent of your pork rolls.”

“Ha! You were always a fiend for them, since you were knee-high to... well, everything. Want one?”

“Please,” I said, nodding. “Love? Pork roll?” I looked up at Wyll, to find him staring, dumbstruck, at the kitchen. At the back door. “One each, please,” I said. “We’ll pay at the bar. How are you?”

“Oh, same old,” he said breezily, piling meat onto rolls sliced down the centre, and pouring gravy over the top. “Everything changes, everything stays the same. I got married. He works on the docks. I get the freshest fish.”

“Nice perk,” I said, glancing at Wyll. Something was definitely bothering him. I took his hand and he shook himself out of his reverie, smiling at me.

“Looks like you found yourself someone, too,” Chorizo said. “I’m Chorizo, mate. Nice to meet you.”

“Wyll,” Wyll said, smiling. “I like your kitchen.”

Chorizo handed us each a pork roll. “I’d love to catch up more, but the dinner rush will start soon. I need to get cracking.”

I took that as the hint it was, and led Wyll out to the bar.

“Ales again?” the bartender asked, and we both nodded.

Wyll slid some coins over to her, and we both bit into our rolls. I groaned. “Gods be praised. This is just as good as I remembered it.”

“Perhaps you could write a guidebook someday,” Wyll said, a smirk growing on his face. “Best feeds in warehouses around the Sword Coast.”

“Why stop there?” I asked, smiling back and licking gravy from my thumb. “Waterdeep and Amn probably have some decent offerings.”

Silence fell between us as we polished off our rolls and ale.

“I think I’d like to go,” I said. “How about you?”

Wyll nodded, and we walked out the front door.

“You seemed a little spooked in that kitchen,” I said, slipping my hand into his as we trudged towards the lower city. “Was it something I said?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Wyll said, sounding puzzled. “Dash, I *knew* that kitchen.”

“As in, you’ve been there before? When you visited with your father?”

He shook his head. “Earlier. Much earlier. When I was a child, sometimes Father would send me out with messages for people. Or to pick up little notes. I think... Shares’ Caress was one of those places. Or the kitchen was. I had no idea what it was, of course.”

“Huh. A love affair?” I asked, feeling a stir of concern. Damn Astarion and his snarky remarks. Had Wyll’s father known my mother? And if so, in what sense?

“Probably,” Wyll said. His brow was furrowed, as if he was looking at a puzzle that was missing just a few too many pieces. “Wouldn’t have been the first time. My father had quite the roving eye.”

“Hmm. Sending a child with love notes to a brothel seems a little off-colour,” I said. “I suppose he didn’t have many people he could truly trust, though.”

“Mmm.” Wyll seemed lost in thought.

Back at the Elfsong, we curled up together on the bed.

“Are you alright?” Wyll asked. “You’re quiet.”

“Mmm. Feeling melancholy. My mother... I knew things would be different now. I knew everything would have changed. But knowing it intellectually, and experiencing it? Two very different things.” I took out the ring Mamzelle Amira had given me, twirling it slowly, staring at it.

“Tell me?”

“I grew up there. It was home. And now there’s one single person in the whole place who remembers my mother. Barely remembers me. I feel oddly at sea. As though I thought I had roots; an anchor. But I don’t. I have nothing to connect me to my past here. Except this one,

single ring. It seems such a slim connection to my mother, you know? I'm not sure how to feel about it all."

"Would you like to cuddle, my darling?"

"Desperately," I said, smiling at him and snuggling close as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I slid the ring onto my pinky finger, rested my head on his shoulder, and breathed in. Sulphur and oakmoss. "That faint oakmoss scent you often have. Is that from hugging trees and the like, or is it a perfume?"

"An interesting tangent in the conversation," he said, kissing my forehead. "It's a pot of scented balm I bought from a trader. Feels like a lifetime ago. It reminded me of the Wilden Oak, and I couldn't resist. But I only use the tiniest amount. Just to remind myself where I came from, when life is difficult. Or lately, because you said you liked it."

"You are the sweetest man," I said. "Not that I don't love how you smell regardless. But now it reminds me of our betrothal. I think perhaps it always will."

"An excellent reason to wear it for the rest of my life," he said, looking at me with fondness. "My darling. I still can't believe you said yes."

"As though I could refuse you."

"Hmm. Speaking of... you were talking about feeling unanchored."

"Mmm. To my past, yes. I feel connected to you, love, and it's wonderful. But... I still feel a little lost, when I think about my past. It's all just... gone."

"Would you like to go back to your mother's home, once this is all over? Find her family; perhaps learn more about her?"

"I... think perhaps I might," I said slowly. "But I have no idea where to start. I was too young when we left to know or care where we were. And she didn't speak much about her past. Said the future was much brighter, and far more interesting."

"Old colleagues, maybe?"

I thought about that. Were any of the whores of Sharess' Caress, twenty years ago, still alive and in the city? Why not? The life of a gutter whore, like I'd been, was often short and brutal; but Sharess' Caress had been the premier brothel in the city. It had taken a large cut, but my mother and I hadn't gone wanting too often. So the people she'd worked with might still be here, somewhere. Retired, perhaps married.

"That seems a possibility," I said. "But how would I track them down?"

"I'm sure we can figure something out. We've hunted down all sorts of evil beasts. A couple of mortals shouldn't be too big a challenge for this group."

"You think the others would help?" I felt a stab of self-recrimination. This wasn't something I should be wasting the group's resources on.

“You can’t be serious. You’ve helped us all do any number of odd tasks. Of course they will. If you need us to go house to house looking for retired whores, we’ll do it. Some of us with more relish than others, though, I’ll admit,” he added with a grin. “Perhaps once we take out the Absolute, though.”

“Mmm. If we don’t manage that, it won’t matter anyway.”

“Ahh, there’s my darling. Optimistic to the end.”

Wayward wizards and whores

Chapter Notes

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

I woke to a new dawn, and immediately started to worry. Something Wyll had said to me once – or I'd said to him; I wasn't sure which – came back to me. That every time we thought we were close to the end of our joint endeavour, we found another three problems that needed to be solved. Even now, when we felt so close to taking down the elder brain. We had all three netherstones. We had some measure of temporary control over it. But now Minsc had joined us, and someone needed to keep an eye on him. Jaheira, hopefully.

Then there was Gale. And Karlach. And gods, we needed to check up on Rolan. Perhaps it wasn't quite my business, but I couldn't bear to leave a young person in the hands of someone who seemed abusive. Maybe he was fine. Maybe. My stomach clenched – no, I recognised the look in his eyes. The one that said *No, I can't have made a mistake this large about someone. I must be confused. If I just...*

While Wyll and I meditated, I let these worries go through my head, and tried to let them go as I thought about them. In the end, I could only do so much. I would make mistakes. People would get hurt because of those mistakes. I was a mortal being, and all I could do was an approximation of my best. It was frustrating to admit, but I couldn't actually control the world around me.

Eventually I sighed and stood up. Feeling a little better about inevitable failures wasn't quite the result I'd hoped for. Somehow, despite knowing better, I always expected meditation sessions to end with all the solutions to my problems tied in a neat bow.

Wyll opened his eyes not long after I stood up. “Breakfast?” he asked.

“Mmm. We need to talk to Gale,” I said, stretching.

“Hells. You never just rest, do you? You're always thinking about all of us.”

“And what we need to do. There's so much that can go wrong, still.”

“You're sure Gale is in a bad place right now? Wanting to be divine doesn't seem that terrible.”

“You know,” I said, thinking about it, “if it was anyone else, I don't think it would be that bad. It's just... Gale. He worries me.”

“Well. I'd give more weight to your opinion than mine, on this. Just let me know what you need from me.”

I felt a surge of gratitude. “Thank you, love. I want to remind him that we all love him; that he always has a place in our hearts and lives. That's what most concerns me. That he's

moving towards this option because it seems like his only one. There's got to be another way forward for him.”

“I can't see how telling someone they're loved would harm anything.”

“Hmm. I'd like to think so. But I think anything we do can have unintended consequences, good or bad. All we can do is try to spread light and love while we can.”

“Spoken like a true Lathandrian,” Wyll said, and laughed as he dodged the mock blow I aimed in his direction.

To smooth the way, we delivered breakfast to the common rooms. Coffee, bacon, and pastries tended to put most people in a better mood.

When Gale emerged, yawning, I pushed coffee and a pastry over to him.

“Oh,” he said. “This is the discussion you promised, is it not?” He took a sip of coffee.

I nodded. “I'm worried about you. This plan of yours... it seems risky. And I want to make sure that your motives are good.”

Gale's brow creased into a frown. “You've known me this long, and you think my motives are evil?”

I shook my head. “No, I'm worried that you're thinking with the part of yourself that doesn't value Gale the human.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Shit. He was offended. Oh well – in for a copper, in for a gold piece. I drew a deep breath and plunged in. “I want you to know that we love you. That you're an important part of this group as Gale the wizard... but also an important part of our lives, as Gale Dekarios. Whom we'd still love and want to be around no matter what: no powers, mighty wizard, or god.

“There are so many things I love about you. The gentle humour in your eyes. The way you reach out to touch me when emotions are high, because you know that makes me feel better. The way you love to share your knowledge with others. The twinkle in your eyes when you're about to deliver a piece of witty repartee. Your love of helping and teaching people. None of these things in and of themselves make you unique or special. But together... they add up to a wonderful person who I'm honoured to call a friend.

“Gods don't care about such things. You've said so yourself. And I love those things about you. I'd be sad if you went back to Waterdeep after this, because I'd miss you so much. But at least I'd know that you were there, and alive, and learning to love everything about life. If you were a god... Gale, I could celebrate your new godhood, and I'd still mourn you. Because I love you, not your power. Not what you can do for me. Just the core of who you are.

“I don't think god Gale would want to hug me anymore, or eat dinner with me, or talk about obscure bits of medical and magical lore. I worry that if you ascend to godhood, I'll end up

losing my dearest friend.”

“So. You'd deny me a chance at godhood because you don't want to lose a friend? You're that selfish? Deny me this, Dash, and our friendship is over regardless.”

I shook my head, sighing. “You misunderstand me. I won't deny you, Gale. I stopped you from exploding that thing in your chest once, because I was sure I knew better. Now... I'm not so sure. I can't speak for Wyll here, but... I'll back you up. Whatever you decide. Whatever you need. As long as it's within my powers and my conscience, it's yours. I just... I want you to know how much you're loved and valued as you are. That's all.”

“It's not just Dash,” Wyll said quietly. “Over the course of the last few months, you've gone from chance ally to my bosom friend, Gale. You've cared for all of us. With food, with kindness, with love. If you must do this, you have my sword at your side. But we both want you to know what a huge hole you'd leave in our lives.”

“And what of the huge hole I leave wherever I might be standing, when the orb detonates?” Gale asked. “You forget. I'll be leaving you regardless, in a few months at the most. This arrangement with Mystra, to keep my orb stable – it won't last.”

I winced. “True. But another solution might present itself. We'll look, I promise. And like I said – I'll support you if you try to ascend. And I'll just hope to all the heavens that you don't simply cease to be.”

He sighed. “So what are you asking of me?”

“Stay open to other options. That's all. And be aware of just how much you're loved and appreciated for yourself.”

“I suppose I can do that much,” he said. “In return for your support. It might not seem to you as though you're asking much, but you're asking me to hold onto hope for a cure, when I'd all but let it go.”

I nodded, sombre. “I am. And I realise it seems simpler to let it go. That sometimes hope can hurt more than anything else in existence. But I'm asking regardless, for the love we have for you.”

“Damn it! You know exactly how to tug my heartstrings, don't you?”

“It's sincere, though.”

“Fine,” he said, standing abruptly. “Look for other solutions. But if you stand in my way, so help me...” He turned and left.

Wyll and I looked at each other. “Well,” he said. “That could have gone worse.”

“Could have gone better, too, I suppose,” I said. “Now we just have to figure out how to cure Gale. He's researched far more than we ever could. He had access to the best libraries in Waterdeep. How the hells do we best that?”

“Maybe the answer isn’t to be found in books?”

“Blasphemy!”

“Ha! Perhaps our new friend at the tabernacle might have some suggestions.”

I considered that. “Perhaps a history expert, too? Do you know of anyone?”

“Hmm. Father might. While we’re at it, we also need to track down the Gondians and see if they can help Karlach.”

“True,” I said, rubbing my temples. “Gods, there’s so much left to do.”

“You don’t have to do it all alone, dearest,” Wyll said, moving to sit next to me and pulling me into a side-on hug. “But perhaps we should start writing lists.”

“And if someone else gets hold of our lists?”

“So what? Is anything we’re doing that much of a secret? Gale’s ambitions aside.”

“You’re right. Ugh. I should be better at this. But yes. Let’s talk to your father. And I suppose we might find the Gondians at the House of Wonders, now?”

“Worth a try, that’s for sure. While we’re on the topic, I had a thought about your mother, too,” Wyll said. “I think we overlooked one person who might be able to help. Although I don’t relish having this conversation with him.”

I closed my eyes as puzzle pieces fell into place. “Your father. Of course.”

He nodded. “He exchanged an awful lot of correspondence with that place, in my memory. He must know something.”

“That’s a good point, love,” I said, moving closer to him. “But if we ask him for help… I’ll have to explain why. All of it.”

Wyll nodded, his cheek moving against my forehead. “We would have had to have that conversation eventually, I suppose. Better sooner than later. Before someone decides to blackmail you when they realise your connection to him.”

Guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Hey,” he said, drawing away a little. “Darling. No. Don’t ever think you’re an inconvenience to me. I love you. You didn’t lie to me or deceive me. I would never, ever regret you.”

“It will be an uncomfortable conversation, though, at best. At worst… he could demand you break this off.” I felt a surge of pain. Gods, not again. I couldn’t do that again.

“Not happening. I don’t care if Ao himself tells me it’s over. I’m yours.”

“Disowned again? I can’t let you do that.”

“You don't get a say in this one, dearest. I get to choose what I want for my life. And I've already chosen what I want most.”

I smiled and pulled him close again. “Fine. I love you too. Stubborn bastard.”

“Oh. We can tell him of our decision, too, if the discussion goes well. If you're still of the same mind? That aiming to take over for my father is our best path?”

I nodded. “I am, if you are. You've had a chance to think it through?”

“I have. The city will need a firm hand to recover and thrive. If Father is no longer feeling up to the task... well, there aren't many people I'd see doing his job effectively. But with your help, and Father's guidance, I think I can do it.”

“And at least you care,” I added. “You might not be confident in your abilities yet, but I know you'll try your damndest. And sometimes, that's the best choice – the person who will always *try*.”

“Thank you,” he said, kissing my forehead. “You always build me up when I falter.”

I lifted my face to his, and he laid his lips against mine. I felt a lick of pure lust slide through me, and as Wyll drew away, I could see he'd seen it in my face.

“Can we take some time before the Healing Hole?” he asked. “Do we have time?”

“I don't think we do,” I said, with honest regret. “But later, sweetheart? Once we've talked to your father?”

“Tell me,” he murmured, kissing my neck. “Tell me what you want to do to me. I want to spend all day imagining you fucking me.”

“So many things,” I breathed. “But... I'm feeling sentimental. Do you remember, not long before our betrothal, you told me...”

He closed his eyes. “Hells. That I wanted you to fuck me with your hand on my dick. You remembered?”

“Sweetheart, I damn near did it on the spot, you aroused me so much.”

“I'll admit, I was rather disappointed that you didn't.”

“Well... I'd hate to disappoint my love again,” I said, kissing him. “Come on, sweetheart. Let's go, before temptation gets too much.”

“Right,” Wyll said, as I ushered the last patient out the door with a sigh. “Your plants are watered. I added a little of your fertiliser to each. Was that right?”

“Perfect. Thank you, love.” I stripped the sheet from the small bed at the back of the store, where I examined patients who I needed to see lying down, and replaced it. I threw the used

sheet into the basket I used for dirty laundry. “I’m running low on a few potions, but I think I can wait until tomorrow to make them up. As long as there isn’t a sudden outbreak of sailor’s lament in the city, we should be fine.”

“Sailor’s lament?” Wyll asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Happens on long voyages,” I said. “Joints hurt and swell. Gums bleed. Fresh fruit cures it. Come to think of it... I was just being flippant, but laying in some supplies might be a good idea. In case these food shortages continue. I can at least keep some people from getting deathly ill. From that danger, at least. Rosehips, orange peel... neither should be in very high demand right now.”

“You can make a lifesaving potion from orange peel and rosehips?”

I grinned at him. “I can indeed! Though sailor’s lament rarely kills, in usual circumstances. Just hurts a lot.”

At the palace, a short line of petitioners waited outside the audience chamber for their chance to speak to Grand Duke Ravengard. The steward’s eyes widened when he saw Wyll – he clearly recognised him. Though from his early life or recent days, I couldn’t tell.

“You’re here to see the grand duke?” he asked. “I’ll check if he can see you.”

“No need,” Wyll said, waving an arm airily. “We’ll wait our turn. No need to disrupt your day more than necessary.”

“You’re sure, saer?” the steward asked. “It’s no trouble.”

Wyll shook his head. “I know your job rather well,” he said with a wince. “I’ll not mess up the list. Put us at the bottom. All is well.”

We sat a short distance from the other petitioners, many of whom edged further away, looking at us askance. I chuckled quietly. Wyll caught my eye and grinned, understanding the joke. If they only knew who was in the room with them, their tunes would change rather quickly. As it was, our appearances didn’t exactly inspire confidence. A gnome and a devilish-looking man, well-armed even here, and – I realised, looking at our clothes in contrast to others’ best suits – rather scruffy to boot. We looked like trouble on the hoof.

Wyll seemed lost in thought, and as we had a while to wait, I decided to make use of the time for a deep meditation. I crossed my legs and leant back against the wall, breathing deep, slipping into a trance to slowly and methodically feel out each part of my body, looking for small problems that could grow into large ones, or bigger issues that I’d been ignoring. I’d made it up to my lower back with no greater concerns than a sluggish gut when Wyll touched my arm gently, pulling me from the trance.

“Our turn, dear,” he said, standing.

“Wyll! Dash!” Ulder Ravengard exclaimed as we walked into the audience chamber. “You know you didn’t have to wait in line to see me? You’re family; or as close as matters, Dash.”

A lump rose in my throat. It had been a long time since someone had truly claimed me as family. And now, I realised, we might be about to blow that sky-high.

“You left me serving that steward post for six months for abusing my privileges,” Wyll replied, smiling at his father as he came forward to clasp his hand. “I remember the chaos caused when people insisted on barging through and messing up my careful schedule.”

Ulder laughed. “A lesson that stuck longer than I expected, I’ll confess. What can I do for you?”

“We need to talk to you,” Wyll said. “A personal matter. Can we...?” He gestured at the guards.

Ulder nodded, his face curious, and dismissed the secretary and guards.

“What is it? I admit to quite the sense of curiosity, now.”

Wyll looked at me.

I took a deep breath. *This is it. Courage. Wyll loves me.* “First, I need to explain a little about myself,” I said. “My mother was a whore. At Sharess’ Caress.”

Ulder’s eyes widened, and he started to speak.

“Wait,” I said, raising a hand. “There’s more. I was a whore as well. When I was young. I’m not exactly well-bred. Very far from it.”

The duke nodded, looking thoughtful. “Who was your mother?”

I blinked. “Her... public name, I suppose... was Rosabelle.”

A look of relief glinted in his eyes. “Is that all?” he asked.

“Apart from the request,” I said. “It’s something you needed to know, though. Chances are, it will come out. Eventually.”

“Hmm,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “Since you and Wyll are planning to stay here in the city, it’s only a matter of time until someone decides it’s worth a bit of blackmail. Are you asking how to handle it?”

I stared at him. “Not a single word of concern for your son? About my background?”

Ulder laid a hand on my shoulder for a moment. “I meant it,” he said. “When I told you that your history meant little to me, compared to what you had done for the city. For me. You have proven yourself, over and again. Wyll means the world to me, despite the evidence to the contrary. I am content that he loves you, and you love him. As long as you continue to do so.” He looked at Wyll, who pulled me into a one-armed hug.

Hot tears rose in my eyes. I blinked them back, trying to focus on the job at hand. “Thank you,” I said unsteadily. “Honestly, I thought you might have me thrown from the palace.”

“You’re family,” he said simply, shrugging. “So. This request?”

I explained the lack of information I had on my mother, and what I proposed to do about it. “I thought you might know where some of her colleagues are now,” I said. “They seem the most likely to know who she was, and where she was from.”

“Hmm,” Ulder said. “I think I might be able to decrease the number of steps in this hike, somewhat.”

“How?” I asked. “You knew her?”

“This can’t leave the room,” he cautioned. “Both of you. I need utter silence on this.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “But these worms – sometimes I share things without meaning to.”

Wyll nodded in agreement.

“Well. If my network is compromised, that might just be a price I have to pay,” he said. “Very well. Most of the workers at Sharess’ Caress are informants for me.”

I blinked, trying to parse this information. “Oh. OH. *That’s* why you sent Wyll with notes, back and forth?”

He nodded. “No one pays much attention to another brat underfoot, even if the brat is clean and well-dressed. Which Wyll rarely was, at that age.”

Wyll snorted.

“Suddenly this is making far more sense,” I said slowly.

“Not that I didn’t visit for more personal reasons, occasionally,” he said, watching me carefully. “Not your mother, though. She wasn’t my type, and I suspect I wasn’t hers.”

“Oh, thank all the gods of light above,” I said. “That’s a relief.”

He actually chuckled, a sound I hadn’t heard him make very often. “Understandable. But... my point is, unless Gortash destroyed them, I should still have records on all my informants. Somewhere, in this labyrinth. I just need to find where they are now. That man created utter chaos in this place.”

“Which should contain information like her real name,” I said, finally catching on. “That’s amazing. You’re willing to look?”

“You pulled me out of the Iron Throne, killed my primary competitor, rescued Counsellor Florrick, *and* took down the Bhaalists that have been terrorising the city. I think I can spare the time to help you, even if you couldn’t simply ask me as Wyll’s father. Which – in case it’s not clear – you may.”

It suddenly occurred to me that to Ulder Ravengard, this was like a hug would be to me. An expression of caring, perhaps even love.

“Thank you,” I said, meeting his gaze. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Back in the Elfsong, Wyll and I washed up and changed into light robes, then reclined on the bed for a while before dinner.

“Informants. Of all things. My father had me running spy notes, didn’t he?”

I nodded. “Sounds like it.”

“I can’t believe I never figured it out. I thought they must have been love letters. My father had quite the roving eye, back in the day.”

“Is that why you were so…” I paused, struggling to think of a polite way to say it.

“Straitlaced?” he asked. “Hmm. Possibly. I didn’t find his excesses very appealing, that’s all. He wasn’t overt about it, most of the time. But when I was older, he took me to Shares’s Caress. Told me to pick out someone, and he’d foot whatever bill I racked up. I just sat and talked to a friendly whore, drinking expensive drinks, until I needed to vomit.”

“You weren’t curious?” I asked.

“I knew how to make love,” he said, moving closer to me. “I had done it. I just… without a connection, I didn’t like it. It felt empty. Hollow.”

I took the hint and leant against him, his arm sliding around my shoulders. “That I understand, I think,” I said. “It’s not the same for me, quite. I can find release in a simple roll in the grass. But it’s so different with someone I love.”

“It is?” he asked, bending to lay kisses down the side of my neck. “How is it different?”

I tilted my head to give him better access to my neck. The kisses were arousing, sending light pulses of warmth down to my loins, and I wanted more of them. “Sweetheart, you drive me to utter distraction. I want to fuck you, but I also want to cuddle close to you and never let you go.”

“Never, hmm?”

“Never,” I said softly, sliding an arm around him, hand under his robe. I caressed the skin gently as I enjoyed his kisses on my neck.

Wyll kissed slowly across my cheek to my mouth, his fingers stroking my beard. His lips touched mine, and every nerve caught fire. Every kiss fanned the flames, and I felt my face flush as my cock stiffened. Eventually I pulled away a little.

“May I touch you, beloved?” I asked. “Gods. The effect you have on me.”

“Will you make good on your morning promise?”

I bit my lip as I remembered what I’d told him. “Sweetheart, I’d *love* to.”

“Mmm. Then touch me all you like, darling. I’m yours.”

“I want to play with your cock first,” I said, and his eyes widened.

“Hells. If I ever get tired of hearing that, slay me. I’ll already be dead inside,” he said.

“Where do you want me?”

“Take off the robe. On your back. Legs apart.”

He followed my instructions, and I lay down between his legs, head resting on his upper thigh.

“Hmm…” I said, looking at the bounty in front of me. “You know… I’d rather like to play with your balls, too. Are they tender?”

He shrugged. “No idea if they’re more or less so than anyone else’s. But I’d like to find out.”

I licked at one, and he inhaled sharply. “Tell me if you don’t like something, love,” I told him, and went back to my exploration. I kissed slowly over its surface until I heard his breathing change, then sucked it slowly into my mouth, careful to be gentle, and caressed it with my tongue.

“Hells. That’s like nothing I’ve ever felt,” he said, breathing hard.

I moved on to his cock, sliding my cheek over it, letting its irregularities caress my cheek in turn. He groaned. “I haven’t even licked it yet,” I said, looking up at his face. He bit his lip, watching me.

I slid the tip of my tongue in tiny circles over the base of his cock, moving slowly up its length, drawing those small circles all the way. When I reached the tip, I started to circle it with my tongue. I looked up, to find Wyll grasping the sheets with both hands. “Do you like that?” I asked.

He panted. “That’s a ridiculous question.”

I laughed, feeling a touch of triumph. Gods, I loved having him in the palm of my hand like this. I continued the circling with my tongue, going slowly further down, until my lips were against the tip of his cock. “More?” I asked, and he nodded, eyes wild.

I took it as deep into my mouth as I could, pushing down, till it started to slide down my throat. He called out, and I reached up to take his hand in mine. A few more repetitions, and he squeezed my hand hard, twice. Enough.

“Whew. I could barely talk for a few moments there,” he said. “Give me a moment to recover. Hells, Dash, your mouth feels like Elysium.”

“You say the sweetest things, love.”

“I’ve never felt pleasure or joy like that you bring me, darling. I feel drunk on you, like I’ve quaffed the finest wine in all of Faerun, then eaten of the golden apple of the gods themselves.”

“You just *had* to outdo yourself, didn’t you?”

“It seems only fair, when you seem dedicated to the same,” he said, sitting up to pull me into an embrace. “Mmm. My darling. I love having you in my arms.”

“This sort of thing is exactly why we got kicked out of the communal rooms,” I said.

“Mushy words and nudity?”

“It’s possible the words bothered them the most.”

“Such a sad affair. Especially now we have to languish, alone with only the other for companionship, in this room with a big bed,” he said, eyes dancing.

“I’m heartbroken,” I said. “You’ll have to kiss me to make up for it all.”

“Utter torture,” he said, devoting himself to exactly that.

Eventually, I drew away a little. “I hope you’re feeling chastened,” I said with mock severity.

He grinned. “Very,” he said, pressing against me. “Darling. Will you fuck me?”

A surge of arousal went through me.

“Gods,” I said. “Those have to be my favourite words from you. Apart from *I’m yours* .”

“Hmm,” he said, hand sliding down my back to my arse. “I’ll keep that in mind, dearest. But you didn’t answer the question.”

I pushed one of his shoulders, so he fell onto his back. I knelt, reaching for the oil.

“Watch me,” I said softly. “Watch me getting ready to fuck you, sweetheart.”

I poured a little oil into my hand, and slowly stroked down my cock. It was already hard from the previous play, but it hardened further under my ministrations. Wyll watched with glazed eyes, already breathing fast.

I threw my head back, enjoying the physical sensations, but enjoying even more the feel of Wyll watching, hungry, wanting the cock I was playing with. I put down the oil, but close by.

“Turn over,” I said. “On your side, love.”

He obeyed, and I lay down behind him, reaching around to slowly run my oily fingers over his cock. I pulled his hips closer, so my cock nestled in the crevice of his arse. Desire ran through me, building and surging with every breath.

“Gods,” I said. “I remember when my sole desire was to lie like this, my cock naked against your arse, so I could imagine how it felt to fuck you.”

His breathing sped up, so I started to move against him, letting my cock slide over his arsehole. Pleasure tried to overtake me, and I pushed it down a little. Not yet. Nowhere near.

“Stop imagining?” he asked, gasping. “Dash, please.”

I moved away to re-oil, then slid the tip of my cock around his arsehole. Wyll groaned, and I grinned. Gods, I loved making him make these noises for me. “Yes?” I asked, and his back arched.

“Fuck me,” he said. “Oh... *hells*,” as I slid slowly into him, my hand moving to grasp his cock.

I moved my hand in the same rhythm as my hips, concentrating on getting the coordination just right – on anything other than the bliss currently trying to pull me under. Pleasure pulsed through me with every slow thrust, and Wyll started to cry out with every stroke.

“You're good, love?” I asked, fairly sure of the answer.

He just nodded.

I continued, speeding up, hearing his breathing change to match. He was right there with me. I pushed into his arse over and over, until the feel of the muscles clenching around my cock pulled my attention from getting the rhythm correct, and onto just how good I was feeling. Warmth ran through my body in waves, building, increasing, threatening to break and tumble me into utter ecstasy with every movement. I breathed hard, focusing. *Not much longer. Keep it together, Dash...*

“I'm close, love,” I told him.

“Stay inside me,” he said, voice strained. “Spill your seed... *hells*... inside me.”

“You're sure?” I asked, startled enough to take my attention for a moment from the sensations taking me over.

“Please. Darling. I want to feel it.”

The idea sent me over the edge, erasing every scrap of control, and I climaxed with a shout, juices pulsing into him as I shook with the strength of it, hand squeezing his cock. He cried out my name, and stiffened, then his seed spilt out over my hand and the sheet.

He panted for breath, and I took the opportunity to lick a finger, tasting him. He turned to watch me, eyes glazing again.

“Hells. I love watching you do that,” he said, voice unsteady. “Tasting me.”

“I love tasting you,” I said, moving my hips, watching him shiver in delayed reaction. “My sweet love. Salty love, rather.”

He chuckled.

I withdrew reluctantly, wishing I could stay deep inside him, a tangible reminder of our connection. But I couldn't. "Come cuddle with me?"

He rolled over into my arms, kissing my cheek. "Always, darling."

"How did it measure up against the fantasy?" I asked.

"No comparison. I misjudged the intensity entirely," he said. "Your dick in my arse, your hand on my dick, moving them together... I couldn't focus on anything except what you were doing to me. I couldn't even move, I was so lost."

"Mmm. Good. Just how I want you."

"And when you were kneeling there, stroking your dick for me? Hells. You're beautiful. But even more so when you're touching yourself."

I slipped a hand to the back of his neck, pulling him close to kiss his mouth. He wrapped his arms around me, making a happy sound into my mouth, deepening the kiss, so I relaxed into enjoying the simple pleasure of our mouths moving against each other, his warmth and taste and scent filling my senses.

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry it's taken all week to get this chapter out to you, folks. This one gave me **trouble**. Every time I thought I'd edited it into submission, another glaring problem made itself bleeding obvious. Ugh. Some days, writing feels a lot like herding cats.*

But on the bright side: I finally managed to wrestle it into a semblance of sense, and we're barrelling towards the final (in-game) confrontation. Which is already edited, thank all the gods. 😄

I hope you enjoy this one!

Love, Rowan

Hopes and dreams

Chapter Notes

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

“Shit,” I said out loud.

Wyll jumped. “Huh? What’s wrong, dear?”

“We forgot to ask your father about history experts.”

He shrugged. “It’s not exactly Toril-shaking information. I think we can entrust the question to a note.”

“Huh. Good point, love.”

“We did also forget to tell him about our decision, though.”

“Ugh. Why doesn't my brain work a little better?”

“Because you're so wise, all your memories fell out?”

I laughed.

“Seriously, though – I don't know about you, but I was just happy that things went as well as they did. Not that I wasn't utterly sincere about wanting you above all. But... it would be nice to keep my father in my life, too, now that we've reunited.”

“I can understand that, sweetheart. I'd feel the same if my mother was still alive.”

“I wish she were. I'd love to have met her.”

I went to him, and he opened his arms to pull me close. “Gods. I still miss her. I wish we'd been able to save her.”

“Is that why you became a healer?”

“Partly. It certainly influenced my decisions on what to learn. Our training pushed us to find our motivations for the vocations we picked, so I spent some time thinking about it.”

“Huh. Why did they make you do that?”

I sighed. “Because people get into vocations for all sorts of reasons, and some of them are... less optimal than others, I suppose. You'd think people become healers to help others, and that's often the surface motivation, but underneath... a lot are trying to distract themselves from their own pain, instead.”

“They become a healer instead of seeing one?”

“Exactly. That was a big part of my early motivation, deep down. It felt like a way to heal myself without having to trust another person. My mentor disabused me of that idea very quickly. Told me I'd end up burnt out and miserable within a year if I kept up that nonsense.”

“Oof. Harsh.”

“She wasn't wrong, though. Others... come to it for the power over vulnerable people. They're the ones to beware. Soft and sweet if you're influential. Dark and vicious when you're sick and helpless.”

Wyll shuddered. “So. What's on for today, love? Would you like me to go see my father while you're at the Healing Hole? He only holds audiences and court meetings in the afternoon, so I should be able to get in to see him fairly easily.”

“Oh. Love. That would be helpful – thanks. Would you check on the House of Wonders as well? See if you can set up an appointment for us? It's not too far out of the way, is it?”

“Not at all,” he said, kissing my cheek. “I'll do that. What's on for this afternoon?”

“I want to check on Rolan. I'm worried about him. Thought I might take you and Gale, if that's alright?”

“I'm at your disposal. So if we can get an appointment this afternoon at the House of Wonders, I should take it?”

“We should check with Karlach, first. I haven't actually told her what we're up to.”

Later that morning, Wyll walked into the Healing Hole, whistling. He quietened when he saw I was with a patient.

“Ah! Just the person I wanted to see!” I called out, motioning him over to the bed.

“What's up?”

“This is Sallah. Sallah, this is my partner and occasional assistant, Wyll. Sallah's arm is broken, and I need some help setting it.”

Wyll winced in sympathy. “Ouch. Hi, Sallah. What do you need, Dash?”

“Hold just above her elbow in one hand and her wrist in the other. When I say so, pull them apart, to pull the bone pieces straight. And keep the pressure on until I say to stop. It'll be a while.”

“This is going to hurt, isn't it?” Sallah asked.

“The tea will help numb the pain,” I told her. “But yes. There's only so much I can do. Setting it will hurt, a lot – but if we don't do this, you'll have pain for the rest of your life instead.”

She shrugged, then winced as the movement jostled the broken arm. “I’m used to pain. As long as I can still use it afterwards.”

I nodded. “That’s the idea. Keep you functional and able to earn a living.”

“Alright. Distract me, horny dude. Tell me something weird and messed up.”

Wyll chuckled, taking his place at her side and laying his hands on her arm as I’d asked. “Did you know there’s a place east of here where Shar’s shadow curse lay over the land for a hundred years?”

“You don’t say! I’d heard rumours, but I thought them made up. I’m more of a sailor, myself. Don’t get inland very often.”

“And why would you, with all of the open sea to traverse?” Wyll asked.

I shuddered as I mixed the lime mixture I’d need, and laid bandages in it to soak up the mixture.

“It’s true, though. At least, it was. In the darkest depths of the curse, we came upon a little hospital. Perhaps once it was a little like this place. By the time we found it, though…” Wyll continued the story, his one-person audience staring at him, intrigued.

“Right,” I said, cutting in before he could get to the suspenseful bit. “Here’s what we need to do, Sallah. Wyll is going to pull the bone back into place. It will hurt like the hells for a few moments. I’ll paste these boards onto your arm to keep it straight, then wrap it in bandages. The bandages are treated to solidify as they dry. They’ll hold the bones in place. You’ll need to stay still for a while once I’m done with the bandages.”

She nodded, her face draining of colour.

“You’ll be alright,” I said, more gently. “Just focus on the fact that you’ll be better in a few weeks, and this will fade to a bad dream. Wyll – now, please.”

He pulled slowly, and Sallah yelled. “Balduran’s balls, that hurts like a bastard!”

I got to work as swiftly as I could, pasting the boards to her forearm with a flour-and-water glue, then wrapping it with the wet bandages. Soon it was done, and if I’d done it right…

“Let go now,” I told Wyll.

He released Sallah’s arm, and it stayed straight. No deformation.

“That looks good,” I said, feeling a rush of relief. “Sit still for a while, now. We need to wait for those bandages to dry and harden.”

“Will this stuff loosen if I get it wet?”

I nodded. “It will indeed. Wrap it with oilcloth if you need to go out on the boat. Not that I recommend it for at least a week, and you *need* to rest that arm. But I know what it’s like.

Just don't use it, please. And if something happens, come back to have me redo the bandages. Better the extra cost than losing the use of your arm for good."

"You got an appointment at the House of Wonders?" I asked.

"I did!" Wyll said, grinning. "They were unimpressed until Zanner walked in and recognised my voice. Suddenly I went from annoying petitioner to honoured guest. It was quite the amusing reversal."

"You didn't drop your father's name?"

"I... have been less inclined to do that lately. People think I'm lying," he said, his mouth downturning. "I suppose I could ask Father for a letter of introduction, but it all seems so pretentious."

I wrapped an arm around his waist for a quick, passing hug. "I love you, sweetheart,"

The sadness melted from his face. "My light," he said, softening. "I love you, too."

"So when's the appointment?"

"Mid-afternoon. Should we grab Gale and Karlach, see if we can kill two squirrels with one stone?"

"Sounds good. Gale might be able to help. Oh... we could stop by Dammon's forge, too."

"Oh! You found him?"

I bit my tongue. Damn. I hadn't meant to let that slip just yet. Oh well. "Forge of the Nine," I said. "Near the cemetery in the Lower City."

"Hmm," he said, casting a quizzical look at me. "That's handy. Do you think he'd come along?"

"Worth asking," I said, shrugging. "Let's go there now? I could do with some food, too. Do you think that place with the greasy wraps will be open?"

Wyll snorted. "If you didn't train so hard, you'd be wider than you are tall."

"Not so difficult a feat," I said, laughing. "Right. All clean here. Let's go, love."

Dammon was, unsurprisingly, working in his forge. We watched, leaning against the balustrade, as he hammered out a short length of steel and quenched it.

"Oh! Dash! Is this about —"

I shook my head an infinitesimal amount, grimacing.

He took the hint and fell silent. Wyll looked at me sideways, eyes curious, but said nothing.

I explained our mission, and Dammon clapped, black dust showering from his gloves. “Perfect!” he enthused. “I’ve been itching to get my teeth back into that problem. I’ve hit a dead end; I just don’t know enough about the engineering side of things. But the Gondians... yes, they might be able to help, if those Steel Watch monstrosities were any indication of their skill. Hmm...”

“You have an idea?” I asked, curious.

“My landlord,” he said. “She’s a diabolist. I wonder if she’d be willing to sit in? You won’t get her there by the kindness of her heart, though. Strictly business, Helsik is. Seems reliable, though.”

“Where would we find her?” I asked. This was turning into quite the large problem-solving group.

“Devil’s Fee,” Dammon said, pointing west. “Just next door, across the alley. It’s... uhh... a bit of an odd place. Tread lightly. She’s powerful, and not easily cowed.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said, smiling at him. “See you later this afternoon, then?”

He nodded and went back to his work.

Wyll and I walked out, and he held out his hand for me to hold as we walked.

“Do you and Dammon have a secret?” he asked.

I smiled up at him and squeezed his hand. “We do.”

“Is it anything I should be concerned by?”

“Not at all, love,” I said. “You’ll know soon enough.”

“Alright,” he said, shrugging, his face lightening.

“That’s it? No further questions?”

“I trust you with my life, darling. I might as well start trusting you with my heart, as well.”

I chuckled. “I love you.”

“So. The Devil’s Fee?” he asked. “This feels like a bad omen.”

“Could be,” I said. “Or, I suppose, we could think of it as Karlach already having paid a fee to a devil.”

“Hmm.”

We walked into the place to find... a surprisingly ordinary-looking, rather high-end shop. Full of oddities and artefacts that made my teeth ache, but still full of plush upholstery and gleaming wooden furniture.

“Can I help you?” the person at the counter asked.

“That depends,” I said. “Are you Helsik?”

“I am,” she said, eyeing Wyll and I. “Who’s asking? And why do you want to know?”

I explained our mission. “Dammon thought you might be willing to help us out.”

She frowned. “Karlach, eh? Former inner circle of Zariel herself?”

I nodded, mildly confused. Where was she going with this?

“Would she answer a few questions for me, you think?”

I glanced at Wyll, who shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Loyalty’s not really the issue, here.”

“Then we might just have a deal,” she said, looking thoughtful and just a touch avaricious. “Mid-afternoon at the House of Wonders, right? I’ll be there. I want to have a chat with this Karlach before I help.”

Back at the Elfsong, Gale, Shadowheart and Karlach were... playing lanceboard? Hmm. Not a game I’d have expected two of them to embrace.

“Gale and Karlach: do you have plans this afternoon?” I asked.

Karlach shrugged.

“Only in the sense that I have books to read and knowledge to obtain,” Gale said, his voice cool. Hmm. Still hadn’t quite forgiven me for the previous day, it seemed. “What do you need of me?”

“Karlach, hon, I want to take you to the House of Wonders and talk to the Gondians about your heart,” I said. “Gale, I want to stop by Sorcerous Sundries and check on Rolan. I’m worried about him. I thought you might have some useful insight for both.”

Gale frowned, but nodded. “Fine. I’ll come. Karlach?”

“You bet your arse!” she said, beaming. “You’re sure they’ll help, if they know how? Why would they?”

“Because we helped their kin,” I said. “We gnomes take life debts seriously. They’ll help, if they can.”

“Aces!”

“But it’s still a long shot,” I cautioned her. “Please... don’t get your hopes too high.”

“You kidding me, soldier? I’m running on nothing but hope and fumes at this point. I’ll get my hopes as high as I damn well dare.”

I grinned at her. "I love you."

"Love you too, soldier. Now. What do I need to bring?"

"Just yourself and your heart," I said, shrugging. "You can take it out, right? How long can you survive without it?"

She shrugged. "I'm not really *without it* as long as it's nearby, I think. It's some sort of weird magic shit. I don't really get how it works."

"So the Gondians will be able to inspect it while you're standing there, like Dammon did... but we can't leave it with them unless we leave you too?"

She nodded. "I think that's about it in a nutshell, yeah."

"Got it."

A while later, we all met outside the House of Wonders.

"Dammon!" Karlach called, running to grab him into a hug. "Man, it's been forever! How are you? What are you doing here?"

"Dash didn't tell you? I'm here to consult on your heart."

"Oh, you bloody beautiful man. I could kiss you!"

Dammon's face expressed zero objections to that course of action. I sighed, watching them. I had a strong suspicion that Karlach was utterly oblivious to his crush.

We walked into the House of Wonders. I looked around, drawing in a breath. The high, vaulted arches overhead were built to impress and make people feel small, insignificant. Was there an extra meaning in it having been designed primarily by gnomes? An attempt to show regular folk how life felt as a gnome in a large-people city? Or was I overthinking the decor?

"This feels like the setup to a joke," Wyll said quietly to me. "Four adventurers, a diabolist, and a blacksmith walk into a bar..."

I snorted. "Let's hope it's not a joke."

Moments later, Zanner Toobin ran his hands over the components of Karlach's heart. "Ahh. Metallurgised demonovalves. Some sort of infernal alloy... ragnax?" he asked, his face turning to Dammon.

Dammon nodded. "I managed to insulate it a bit and cool it down. Recycle some of that heat into performance. But I reached the end of my expertise; I don't know what to do next."

Zanner sighed. "That's because there's nothing more to do. This can't be repaired any further."

My heart plummeted into my stomach. “Seriously? You can’t do *anything*?”

“We’ll just have to try someone else,” Karlach said, her jaw jutting outward, but her eyes showing her distress.

“Wait,” Zanner said. “I said the heart can’t be repaired. Not that *you* can’t be repaired.”

“What?”

He laid a hand flat on Karlach’s chest, over her breastbone. “Hmm. Quite a bit of paraphernalia in there. You’ve been modified quite extensively, haven’t you?”

Karlach nodded, her face vulnerable. “Zariel liked to make sure I kept at the top of my game.”

“So a biological heart is probably a waste of time. Pity. A good permanent polymorph spell, and we could have slotted in a perfectly healthy sheep or pig heart. But... that doesn’t mean we can’t construct something new. This is... innovative in some ways; utterly slapdash in others. I can’t forgive the use of a ragnax casing with steel pistons. What were they thinking? Hmmp. Probably weren’t. This design is terrible. Needs to go back to the drawing board.”

“Wait. You can build me a *new* heart?”

“I think so,” he said, already looking a million miles away. “It would be a modification of the Steel Watch ‘heart’ that we built, but modified to fit a biomechanical interface in a smaller package. Heat dissipation will still be a problem. Need some way to bleed it off safely. Unless we use it. Transmute it into a magical charge that you can feed into an amulet or something of the sort. I’m not sure how we’d do that, but I think it might be conceivable... you’d need to release it regularly.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “Seriously? You think you can actually *do* this?”

He nodded. “I think I can,” he said. “But I’d need... hmm. Access to a forge that can handle infernal materials. The infernal materials themselves. And frankly, the original blueprints and research notes wouldn’t hurt. Might save me redoing old work.”

“I have the forge,” Dammon offered. “I’d love to help. I’d like to learn how to do more.”

“For the right price, I might be able to assist with the materials. Perhaps even the blueprints,” Helsik said. “My services aren’t cheap, though.”

Gale stepped forward. “Might I offer a thought?”

I gestured an invitation. The more ideas, the merrier, in my opinion.

“Would you like to see what you can glean from the orb in my chest?” he asked Zanner. “It’s not something you’d come across every day. And it might give you some ideas on that energy transmutation requirement.”

Gale knelt and guided Zanner’s hand to his chest.

“By the bright hammer of Gond himself,” Zanner whispered. “An arcane battery. Wild and untamed. Barely leashed. Young man, you realise how dangerous that thing is? The immense power stored in it?”

“I do,” Gale said, his voice grim. “It’s quite the long story. Does it give you any ideas for Karlach’s heart, though?”

“Hmm. Different types of magical weave. If we could synthesise magic and technology together in a facsimile – a technoweave, so to speak – yes, we might be able to broach the weave barrier without causing catastrophic damage. Thank you, young man. That was very... instructional.”

“You’re welcome,” Gale said, groaning as he got to his feet. “Ugh. My knees.”

“I’d like to help you, too,” Zanner said, laying a hand on Gale’s arm. “But I have no idea where we’d start. Your problem might not be solvable with technology.”

Gale nodded, looking sombre. “I fully realise that. Don’t concern yourself. Karlach’s problem was imposed on her by slavers. Mine, inflicted by my own hubris. She, at least, deserves a cure.”

When we left, Karlach was bouncing with every step. “This is the best day. We might actually have a cure for me! Eventually. Man, I’m so excited. *So* excited. This is amazing.”

“Not so fast,” Helsik interjected. “Karlach, I’ll want information in return for my assistance.”

“You kidding? Let’s go. Ask all the questions you want. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, as long as I actually know it. Keep in mind I was only a soldier.”

Helsik motioned for Karlach to follow her.

“You’re alright to go alone?” I asked her.

“Fuck yeah. I’ll be fine. Go check on Rolan. Tell him I said hi, the silly git.”

I grinned, filled with the temptation to deliver the message just as provided. Rolan’s head might just explode.

Sorcerous Sundries was so much louder in the daytime. Elementals popped in and out of existence. Practitioners tested spells. A seller displayed their summonable creatures. I walked in and blinked. Somehow the place always just felt... too much. Probably partly because I just didn’t *use* any of these things, though. Give me a nice pair of gloves and the freedom to punch and kick, and I was generally a happy gnome.

Rolan was standing at the counter again. A large, dark bruise decorated one cheekbone.

“Ouch. I don’t remember my apprenticeship including injuries like that,” Gale muttered.

“What does Lorroakan have him learning?”

“How to take a blow, I suspect,” Wyll said, looking grim. “You should have heard him yelling at Rolan last time we were here.”

“Hmm. He does have a reputation as an absolute cad,” Gale said. “Come to think of it, Rolan was looking a little worse for wear the last time I was in, too.”

“Rolan,” I said, approaching the counter. “How are things?”

“Can’t chat,” he said, biting his lip. “What can I do for you all?”

“Any new spells?” Gale asked.

“Umm... I have a new cloudkill spell in from Waterdeep,” Rolan said. “Interested?”

“Ooh! Very...”

The two fell to bargaining, and I took a leisurely look around. The place was busy, with magical items cluttering every surface. The counter in front of me, though, was plastered with pamphlets, advertising Lorroakan’s interest in, and reward for delivery of, the Nightsong.

The Nightsong. Lorroakan was after Dame Aylin. Did he *know* she was a person, not an artefact?

I palmed a pamphlet and folded it into my pocket while Gale finished his purchase.

“Rolan, if you ever need help, we’re at the Elfsong,” I said. “You’re welcome to stay with us if you ever need to. Alright?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, a sullen tone to his voice. “I’m fine. Living my lifelong dream to apprentice to the premier wizard on the Sword Coast.”

Wyll snorted. “You realise you’ve just been talking to a man who was the Chosen of Mystra, right?”

Rolan eyed Gale, looking dubious. “Mystra’s cast-off?”

I gritted my teeth. I felt worried for the young man caught in a bad situation, but I also wanted to slap the arrogant git upside the head. Not that the poor kid needed more abuse, by the looks of him. Damn it.

“We should go,” I said abruptly. “Come on, folks.”

“We have a problem,” I said outside.

“More than Rolan’s face?” Wyll asked.

“Lorroakan’s after Dame Aylin,” I said, pulling out the pamphlet. “Look. 5000 gold reward. That’s a fortune for most adventurers.”

“Shit.”

I nodded. “Next time she shows up, we need to let her know that *the premier wizard on the Sword Coast* is after her.”

“He’s a coward,” Gale said, sniffing. “Won’t even go into his own basement for fear of the enchantments left by the previous incumbent. I doubt she has much to fear from that weakling.”

“Still. She might be immortal, but I doubt Isobel is. She might well be caught in any crossfire.”

“Good point,” Wyll said. “We need to warn him off her.”

“You think he’ll listen?” I asked Gale.

“Not from what I’ve heard,” he said.

“Fuck.”

Back at the Elfsong, I gestured for Wyll and Gale to continue to the common rooms. “I’m going to stop in at the kitchen,” I told them. “I’ll be up soon.”

The afternoon cook was doing his usual chaotic-looking dance around the kitchen, from chopping board to stove to oven to sink, a blur of motion.

“You!” he said, pausing to stir a pot. “I’m busy. What do you need?”

“Dinner now; snacks and wine for later,” I said. “What can you spare me?”

“A nice hearty soup and crusty bread with cheese,” he said. “Cinnamon rolls and a Amnan dessert wine? Is this for a picnic?”

“Of sorts,” I said, shrugging and dropping a few silver pieces on the counter. “Dinner sounds great. Do you want to give me everything at once, or have me come back for the later supplies?”

“Take it now,” he said, whirling to fill a crock with soup, stacking a wedge of cheese, knife, and loaf of bread on top. “Here...” He added a bottle and rolls to a basket, and slung it over my forearm, then loaded me up with the stacked crock. “Off you go. Out of my kitchen, already.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll leave you be.”

I dropped the basket off in the room Wyll and I shared, and took dinner into the common rooms. Gale and Wyll seemed to have brought everyone up to speed.

“The Gondians might be able to cure Karlach?” Shadowheart asked. “What are they asking? What’s the price?”

I shrugged. "I think we've earned a fair amount of goodwill," I said. "Zanner just asked about supplies, not payment."

"Well. Let's hope they don't wait until the cure's in arm's reach to tell us the price," Shadowheart said, frowning.

"Regardless," I said, watching her face. "It's good news. We have hope."

Her face closed down. "No hoping until they actually succeed. There are so many ways this could fail."

I nodded slowly, serving myself a bowl of soup from the crock. "It could. But we need to stay positive, for Karlach's sake."

"Optimism is a luxury."

Shadowheart seemed intent on not getting her hopes up. If she and Karlach were involved now... well. I knew how it felt to want to hope, but shove it down because it would just make the disappointment and heartache worse if things went sideways.

"That felt a little anticlimactic," Wyll said as we left for our own room. "Shadowheart seems especially dour today."

"She's afraid to hope," I said, shaking my head. "She's afraid of the pain."

Wyll sighed. "Do you think we can really pull this off?"

"Honestly? I don't know. But I'm going to do everything in my power to succeed," I said. "I'm sure I'll mess up a lot of things. But letting our friend die? No way. Not if I can help it. If Karlach dies, I'll be fighting for her life up to the last second."

Wyll knelt and pulled me into a hug. "Thank you, darling."

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and breathed in his scent. "I'm not doing it for you, love. I love her too."

He drew back to smile at me. "I know," he said, shaking his head as if to shake off a mood. "What do you want to do tonight?"

"Would you come up to the roof with me?" I asked. "We haven't watched the stars together for ages."

"Oh. That's perfect," he said. "You and I, a blanket, and the moon and stars above us. Like when we met."

"Just so," I said. "Here." I handed him the basket from the cook, and hunted out a spare blanket and my lute. "Let's go, sweetheart."

The roof was, blessedly, deserted. I spread out the blanket in a corner, out of sight of the trapdoor that led downstairs. “Hmm. Needs cushions.”

“I’ll grab a few,” Wyll said, bouncing over to the trapdoor and jumping down.

I laid out the wine and rolls, and started to tune my lute. Once again, I was struck by its quality. The lute I’d played as a child had been a nightmare to tune, and needed retuning a couple of times every time I played, too. This one had sensitive pegs, but once I got it in tune, it generally stayed that way until the weather changed.

When Wyll returned, I was strumming a tune. “What’s that?” he asked.

“As you walk in the wind’s whistling claws,

“Listen past the howling of the wolf’s jaws.

“My song

“Comes to you,” I sang, smiling at him.

“And when you’re lost in the trackless snow,

“Look up high where the eagles go.

“My star

“Shines for you.

“In deep, dark mine or on crumbling peak,

“Hear the words of love I speak.

“My thoughts

“Are with you.”

“Oh. A serenade and cinnamon rolls?” Wyll asked, reclining on the blanket across from me.

“My darling. I love your romantic side.”

I blew him a kiss and segued into *Last Lament* .

Later, my fingers tired and the rolls consumed, we lay together, looking up at the stars and passing the bottle of wine back and forth.

“You seem surprisingly calm now about Lathander poaching you for a cleric without a by-your-leave,” Wyll observed. “Accepting. Judging from your initial reaction, I thought you’d be more angry. Or upset. Something.”

I breathed a few times, thinking about it. “Anger was my first reaction,” I said. “But when I thought about it, I was more upset about accidentally throwing you halfway across that roof. What could have happened...” I shuddered. “I couldn’t live with the knowledge I’d killed you, love. That would destroy me.”

Wyll nuzzled at my neck, kissing softly. “You didn’t, love. You showed restraint, even when you were acting on instinct.”

“Hmm. Still. But anyway, once I got over that reaction, I spent some time thinking about how I felt about Lathander. And... I think these days, I understand better what happened in my

monastery. When I thought you and I were over, love... I sank into the depths of despair. Whenever I didn't have a specific task to distract me, I was so lost in grief and self-recrimination."

Wyll's arm tightened around me.

"Sorry, love," I said, lifting my face to kiss his cheek. "I don't mean to open old wounds. But I need to, if I'm to explain."

"I think I can see where you're going," he said, his voice soft. "You saw more clearly how Lathander could sink into grief so deep that he couldn't focus on what he might be doing to his followers."

I nodded. "Exactly. I'd been slowly realising that I needed to let go of my anger and forgive... and then I came to understand, too."

"A reconciliation of sorts?"

"Mmm. I suppose. Vicar Humbletoes' words keep going through my head. That maybe I never really turned my back on Lathander. That perhaps he was with me all along."

"That seems to bring you... comfort?" he guessed.

Tears came to my eyes. "I don't think I realised how lonely I was," I confessed. "Out there on the road. I was amongst people so often. But I longed for something deeper. To actually feel *part* of something. To think that I was never really alone... that maybe he was keeping watch over me in some small way... it's oddly comforting." I looked up at Wyll, to see him nodding, his face sombre.

"I was the same," he said. "So many things I couldn't bring myself to admit, even to myself. The loneliness. The aching regrets. The wish that I could go back and change things."

"I remember you talking about having no regrets about the pact," I said, cuddling closer. "While I appreciated the nobility in terms of giving one soul for thousands, having zero regrets seemed a little excessive. You're allowed to regret what happened while still acknowledging that you couldn't see any other options. Even that you'd do the same again, if need be. Which – by the way – please don't."

Wyll huffed a slight laugh, his hand lifting to my face to play his fingers through my beard. "I think perhaps I've learnt my lesson."

"Even if it's me?" I asked. "Sweetheart, I don't mean to disparage your judgement. But please – if the day ever comes that Mizora threatens me, or offers to save me for your soul – don't even consider it. I wouldn't thank you. It would be a knife in my heart for the rest of my life. You'd only be helping yourself, not me."

"Hmm. Interestingly worded."

"We can both be self-sacrificial to a fault, love. I'd much rather die and know that I might see you again in the afterlife. I'd wait until the end of time for you."

Wyll sniffed, and I pulled away to look at him. Slow tears slid down one cheek. I felt a pang of guilt. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. Gods, I’m such a beast to you sometimes. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

He shook his head, pulling me back against him, cheek on my hair. “No, it’s not like that. I was just thinking... maybe I should start worshipping Lathander.” *So you don’t wait forever for me*, was the unspoken meaning I took from his words.

“I love you so much, my stars,” I said softly. “You might be the most loyal man I’ve ever met.”

He snorted. “Try looking in the mirror sometime, you silly gnome.”

I chuckled.

“What would you like to do?” Wyll asked, clearly wanting a new topic of conversation. “When this is over, and it can be just the two of us. I know you’ll have the Healing Hole, and if Father’s successful, there’ll be ruling responsibilities galore – but what about for the two of us?”

“Do you mean... what do I want our evenings to look like? What do I want for us as a family?”

“Mmm. Just that.”

“Well... there is one thing I think I’d like to do. Only... it could undo everything you’re working towards. I’m not sure it’s something to undertake lightly.”

His eyes widened slightly. “Oh, I have to hear all about this. It has Gale-like epic tragedy written all over it.”

I laughed. “Possibly! Look, I... I wouldn’t push this. It’s something we’d have to do together. And I’d understand if you didn’t want to, but... love, there are so many orphans in this city. Tieflings in particular. You know – we met so many of them. And they’re falling to lives of crime, or into slavery, and...” I sighed.

“You want to adopt some of them?” Wyll guessed. “Oh my dearest one,” he said, brushing hair away from my face. “You have the biggest heart in all the world.”

“Mmm. I remember that life. Being out on the streets trying to look after myself, while everyone spat on me. It was... not pleasant, and I was lucky. I hate to think what some of these children have already endured. But... helping them wouldn’t be easy. You saw how Mol was. She has no trust left in adults; if we tried to adopt her she’d steal the house from around us and then sell us to a slaver.”

“Well. I’d like to think she’d stop short of selling us. Put us to use in the Guild, maybe.”

I smiled. “What about you? What do you hope for?”

“Honestly?” he asked. I nodded. “I’ve been having trouble picturing the future. I know what my duties as grand duke would look like – gods know I followed my father around often enough. But at home? At peace? All I can really imagine is this right here. Lying here with you in my arms. Smelling your scent. Knowing that you’re close and that you’re mine. I... never expected to marry, or have children, any of the things my father planned for me. I thought maybe you’d paint me a picture that gave me some ideas.”

I reached up to stroke his cheek. “And instead I’m all for getting married and having children?”

He laughed. “And as usual, instead you surprise and delight me, dearest. I know it wouldn’t be easy – but nothing worthwhile ever is. I think I like your vision of the future. I think I like it a lot.”

“Mmm. The pitter patter of tiny tiefling hooves?” I said, feeling a warm glow. I honestly hadn’t expected him to be so quickly keen on my – rather ridiculous, in many ways – plan for the orphans we’d met in our travels. “Kiss me, love?”

Wyll’s lips touched mine, and I let thoughts of the future slide away, to be replaced with my awareness of the present. My beloved’s kisses, and the feeling of warmth and security they brought me.

Chapter End Notes

Quick shout-out to [these people talking about Forgotten Realms songs 17 years ago](#). Many thanks for saving me the effort of trying to songwriter when I’ve already displayed my utter lack of poetic talent. 😊

*My chapters are getting a little unwieldy! Let me know if you'd rather I break them up a bit more. There's just **so much** going on in the game's Act 3, and only so much of it that I can skip over.*

Love, Rowan

Recovery

Chapter Notes

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

What's on for today?" Karlach asked, bouncing. "Oh man! Waffles and preserves? Perfect! Check this out!" She picked up a waffle, held a finger under it, and let it flame. The waffle released a sweet, slightly nutty scent. She loaded on the jam, and crammed half of it in her mouth.

I grinned at her. "Figure out a way to contact Dame Aylin," I said, throwing the pamphlet from Sorcerous Sundries on the table. "She needs to know Lorroakan is sending people after her. If they're all like Aradin, she's probably safe... but we still have to let her know."

She nodded, sobering. "Could Shadowheart help?"

I shrugged. "You think she has a connection to Selune now?"

Karlach nodded. "She might be willing to talk about it."

Hmm. What had I missed? Apart from *a lot*. I felt a stirring of anxiety deep in my gut. I didn't know what was going on with half of our group now. I was too distracted with too many responsibilities. While it was probably good, in the long run, that they were branching out and supporting each other instead... I felt disconnected. And I didn't like it.

"What else, dear?" Wyll asked, sipping a mug of coffee. "Only one thing in a day seems uncharacteristic, lately."

I snorted, but he had a point. Damn him. "Our dear *dream visitor* thinks the elder brain is deep down in the sewers, somewhere. Are a couple of people willing to scout down there? Maybe check up on the spawn in the Underdark at the same time?"

"Ugh. Sewers and prisoners. I'm not sure which is more stinky and unappealing," Astarion said. "But – far be it from me to refuse our glorious leader. I'll help."

I grinned at him. "You'll brighten both places with your presence, Astarion."

"Well. At least the compliments are improving."

I laughed. "Anyone else?"

"I'll go," Jaheira said. "Minsc?"

"Boo and I will smack the bottoms of any elder brain we find!"

"Just look," I said. "No smacking. Not yet. Minsc, are you willing to hold back and wait? If not, you can't go."

“And you will stop me?” Minsc asked, hands on hips, looking me up and down.

“I will stop you, as will Boo, if he knows what is good for him,” Jaheira said, glaring at the big man. “Dash will not have to stir from his comfortable seat to have you under control!”

Minsc blinked at her. “Very well,” he gave in suddenly. “My wychlaran has spoken.”

“Call me that again, and I will whip your buttocks myself,” she said, scowling. “Dash, is this acceptable?”

“I have every faith in you,” I said. “Have at it, please.”

“What are we doing?” Shadowheart asked, approaching the table to pour a coffee, yawning.

“Handing out assignments,” Karlach said. “We need to get in touch with Dame Aylin. Could you help?”

Shadowheart frowned. “I suppose I can ask. It’s not as though the gods usually answer, though. The moon rises in the afternoon today. I’ll try then.”

I raised an eyebrow, but decided not to pry into Shadowheart’s current religious leanings. “Thanks. That’s about all we can think of at the moment, since we don’t know where she went.”

“Anything else?” Wyll asked.

“Send that note to your father about arcane historians?” I asked. “I want to talk to Vicar Humbletoes.”

“Is this regarding me?” Gale asked.

I nodded at him. “I know we’re probably going over ground you’ve already covered, and very efficiently. But we need to start somewhere. Would you like to come?” I had a sneaking suspicion that Gale wouldn’t be keen to accompany us to the Stormshore Tabernacle.

“Thank you, but I think I might abstain until you find an avenue of enquiry,” Gale said, his face softening from its stern lines. “I have some reading to do – and I’m hoping that Sorcerous Sundries has some new books in for me.”

“Healing Hole for the rest of the morning?” Wyll asked me.

“Exactly. But you don’t need to come if you have other things to do,” I told him.

“I’ll see how quickly Father gets back to me. Otherwise, I’m yours,” he said, leaning against me for a moment, then picking up another waffle.

“Karlach? How did things go with Helsik?” I asked.

“Boring. She just wanted to know about my usual day. Where I went in the fortress. That sort of nonsense.”

“Hmm. She’ll help us get hold of your blueprints? Perhaps materials, if we need extra? I think we still have some of that infernal alloy we picked up in the shadow-cursed lands.”

“Reithwyn,” Halsin corrected me, his voice gentle. “Shadow-cursed no longer, Dash.”

I smiled at him. “Reithwyn, true.” I shuddered at the thought of the alloy, though. Touching it had filled me with unease, like walking outside when lightning was about to hit nearby. That feeling of unbridled, chaotic power crawling over my skin, my tongue. “I might go talk to Dammon about the materials he thinks we might need. All that talk of ragnax and demonovalves went over my head.”

Wyll arched an eyebrow at me. I could see curiosity eating at him – he could tell that I had ulterior motives as well.

I reached out to take his hand, kissing his knuckles. “My love,” I said softly, heedless of our audience, and he smiled at me.

“Does anyone else need anything?” I asked, tearing my attention away from Wyll. “Any dramas? Problems?”

“Better wine would be nice,” Astarion suggested. “Also, a supply of blood that comes from something larger than cats. This damned city and its rules about no animals larger than peacocks!”

“Oh, is the supply of criminals running low?” Wyll asked, his voice sly.

“Since we let thousands of vampires loose in the undercity?” Astarion asked. “Ye-esss, Wyll, the available blood supply *has* diminished somewhat.”

“Enough, children,” I said, poking Wyll in the arm. “Astarion – I’ll see what I can do. How fresh does the blood need to be? Can it be bottled?”

“In this weather? A day, perhaps two,” he said, shrugging. “You have an idea?”

“Not so much an idea as a hope,” I said. “Lots of people desperate for money in the city right now. Surely a few would provide blood in return for money or food.”

“I’d rather drink directly from the source.”

I nodded. “But I suspect most will be more comfortable with a leeching kit and glass jar than a vampire spawn biting their necks.”

“Well. Needs must as the devil drives.” Astarion motioned to Jaheira and Minsc, and they moved away to prepare.

“Anyone else?” I asked.

Everyone shrugged or moved away, so I stood. Just as a knock sounded at the door of the rooms.

“What now?” Wyll muttered.

I was already standing, so I strolled over to open the door. A messenger in the city’s livery stood waiting. “May I help you?” I asked. This must be a message from Ulder or Florrick, surely.

“Dash?” she asked. “The grand duke asked me to deliver this message to his hands.”

I frowned. Usually Ulder would write to Wyll if he needed to talk to us. “I’m Dash,” I said. I motioned to Wyll. “Wyll can vouch for me, if you need it.”

She shook her head. “I had a description,” she said, dimpling. “You’re rather easy to pick.”

I laughed and took the note. “Thank you. Do you need to wait for an answer?”

“No. Just deliver it into your hands.”

“Our thanks,” Wyll said, and she turned to leave.

I unfolded the note and read, my eyes widening.

Dear Dash,

I have a situation here that I need your assistance with. Please bring your medical paraphernalia. Anything to assist with starvation and ill-treatment would be appropriate. Wyll is welcome as well, of course, but I’d rather this not go further.

Your friend,

Ulder Ravengard

I whistled and passed the note to Wyll. “Slight change of plans,” I said to everyone else.

“We’ll head to the Healing Hole, put a note on the door. Then we’re needed at the palace.”

“From ragged adventurers to royal advisors,” Shadowheart said. “Well. It’s alright for some, isn’t it?”

“Ah yes,” I said to her. “That heady brew of responsibility and expectation. Such fun.”

She snorted and turned away, smiling a little.

“Ulder,” I said as we entered his office. “How are you?”

“Well, for myself,” he said, reaching out to grasp my hand. “But someone else, not so much.”

“What’s happened? Starvation and torture?” I asked. “Seems a little outside of your usual methods.”

He sighed. “I’ve been sorting through the palace, bringing it back into a semblance of order, after the chaos that Gortash created. Except... in the storerooms where I expected to find food caches, I instead found a prisoner that no one seemed to know existed.”

“Shit. They were down there since we killed Gortash?” I asked, my stomach dropping. Of all the possible ramifications of killing Gortash, this was one I hadn’t thought of. Hadn’t planned for. And someone had suffered as a result. Perhaps more than one person. What if there were more, as yet unfound?

Ulder nodded grimly. “I suspect someone knew she was there,” he said. “She’s not as emaciated as I might have expected. But they must have fled, or been reassigned, days ago. Perhaps longer.”

I winced, thinking through my supplies and what I might be able to do. Broth to start with. “Did she have water?” If not, any drinks would have to be carefully salted, or we’d disrupt her humours worse than the deprivation had.

“Seems so,” Ulder said. “My physician said she’s not particularly dehydrated. There was an empty barrel in her cell; we assume it held water.”

I nodded. “Might I ask... why consult me instead of your physician?”

Ulder shrugged, frowning. “She doesn’t want to treat this prisoner. Not her usual clientele.”

My mouth drew into a sneer before I could help myself. I detested that type of healer. “Hmm.”

Wyll chuckled beside me. “Your face says a lot more than your tongue, darling,” he murmured.

The woman was asleep in her bed when I entered her room, an elderly woman sitting on the other side of the room.

I nodded to the elderly human woman sitting on the other side of the room. “You’re the nurse?” I asked.

“Yes. She was weak and confused when they found her. Sleeping soundly now.”

“Did you give her anything?”

“Just some water and a little broth. I wasn’t sure how much she could eat.”

“Wise. The broth will sustain her a little without overwhelming her body. Thank you.”

I turned to the woman on the bed. Her chest moved a little with slow, shallow breaths. Her dark hair straggled over the pillow, tangled and oily. Her skin was a little yellow. I swore under my breath and touched her arm gently. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name. If you can, would you try to wake up a little?”

She frowned slightly, but relaxed back into passivity.

“That’s alright,” I told her. “I need to check you over. I’m sorry; this might feel invasive, but you could be very sick.”

No response.

“First thing I’ll do is check your eyes,” I told her. I had a suspicion she could hear and feel well enough; but sometimes a body could enter a state like that between sleep and waking, where the mind had awoken but the body hadn’t left its nighttime paralysis. It aided healing, but it made communicating with the patient difficult.

I peeled back her eyelids and breathed a sigh of relief. Slightly yellow; nothing major. “You have a slight constipation of the liver,” I told her, pitching my voice so the nurse could hear as well. “It causes an excess of bile in your body. Drink plenty of boiled water and broth. We’ll get you out in the sun when we can, too. I need to examine the rest of you, now. I’m sorry for the impertinence; but I need to check.”

I looked and felt down her body, looking for contusions, broken bones, and bleeding inside the body. She was bruised, her arms were covered in old burn marks, and her wrists bore the telltale weeping sores of manacles left on too long, allowing too little movement.

“Well, you’re not too badly off,” I said. “Some burns and bruises, and sores on your wrists. I’ll wash these out and poultice them. It might hurt a little, but probably nowhere near to what you’ve already endured.”

I did just that, and she barely stirred. Once the bandages were on, I patted her shoulder gently. “I don’t know if anyone’s told you,” I said quietly. “Gortash is dead. You’re under the care of Grand Duke Ravengard. You’re safe.”

Her eyelids flickered, then relaxed closed again. Hopefully she’d understood that, if nothing else. That she was free and safe from torture.

“Give her boiled water, with occasional mugs of warm broth, please,” I told the nurse. “No teas or food today, but feel free to take her out into the sun for half an hour if you can find someone gentle to carry her out there. Let them know she’s bruised and injured, and needs to be handled with care. And please warn her before you touch her, even if she seems asleep. She’s been ill-treated.”

“I think she’ll recover fairly well,” I told Ulder. “She’s been tortured, but the worst of it seems to have been a while ago. She’ll need careful care; I’ll come once a day at least to check on her.”

Ulder nodded, his face grim. “I blame myself for this,” he said. “She was right here and I didn’t know. I ordered checks of the whole place, but I just assumed the reports I received were accurate. No spot checks. And as a result of my negligence, this woman suffered tendays more than she needed to.” He massaged his forehead, grimacing.

“You can’t know everything and do everything,” I said. “It’s a sad fact that some things will slip. You’re only one mortal man. There’s only so much you can do.”

Ulder sighed.

I watched him closely for a few moments. “Your headaches haven't improved, have they?”

He shook his head. “My physician assures me that the leeching will work, though, in time. I just need to have patience.”

I tsked, annoyed. “She's likely to end up with no patients, if she keeps treating them by taking all their blood. Of all the superstitious nonsense!” I blinked and realised that that might have been a thought better left unsaid. “My apologies, Ulder. I'm sure you trust this woman.”

He eyed me, frowning. “You disagree with the course of treatment.”

I nodded, resigned to sharing my opinion now. “Repeated experiments have shown it: patients who are leeches are *more* likely to die, not less.”

“What would you recommend?”

“Did you find that the tea I gave you helped?”

He nodded. “But I ran out, and she said that herbs were arrant nonsense. I told her they'd helped, but she said it was naught but illusion. She wouldn't make one up for me.”

My jaw set in sheer irritation.

“My son told it true,” Ulder said. “Your face really does say more than your mouth.”

That startled me out of my frustration enough to bring a smile to my face. “It's a blessing and a curse,” I told him. “Well. What would you like to do? Stick with your current physician? I'm quite happy to see you myself, if you'd rather. Or we can try to find you someone more —” I bit back the word *competent* before I could blurt it out. Some things didn't need to be said. Even if I'd already said too much.

“Hmm,” he said. “I thought you were a little too busy as it was?”

I shrugged. “I am. But you're family, and you're just one more person. Hardly a burden. Besides, for now, I'll be coming here to check on your mystery patient daily anyway.”

“My thanks,” he said. “Now, would you happen to have any of that tea?”

I grinned at him. “I have the herbs in here,” I said, patting my bag. “I can mix it up easily enough. But I want to check you over quickly, first. Just to make sure it's only a headache.”

As we walked back to the Elfsong, Wyll had a question for me.

“Why did you talk to her when she couldn't hear you or talk back?” Wyll asked.

“I was ill,” I replied. “When I was still at the monastery. A congestion of the lungs, a little like the one that killed my mother. I was feverish, could barely breathe or move. I woke weak as a kitten, to find our healer examining me. Hands all over me. I panicked. He tsked, called someone to hold me down, and continued, berating me.”

“That's horrible!”

I nodded. “He was usually taciturn and a little grouchy, but I'd never thought of him as lacking in empathy. Still... I decided to be different. I don't know if she could hear me. But if she could, she at least knew what I would do before I did it. I hope I get the same courtesy in future.”

Wyll nodded, looking sad. “I hadn't thought about that. How it could feel to lose all control and dignity.”

I squeezed his hand. “You know the feeling well enough to not want to impose it on anyone else, though.”

“Hmm. True.”

We entered the common rooms to a deathly, still silence.

“Hey, what happened?” I asked, my mind turning immediately to Astarion, Jaheira, and Minsc, down in the sewers. Had I sent them to their deaths?

“Elminster,” Gale said, emerging from the shadows around his bed. “Elminster happened.”

My heart dropped. “Is this about that book? The one by Karsus?”

He nodded, mouth set. “Mystra asked to see me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Asked, huh? Not demanded?”

He shrugged. “The boundary between those is sometimes unclear.”

“Hmm. What does she want?”

“Presumably not simply to abuse me to my face,” he said. “Perhaps to make my exile permanent and formal. I did, after all, defy her direct instruction. Then chased after knowledge I knew she'd disapprove.”

“I'm behind you all the way, divine smiting or no,” I told him. “What do you need?”

“Just your presence,” he said, his face troubled. “If you wouldn't mind coming with me? I need to go to Stormshore Tabernacle.”

“Not at all,” I said promptly. “I need to check on the Healing Hole and see any urgent patients; we just got back from the palace. Then we can head there? Is that alright?”

“It's plenty,” he said, his shoulders relaxing. “Thank you. I'll feel better with company. *Friendly* company.”

“You have me too, if you want me,” Wyll offered.

Gale turned a grateful smile on him. “Thank you. Yes. The two of you should be sufficient to steel my soul and calm my nerves.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks!

*I forgot to mention last week that Wyll's Gate **hit 200,000 words** JFC. 😊*

This fic wasn't supposed to be so long. But it's been so fun to write, and I love Wyll and Dash so much. I'm so thrilled y'all are enjoying the ride.

I'm planning to post the next chapter this weekend - it was originally all one chapter, but the length of my chapters was getting a smidge ridiculous, so I split it up. 😊

Love, Rowan

Reconciliation

“An interview with a goddess,” Wyll remarked. “A new experience, even for us. Gale, how do you feel?”

“Nerve-wracking,” Gale said, striding towards the tabernacle. “I’m not used to feeling anxious, especially about Mystra. I don’t like it.”

“Slay your doubts, Gale, and nothing can stop you. You are clever, and skilled, and talented. You have nothing to worry about.”

Gale smiled tightly at Wyll. “My thanks. Now if we could only convince my stomach of that.”

In the tabernacle, Gale stopped in front of the statue of Mystra. Unlike on our other visits here, now it glowed with a golden light. Inviting. Pleasant. Deceptively so, I thought. This goddess was harsher than she liked to appear.

I touched his arm. “Would you like a hug, to fortify you?”

He knelt, his face vulnerable. “Thank you, Dash. May I... would you mind using the parasite? If it works, I’d feel better, knowing someone is with me in spirit, at least.”

“Of course,” I said, pulling him into a hug and opening my mind to him. “I love you. Be well.”

He nodded, opening a connection between us. *Thank you*, he said silently, and vanished with a hand on the statue.

I leant against Wyll, suddenly feeling in need of comfort. My emotion, or Gale’s? Did it matter? Wyll’s arm wrapped around my shoulders in a silent reassurance.

Mystra, I heard Gale say. *It’s been a long time.*

Gale, she said, her voice rich but with a touch of ice. *You’re looking well, all things considered.*

And you, he said. *You asked to see me?*

You chose not to destroy the elder brain, she said. *Why?*

Gale shook his head. *I had something to lose*, he said simply. *I found... friendship. Peace. And your solution... it would have killed so many people.*

Better they die, and Toril stays free of the mind flayer infestation, Mystra said. *Their deaths would be meaningful, at least.*

And mine, Gale said. *You sent me to my death with hardly a by-your-leave.*

I serve all of Toril, she said, admonition in her tone. I cannot play favourites, Gale.

He snorted, and I wanted to applaud. Beside me, Wyll smiled. He was catching some of this conversation too.

You know of the Crown, now, she observed. What is your intent?

Ahhh. We come now to the crux of this meeting, don't we?

Would you really risk the world to spite me? she asked.

And if I would, would you really be undeserving? Gale asked. You took my powers from me. You took my life. And over a mistake born from love and misguided devotion.

*Oh, Gale, she said, with a hint of sadness. I did nothing of the sort. **You** destroyed your own powers.*

Nonsense, he said, but with a touch of uncertainty. I felt it... you taking my powers from me.

That was the power you took, she said. Gale, do you still not understand? That piece of 'Weave' that you liberated. It wasn't part of my power. It was a Netherese artefact. It uses the Karsite Weave.

The Orb of Karsus, he said slowly. It took my powers?

It was a miracle it didn't take you, and the Weave, and the entire world with it.

I could feel Gale reeling under this new knowledge. *Why didn't you tell me?*

Because you came very close to killing me and destroying everything, she said. Your hubris had already threatened the world. What might you do if you realised what you had?

I would have asked for help and tried to make it right!

And yet... when you had the opportunity to make things right, you rejected it, Mystra said. And now you lust after the Crown of Karsus itself.

You've known all along, Gale said with a burst of realisation. You knew about the Crown, and the power it held over the elder brain. About the connection to my orb.

I did.

And you deemed me unworthy of this knowledge.

Do you blame me? she asked coolly. You had proven yourself, quite thoroughly, unworthy.

I wanted only to bring you something beautiful! he protested.

Really? Can you honestly look into your heart of hearts, and tell me that lust for power and knowledge did not play a part?

And if it did? Did that not serve Azuth admirably? Gale asked. But I loved you. I wanted to give you something no one else ever had.

And instead, you brought me something that could have devoured the Weave itself. Devoured me.

Gale sighed.

*You have seen and read of the results when the Crown of Karsus is in mortal hands. Death and destruction. Misery and pain. You **must** bring it to me when you retrieve it.*

And what then? he asked.

Then I remove that orb from your chest, she said. And you receive my forgiveness for your transgressions.

Once, I would have given anything to hear those words.

And now?

*Now, I am disillusioned and tired. I miss the days when you were my entire world, encompassing all that was wonderful and dear. But I would not go back to them for the world. For the mistake I made, the disaster I almost caused... I apologise. If I do this for you, though, to right the balance, we cannot return to our life together. Too much has changed. Your actions have irrevocably changed my feelings, my thoughts. That you sent **Elminster** to tell me to kill myself for your forgiveness. I have seen love and devotion. You do not demonstrate either. Hence, neither shall I.*

Your choice, as always, she said. Well. You understand my terms. Your decisions are your own to make. Gale, though you may not thank me for it, I wish you well.

Gale nodded stiffly. *And I you,* he said. *I hope you find whatever it is that you seek.*

Then he was physically back in front of me, swaying, looking dazed. I reached forward to hold him steady while he readjusted to the physical plane.

“Well,” he said. “Thank the light I don’t have to summarise *that* conversation for you. Can we go? I don’t want to be here a moment longer than I must.”

I nodded. “I need to go see Dammon for a bit,” I said. “Wyll...”

He met my eyes and nodded, seeing the question in my eyes. He’d look after Gale and keep him from hiding away by himself. I mouthed a *thank you* and patted Gale’s arm. “See you both soon.”

When I arrived at the forge, Dammon was pumping the bellows next to his forge, sweat streaming down his face. I sat down to wait; if he was still using the bellows, his task was probably near its beginning.

A while later, he walked over to me, wiping his face with a towel. “Dash!” he said, kneeling for a quick hug. “I’m sorry; I almost let the pig out of the poke yesterday, didn’t I?”

I shrugged. “No big deal if you had,” I told him. “Wyll likes surprises, that’s all. So I like to surprise him when I can.”

“I found a chain,” Dammon said, turning away to rummage in a box. “Here –” He held out a small, flat wooden box.

I took and opened it. Inside was a light, plain length of gold chain. Perfect. I sniffed it – an alloy of some sort. “Silver and copper?” I asked. I brought out the main piece to compare it. The colours of the metals were near-identical. Phew. Chains needed to be of a harder alloy than the soft gold wire I’d used, and that often caused a shade mismatch.

Dammon nodded. “You have the nose too?” he asked, face alight with interest.

“Sort of,” I said. “Untrained. Unskilled. I’ve heard of people who could tap this, give it a sniff, and tell you the exact composition and the alloying method used. Probably where the metals were mined from. I can just recognise a bad coin and find my way underground.”

“Still. You’re the only other one I’ve met,” he said. “It’s not a common ability amongst my people. Underground, you say? It’s not just for metals?”

I shook my head. “Stone, dirt, metals, gems. I get a little from all of them.”

“Hmm. Metals only for me. I think that’s so, anyway.”

“Interesting. Perhaps we should both look into training, if we can find someone.”

“Hmm. If we can afford it.”

“Oh!” I said. “Speaking of which.” I pulled out a small pouch of coins and handed it to him.

Dammon opened the pouch and held it out to me. “This is far too much.”

“Rubbish,” I said firmly. “Materials. That chain. Use of your equipment. Not being able to move around freely while I was pottering around. I know full well the sort of costs you incurred.”

“Do you also remember saving my life on more than one occasion?”

I grinned at him. “Do you forget helping with Karlach’s heart, with never a whisper of a price?”

“That’s different.”

“Stop being ridiculous. I’ve looted bodies from Moonhaven to the city while you were busy surviving and keeping your friends alive. Take the coin.”

He sighed and tucked it in a pocket. “You’re difficult to say no to.”

“Deliberately so.”

“Well. That was a day full of unexpected twists and turns,” Wyll said, taking off his robe with a sigh. “Bath, dearest?”

I checked the tub. The water was clean and fresh, if cold. Funny how we never saw anyone come in here, but the room stayed free of dust and debris, and the water was always changed. The staff were impressively unobtrusive.

“Sounds wonderful,” I said, smiling at him. “Work your magic, love?”

Wyll stripped quickly and stuck a hand in the water. “How’s that?”

I dipped in a cautious finger. It was hot, but not scalding. “Perfect.” I pulled off my armour and clothes, clambering over the side into the water. I relaxed with a groan. “So Gale has options, now. I’m happy, but a little nonplussed. We had an impossible puzzle to work on, and suddenly it’s no longer necessary. Unless he decides to bite his thumb at Mystra, I suppose.”

“Hmm. What do you think he should do?” Wyll asked, joining me.

“Well. I seem to be the role model for reconciling with recalcitrant deities,” I said. “I’m not sure my opinion matters on this, though. As long as, whatever he does, he does for the right reasons. In fact, I think I’ll try to underscore that with him. I’d like to support him, even if he turns his back on his goddess. He’d certainly have reason.”

“A fair point. You want to make sure he’s not trying to self-destruct still?”

I nodded. “In body as well as spirit. I think... perhaps reconciling for the wrong reasons could be as unhealthy as making the split final.”

“What do you mean?”

I eyed him. This subject matter would perhaps hit a little too close to home, what with Wyll’s recent reconnection with Ulder.

“When someone wrongs us, or we have a relationship that’s unbalanced, not good for us... if we leave, then come back without fixing the original problem... it can be like painting over a bad spot on an apple. The bad spot is still there, and it will still taste bad... but now you’re eating paint as well.”

Wyll chuckled. “So things look good on the surface, but they’re even worse for you?”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“Huh. I suppose I can see that for Gale. Taking someone back as a lover, when they demanded that you kill yourself for their forgiveness...”

“Mmm. Some things are forgivable. Others... perhaps we can forgive them, but we should never forget them, or try to take things back to the way they were.”

“You didn’t think that about us?”

I started to speak and paused, thinking. “Honestly? If I had, I think I still would have welcomed you back with open arms. I’m not sure I could have borne to let you go if you didn’t want me to. But... in all fairness, I’m not sure *we* would be who we are if you were bad for me. And I didn’t think that. Still don’t. We looked at the problems that caused that rift. We worked on them. We made ourselves better.”

His face softened. “You’re saying we didn’t try to take things back to the way they were?”

“That,” I said. “Sweetheart?”

“Hmm?”

“Would you kiss me?” I asked. “I want you close to me.”

“Hard to get very far away, in this tub,” he said, grinning as he slid onto his knees in front of me, pulling me tight against him. “How’s this? Close enough?”

I pulled his head down to press my lips against his, drawing back to smile at him. “This is almost close enough,” I told him.

“Hmm. What would count as close enough to you?” he asked, rubbing his cheek against mine, one horn brushing over my hair.

“Mmm. How about your cock in me?”

I heard him suck in a breath, and drew away a little to see his face. “You don’t want?” I asked.

“I want,” he said, fingers tangling in my beard to tilt my face up. “As long as you truly want it. If you’re trying to please me...”

I shook my head. “I got the message, I think,” I said. “I love you. Sweetheart, you were so gentle and sweet last time. I want that again. I want to *feel* that again.”

“Am I being too protective?” he asked, kissing my forehead. “I just...”

“No. You leave me feeling more loved every time, even if you frustrate me,” I said, smiling. “Love, how can I reassure you? I’m not sure I can promise to never agree to something you want that I’m not sure about... but I think I can honestly promise not to ask for something just because I think *you* want it. Would that do?”

“It would help,” he said. “Thank you, darling.”

“Done,” I said. “Sweetheart... I’m sorry. I didn’t realise how much it affected you when I... detached, I suppose.”

“It’s not that,” he said. “Well. It is a little, I suppose. I just want to make sure you enjoy what we do as much as I do. That’s all. I don’t want to hurt you. I want to love you. Bring you joy and pleasure.”

I reached up to stroke his cheek, and pull him down into a long kiss. “I love you,” I said softly, drawing away a little. “Gods, whenever I start to forget just how wonderful my beloved is... you do or say something that melts me.”

“You’re getting cold,” he said, tracing goosebumps on my arm. “Time to get out?”

“Mmm. I suppose. I have a couple of things to do. Meet you in bed?”

“Gladly,” he said, grinning at me. “Here.” He reached to pick up a towel and handed it to me. “Get dry. Don’t catch a cold.”

“Yes, mother.”

I dried off, shrugged on a robe, and retired to the jakes to take care of some things. I returned to the room to find Wyll lying on our bed, robe untied and gaping open. “Oh. Gods. Do you have any idea how appealing you look?” I asked him.

He laughed and held out an arm.

I clambered onto the bed and cuddled under the arm as he wrapped it around me.

“My darling,” he murmured, kissing my forehead. “What would you like to do tonight? I’m yours.”

“I haven’t changed my mind. I want you, sweetheart.”

“May I kiss you?”

I grinned at him and rose to my knees to straddle him as he leant against the wall. I laid my lips against his, and we melted into a warm, loving embrace and kiss, slowly kindling into renewed arousal.

“I want to touch you,” I said, letting my cheek slide against his.

“Please,” he said, pulling my robe off my shoulders and kissing down my shoulder.

I did the same for him, catching my breath at the sight of his bare chest, suddenly exposed. “Gods, you’re beautiful, love,” I said. “I still can’t believe you’re really mine.”

“All yours, my light,” he said, pulling back to gaze at me with soft eyes. “Tell me.”

I ran my fingers up his jaw, over his ear, watching him shiver, to the braids tied at the nape of his neck. I pulled them, his head going back, his face turning peaceful. “You’re mine, sweetheart,” I said. “My stars. Mine.” I kissed him harder, pushing into his mouth, hand still grasping his hair, hearing his breathing speed up as his hands slid down my back to pull me against him.

Arousal flared in me, feeling his cock harden against me. “Come here, love,” I said, moving away to lie down. “Come fuck me?”

Heat flared in his eyes, and he lay down next to me, his hand on my hip. “Can I touch your dick, darling?” he asked.

I nodded, biting my lip, and his fingers slid over me. I stiffened, groaning, pulling him down for more kisses, moving against him, my breathing ragged as he stroked me.

Wyll pulled away to kiss down my neck and throat, over my chest and stomach, then teased my cock with the tip of his tongue. I gasped, letting my hand move to his hair, and his mouth slid over me.

“Gods, love.”

His forked tongue slid over my cock, the spongy back of his throat pushing against the tip, turning my breath ragged. As his clever mouth moved over me, warmth spread through me, flooding me.

“I’m close, Wyll. Gods, how do you feel so good?”

He paused, looking up at me with fond eyes. “Do you want to climax now, darling? Or wait?”

My mind reeled under the arousal filling me. “What a choice. Wait, I think. I want your cock, sweetheart. Please?”

He moved up to press against me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He groaned, his cock sliding over my arse. “Hells. You think *I* feel good? Oh, my darling.”

“Oil, love. Please?”

He stared at me, breathing hard, and reached for the oil.

“Tease me,” I said softly. “Show me what I’m about to get.”

He grinned and poured a little straight onto his cock. “Like this?” he asked, stroking the oil slowly over his hard, ridged cock. I watched, eyes half-lidded, anticipation building.

“Perfect,” I told him. “Love, I’m desperate for you.”

He slid against me, a finger stroking slowly over my shaft, his teeth catching in his bottom lip.

I wrapped my legs around his waist again, pulling him harder against me, groaning to feel him so close to entering me. “Please, love?”

“No priming?” he asked, letting the tip push against my arsehole just a little as my back arched, pushing me up against him.

“Don’t need it,” I gasped. “Sweetheart. Fuck me.”

He slid slowly, carefully, into me, and I closed my eyes as I revelled in the sensation, feeling every movement as a pulse of pleasure through my body.

“You’re alright?” he murmured. “I’m not hurting you?”

“Far from it,” I said, opening my eyes to pull him down for a kiss. That was one benefit of our height difference, at least. “You feel wonderful, love. Gods, I love feeling your cock inside me.”

He smiled and pushed a little further. “Guide me, darling,” he said, grabbing one of my hands to place it on his hip. I pulled him forward, urging him to work deeper into me, slowly but surely, until he was fully sheathed in me.

“Fuck,” I said, sensation coursing through me, overwhelming me. I started to shake, wishing I could hold this off longer, knowing I could pause and gather some control... but not wanting to, either. I made inarticulate noises as the pleasure crashed over me and the climax hit, Wyll breathing hard as my muscles clenched around him.

“You,” he said, voice throaty, “make it very difficult to keep any semblance of control, you know.”

I opened my eyes to grin at him, trying to breathe and come back out of the near-trance. “Keep going,” I said, realising that I hadn’t spilt seed... that the best climax was still on its way. “Gods. Your cock is amazing. *You’re* amazing.”

“You too,” he said, eyes soft, and started to move again, crying out as I convulsed under him, each movement pulling up aftershocks of the climax while urging me towards another. “Hells. I can’t... I’m too close, dear.”

“One more,” I told him. “Touch my cock?”

He knelt, pulling my arse up against him, still buried deep in me, and stroked me with oil-slick fingers. He pushed into me for two more thrusts, squeezing his hand around me, and I jerked as the new climax took me over, seed pulsing over my belly. He pulled out to spill his own juices over me, groaning, panting hard as his cock jerked against me, crying out, his face alight with pleasure.

When we were both, finally, still, I pulled him down to cuddle close. “Thank you, love,” I said. “That was perfect. I feel so good.”

“No pain?”

“Not a smidge,” I assured him. “Sweetheart, you can worry a *little* less, you know. I am a healer.”

“I know,” he said, resting his cheek on my shoulder, throwing an arm and leg over me. “But I love you. I need to know you’re alright.”

A warm glow filled me, and my nose prickled with tears. I sniffed.

He looked up to meet my gaze, eyes concerned. “Happy tears?”

“The happiest,” I said. “I just... I never in my wildest dreams imagined this.”

He chuckled, one of his eyes suspiciously wet. “Neither did I. Hells. I hoped for love, for romance. But this – you and I – it surpasses even the sweetest ballads from my youth. I know we’ll fight. I know I’ll hurt you, and you’ll hurt me. But I feel so protective and so safe, all in one, when I’m in your arms.”

I nodded, my arms tightening around him. “My stars,” I said softly. “I love you so.” I started as I remembered the item I’d picked up that afternoon.

“What is it?”

“Wait here,” I said, squirming out from underneath him and rolling off the bed onto my feet. I retrieved the wooden box. “I have something for you.”

Wyll’s face lit up. “You know I love surprises,” he said, smiling at me.

“I wanted to explain, first. So you don't think I'm cheap.”

“Of course,” he said, sitting up and patting the bed beside him. “Come sit with me?”

I sat down and cuddled into his side.

“My mother taught me about a rock gnome tradition,” I said slowly, feeling my way through the words. “That when we find the person we love, we make them a gift with our own hands. As long as they keep the gift on their person, they, and the relationship, are blessed.”

“That's lovely,” Wyll said, kissing the top of my head. “I wish I had some tradition of that sort.”

I handed over the box. “Perhaps... being part of mine is good enough?” I asked. I felt a thrill of nervousness go through me. Would he hate it?

Wyll opened it and stared, silent, at the piece within. He shook his head, as if waking up. “It's beautiful, darling. Are you saying you made this? And – ahh! It's sunstone! Oh, you clever beast.”

“So you like it?” I asked, feeling impossibly shy.

Wyll stroked his fingers over the medallion. It was a circular slice of sunstone, cut thin enough that if you held it up to the sun, sunlight would shine through, but thick enough that it wouldn't shatter with a single blow. It was held in a frame of gold wire, twisted to weave in and around and over itself in a complex, looping pattern.

“I love it,” he said quietly. “What's this pattern? I've never seen it before. It's lovely.”

“It's called... hmm. We'd say *fidelity and courage*, I think. It came to mind, and I thought it fit you perfectly.”

“You're sweet to think so,” he said. “My darling. Thank you. It's beautiful. And I love that you made it yourself. It must have taken you days. Weeks.”

“I thought about making a ring,” I said, “so we'd have a set, in a way. But you're a swordsman – it would impair your grip.”

“Wise, though I'd have worn it regardless. I'll wear this all the time, dearest. It will feel like having the tiniest piece of you with me always. My light.” He slipped the chain over his head, settling it inside his shirt.

“You threw a slight spanner in the works, you know,” I said, moving my cheek against his shirt, enjoying the texture of the cloth against my skin, the scent of him underneath it. “I'd planned to use a star sapphire. A different design, obviously. But then you gave me the opal, and I decided yours had to match the theme better.”

“Ha! The sapphire sounds lovely. But this... darling, this is perfect. I can't be sad that I messed up your plans.”

“I had Gale imbue a spell into the stone,” I said, drawing away to see his face. “It should give you a little healing boost if you ever fall in battle. I don't have much faith in magical items, but...”

“You wanted to protect me,” Wyll said, pulling me close again. “Well. These things usually fail more often than they work, I find, but Gale does solid work. I'll make sure to thank him. Let's hope we never need to find out if it works, hmm?”

“I'm all for that.”

“Now I'm thinking I should have done something similar for your ring, what with your habit of jumping into the fray with barely a thought, let alone warning.”

I snorted. “I have faith in my team.”

“And your team has faith in you – to give them heart attacks at least once in every battle.”

I chuckled, stretching up to kiss the side of his neck. “Keeps you all sharp. Speaking of which – I really need to work on that control Vicar Humbletoes talked about. Want to go up to the roof and spar?”

He groaned. “You're the hardest taskmaster.”

I suppressed the salacious comment that came to mind, lest we get utterly distracted from the work at hand. “I'm terrible,” I agreed solemnly instead. “Come on, love. We don't want that lovely arse to get all flabby.”

“*Flabby?*” he exclaimed, looking outraged. “You... you monster!”

I laughed. “Prove me wrong, why don't you?” I grabbed two pairs of simple gloves from the chest and headed to the roof, followed by a muttering but smiling Wyll.

Dredging the past

Chapter Notes

*Sorry for the delay on this chapter, folks! I was about to publish it and noticed I'd messed up **badly** with a plot hole. Sigh. So I sat down to fix it. Keeping everything straight (cough - as straight as I'm capable of) gets difficult with this sort of length. I'm still wondering what the hells I was thinking, novelising the entire damn game. 😊*

I hope you're still enjoying the read! Love you all so much.

Love, Rowan

I woke to a weak, grey light straggling through the windows, as though the day itself was unenthusiastic about starting. It was enough to give shape to Wyll lying beside me, sprawled on his front as usual, wearing only boxers, a glint of gold around his neck. I sat up and smiled, watching him, remembering the joy of sparring the previous night. And, for that matter, being in his embrace.

“Morning, dear,” he said, opening an eye. “Admiring the view?”

“Mmm. With extra relish,” I said, bending to kiss his cheek. “Morning, sweetheart.”

He extended an arm and pulled me down beside him. “Come here, darling. I want a kiss.”

I gladly surrendered, letting him draw me close, tilting my head to slide my lips against his. “Mmm. This makes my morning so much better, love.” I lay there for a while, enjoying the warmth both of the physical embrace and the emotions it inspired.

“My darling,” he said softly. “I love you. Meditation?”

I nodded, giving him one last kiss. “Let’s.”

“Nothing yet,” Astarion reported. “We’ll check another section of the sewers. But the spawn have settled into the Underdark rather nicely. Those that survived the journey, anyway.”

“They had casualties?” I asked, frowning.

“Some were too badly injured from their captivity. Some went wild at the first taste of freedom, and my siblings had to put them down. Others chose to leave the group and make their own way in the sewers or in the Underdark.”

“How many remain?”

“Approximately four thousand.”

“Feeding that many spawn must have its difficulties,” Wyll observed.

“The denizens of the Underdark might be large and difficult to fight, but they also provide more food,” Astarion pointed out. “They’ve developed a system for hunting. It’s working for now, at least. At some point, though, they’ll come up against the duergar or the drow.”

“I’d like to have concern for either,” I said. “But they both tend to enslave and prey on other races. My sympathy isn’t very high right now.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow at me. “That infamous compassion isn’t showing so well today.”

I shrugged. “I don’t like slavers.”

Wyll’s hand touched mine.

“So the spawn will be alright for now?” I asked. “They’re not in desperate need of something we can provide?”

Astarion shrugged. “They’re fine. More or less. Half of them are bordering on utterly deranged. Adjusting to freedom – of a sort – is a struggle for them.” His face turned melancholy. “I can sympathise with that, at least.”

“It can’t be easy, having been locked in a cage like an animal for so long,” I said, trying to imagine how it would feel. “And the hunger... I can’t imagine it.”

“It’s no walk in the park,” he said. “Well. The elder brain. Do you want us to try again today?”

I recognised the change in topic. “Are you up for it? A day off wouldn’t hurt.”

He looked at Jaheira, who shrugged. “What’s another jaunt in the sewers?” he asked drily. “Please tell me you’ll be doing something equally enjoyable.”

“Checking on the House of Wonders, see if they need anything,” I said. “The palace, then the Healing Hole. This afternoon...”

“This afternoon we take a short break, I think,” Wyll said. “You’ve been working too hard.”

I snorted. “Nowhere near hard enough compared to what needs doing.”

“Wyll is correct,” Jaheira said. “Take your recreation where you can. Take advice from an old campaigner.”

I sighed. “Fine. I’m being bullied into resting. Astarion, I haven’t forgotten about the blood. We’ll put up posters around the Healing Hole today.”

“My thanks.”

“Gale, would you take the day off?” I asked. “I think you could do with taking some time for yourself.”

He shrugged. “I do have a new tome on fire magic to peruse.”

“Karlach? Did you want to come with us to the House of Wonders?”

She shook her head. “Shadowheart has something to follow up.”

I arched an eyebrow at her, but nodded. Whatever the two were up to, they’d be fine. At least, that’s what I told myself.

“Halsin?” I asked.

“Unless you have need of me, I’ll assist at the Open Hand temple,” he said. “Their healers are a little overwhelmed.”

“Oh - perfect,” I said. “Thank you, Halsin – I’m glad you made contact with them.”

The Gondians were still working on plans for Karlach’s new heart, so we continued to the palace.

The patient was rousing.

“Hi,” I said, taking her hand. “You might not remember me. I’m Dash – I’m a healer who’s been attending you. You’re in Grand Duke Ravengard’s care.”

She blinked at me, still drowsy. “Remember you,” she said slowly. “Your voice.”

I nodded. “I don’t want you talking too much,” I said, “but it would help us to know who you are. I’d like to have something to call you, at least.”

She sighed, searching my face. “Enver Gortash is dead?”

“By my hand,” I said softly. “I swear it. He can’t get to you.”

“Lenore,” she said. “It’s been so long since I saw the light.”

Beside me, I felt Wyll startle. Was it the light comment that got to him?

“Lenore,” I said. “It’s lovely to meet you. So how are you feeling?”

She shrugged slightly, wincing. “Feel like a drowned dog.”

“Understandable. You’re malnourished. It will get better, but you’ll *want* to be up and moving before your body is capable of much. Be prepared for frustration. Do you want to try sitting up?”

She nodded, so Wyll stepped forward and took her elbow to pull her into a sitting position. "I'm Wyll," he said, smiling at her. "Nice to meet you, Lenore."

"Ugh," she said, a hand going to her head. "Lying down was better."

"Take some tea while you're sitting up," I said, pouring hot water into a teapot. "Wyll, would you give her some pillows to lean back on?"

He piled pillows behind her, and she relaxed against them with a sigh.

I made up the tea, poured out a mug with some water to cool it, and handed it to her, keeping a hand underneath to steady it. She grimaced, but slowly sipped the tea.

"Good job," I told her. "You should rest, after this. Your body will be weak for a few days yet."

"You had an odd reaction to our patient," I said, holding Wyll's hand as we walked to the Healing Hole. "Tell me?"

"When we have some privacy," he said, looking around. As per usual, we were attracting stares and glares in equal measure. Our names might have a growing reputation, but our faces weren't keeping up with it, I suspected. All people saw was a gnome and a devilish man walking hand-in-hand. And they weren't fond of either.

"Hmm," I said, but let it drop for now. "What do you want to do this afternoon?"

"How about we find a pub and have a few drinks?" Wyll asked. "You haven't relaxed and let loose for a while. And last time you did, I distinctly remember you complaining I don't invite you to drink with me."

I chuckled. "That sounds like something I would say."

Healing Hole visited, patients seen, and posters made and put up, we retired upstairs to water the plants. And finally relax.

"Ah. Freedom," I said, collapsing onto the bed. "Gods. Those two with coughs worry me."

"They didn't seem too unwell," Wyll said, reclining next to me.

"It's the chance of an epidemic," I said. "Starts small. But what a healthy person can shrug off, often a poor or unwell person can't."

"Is it likely, do you think?" he asked, frowning.

"Sadly, yes. Perfect conditions for it. Crowded conditions, new people galore, food potentially getting scarce. A shortage of healers."

"Damn. Is there anything we can do?"

“Magic up a stack of good housing, fruit, and vegetables? Clean water and good sanitation?”

“Hmm.”

“Exactly. I’ll see if I can get the ingredients to make up some tonics. Might help limit the spread around here, at least.”

“So. Lenore,” he said. “I don’t know if you were part of the conversation, but back in the Underdark, someone talked about a Lenore. A cleric of Mystra who had been studying sussur flowers, or something. No one had seen her for months. They thought perhaps she was just deep in her studies.”

“Huh. So you think our prisoner might be *that* Lenore?”

“Seems likely. Sussur flowers have some odd properties. Perhaps Gortash thought her research could assist him in building the Steel Watch.”

“Tech and magic fusion?” I asked. “In something that was already infernal and technology combined? Sounds... risky, to put it mildly.”

“I got the distinct impression that Gortash didn’t mind risking his slaves in the pursuit of progress,” Wyll observed. “But the Gondians thought about a magic-technology fusion too, for Karlach.”

“Huh. So this Lenore might be able to consult on Karlach?” I asked.

“Perhaps. She might not wish to.”

“Mmm. I’d be in a hurry to return home, if I was her.”

Wyll sat up, shaking off his sombre mood. “Should we go, darling? I’d like a drink to take the taste of these musings from my mouth.”

I nodded, putting out a hand.

Wyll grabbed my hand and pulled me up into a hug. I cuddled close for a moment, smelling him. “Mmm. Let’s go, before the temptation to lie back down and cuddle you takes over.”

“Silly. Come get some food, or you’ll perish. Probably of that damned cough.”

I grinned and pulled away to bounce off the bed. “You’re right. Let’s go wash out my throat with whisky.”

“You really are my type of man.”

“The Blushing Mermaid?” I asked, eyeing Wyll. “Isn’t this named after a popular old book of... a certain repute?”

Wyll grinned at me. “I loved that book when I was younger. Such wonderful trash.”

I laughed. “How’s the food?” I looked around. A few sailors, the sort of people that frequented the Healing Hole... and a lot of more sinister-looking characters, lounging in their chairs, weapons on clear display. Not the sort of clientele I’d expected Wyll to find appealing.

“Terrible. But if we bribe the bartender, they’ll probably send someone out to pick up something more appetising for us.”

“Perfect. Beer to start?”

He walked over to the bartender, said something, and slid over some coins. The bartender waved over a server, who led us upstairs to a table overlooking the docks.

“Huh,” I said when he left. “This is more plush than I expected.”

“A lot of money changes hands up here in the evenings,” Wyll said. “At least, that was the case when I was young, and it looks like very little has changed.”

I looked around. Small tables, with big, comfortable chairs. “Gambling?”

He nodded, grinning. “I got nostalgic for my misspent youth.”

“What did you do here? Mistreat a library book?”

Wyll leant back in his chair, laughing heartily.

The server approached with two foaming tankards of beer and placed them between us. “Your food will be here in a few minutes,” he said. “I’ll head out now to pick it up.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at him, and picked up a tankard. “Cheers, love.”

Wyll tapped his tankard against mine, eyes soft. “To love,” he said.

“To love,” I said quietly, covering his spare hand with mine. “Thank you, sweetheart. This is a nice change.” I sipped the beer – a surprisingly palatable brew, given the ambience downstairs. Then I looked outside, and gasped.

“This is why I brought you here,” Wyll said. “I thought you’d like the view. Even if you’d seen it before.”

I stared out at the docks in the near distance, with the Bay of Balduran behind them, stretching out to the horizon. “Gods. I forget sometimes how short a distance we can see in the city, usually.”

“It’s surprisingly difficult to get used to,” Wyll said, gazing out the window. “I didn’t realise how much I took the vistas along the Sword Coast for granted. Or how much I’d miss them. You seem to be managing a little better.”

“Perks of being a rock gnome, I suppose,” I said, thinking about it. “I’m most comfortable in smaller spaces. Being on a boat, out there?” I pointed to a ship moving towards the docks, its sails furling. “That might be my worst nightmare.”

“Hmm. Not a keen sailor, then?”

I shuddered. “I’d do it. But I wouldn’t like it. Give me a cave anyday.”

“But you do like the views?” he asked, a faint frown on his face.

I nodded, squeezing his hand. “I love them,” I said softly. “To look at, just not so much to be in.”

The beers were almost empty when the server returned with two plates heaped with rice and something – vegetables? Legumes? covered in a spicy, fragrant sauce. I sniffed. “Curry?”

He nodded. “From the Calimshan down the street,” he said.

“Perfect,” I said, my stomach growling at the scent as he put the plates down. “Good choice, love.”

Wyll took a mouthful of curry and groaned. “I haven’t had this sort of dish in an age.”

“Neither have I. Gale’s cooking seems a little more…”

“Traditional Waterdeep in style?” Wyll asked, chuckling. “Heavy on the meat and creamy sauces.”

I nodded. “Bless him, it’s wonderful food, but sometimes I crave spice and vegetables.”

“I thought you might approve. And if you didn’t, we could always have gone to find something else.”

I tried a spoonful. “Gods. This is amazing. Is it really good, or am I just starved for spicy food?”

“Did you grow up eating this sort of thing?”

“Mmm. We weren’t too far away from Little Calimshan. And my mother always said that the spices helped to keep the food safe. Seems to work.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

“Alcohol also seems to work, in a pinch,” I said, waving the almost-empty tankard. “That’s why pub food can be terrible and still not kill you. As long as you drink.”

“Hmm. I knew drinking was good for something. Though you end up vomiting if you’re not careful, either way.”

I grinned at him and drained my tankard. “Another, love?”

He nodded, and I walked downstairs with the two tankards to get refills. At the bar, a man with long dark hair and square jaw glanced casually to the side, and I froze. Jorgen, here? It was *exactly* the sort of place he would have loitered in. Looking for marks – and customers.

Suddenly I was in my teens again, desperate to please, hellishly scared that I never would, hopelessly devoted to someone utterly unworthy. And irrationally afraid. I took a shuddering breath, and my adult self came slowly sliding back. I wasn't young, foolish, and weak anymore. I had helped to take down the avatar of Myrkul himself. I could handle –

The man turned to leave, and the breath whooshed out of me. It wasn't Jurgen. Too young, different face. Just the hair and jaw were similar. I shook my head and went to the bar.

“Refills?”

I nodded. “Two whiskies a little later, please?” I slid over the tankards and some coin. He returned full, sloshing tankards and gave a thumbs-up.

Upstairs, I placed the beer on the table and collapsed into the seat opposite Wyll.

“You look like you saw a ghost,” he said, eyes narrowing a little. “Is everything alright?”

I was abruptly sick of the mere thought of Jurgen. He'd haunted far too many of my days already. “Just thought I saw someone I knew,” I said, shrugging it off. “How's your curry?”

“Still delicious,” he said. “So tell me. What do you think our chances are of fixing Karlach? Surely we'll find something. There's always a way, if you try hard enough.”

“Sometimes there isn't,” I said, sighing. “But I hope so. I really do.”

“We've made a good start, with the team we've collected. We just need time, energy, and a lot of caring. And I think we can deliver all of those.”

I smiled at him. “We'll do our damndest.”

Wyll scooped up the last of his curry, chasing errant bits with his spoon, as I pushed the rest of mine away, no longer hungry. He looked up, chewing, and frowned. “You've eaten enough?”

“Just full,” I said, and he smiled, but held out a hand for me to hold as the server came up the stairs, two glasses on a tray.

I nodded in thanks, and sniffed my glass as the server walked away and my fingers curled around Wyll's. Peat, and the harsh tang of grain liquor, with a smoky after-scent. Not top-shelf whisky by any means; not rotgut, either. The bartender was surprisingly honest. Or perhaps he'd actually recognised one of us. Probably Wyll; gnomes weren't overly numerous here, but Wyll was one of a kind.

“Spoiling me!” he said, inhaling and then tasting the liquor. “Oh. I haven't had whisky for so long. Since somewhere in Reithwyn, I think. We raided a barrel and it was full of wine and liquor bottles, for some reason.”

“I don't remember that.”

“Frankly, I'm not surprised. You weren't exactly at the top of your game around that curse.”

“Sorry, love.”

He coughed. “Sorry? For what? Being less than startlingly amazing at every moment? What a disaster.” His tone was light, just a little bit mocking. Somehow it grated when I’d have usually laughed, but I shrugged off the irrational mood.

“Do you want to go find dessert?” I asked. “Or do you already have something in mind?”

“No, that sounds wonderful,” he said as I took a last gulp of the whisky. “That bakery is around here somewhere?” His face was hopeful, and despite my bleak mood, I laughed.

“I know exactly what you’re after,” I said. “Cinnamon roll, right? Terribly predictable.”

“Cinnamon rolls, a tankard of beer, and thou,” he said, standing to give me an elaborate bow and extend his hand. “Wilt thou walk with me, sweet prince?”

I chuckled, the last of the mood swirling away with his theatrics. “Have I mentioned I love you?” I asked, taking his hand. “My silly giant.”

“Not recently enough,” he said, leading us down the stairs. “It’s been at least a candlemark. I was perishing for a proof of your love.”

Back at the Elfsong, lunch and dessert eaten, I bought a bottle of fortified wine from the bartender, and we made our way upstairs.

“How are you not the least bit drunk?” Wyll demanded. “You’re half my size. You drank just as much as I did.”

I shrugged. “It’s a monk thing.”

“Really?”

“No, just being silly. At least, I don’t think it’s a monk thing.”

“Oh good. Now I can get you drunk and have you seduce me.”

“Oh!” I said. “Not seduce *me*?”

“Last night *was* rather wonderful, darling, but –”

“Aren’t you frustrated?” I asked, interrupting him, worry unfurling in me. “We don’t do that very often. You’re sure it’s not troubling you?”

Wyll smiled. “Darling, I’m thrilled with my life with you. In and out of bed.”

“But –”

“Hey. You’re trying to pick at this like a scab, aren’t you?” he asked, kneeling in front of me. “Dearest, you give me so much. Why would you think I’m unhappy?”

I sighed. I didn't quite know how to say *but how could you not be, with me?* – and I didn't want to say it, either.

“You're the dawn that fills my day with light and love, darling. I'm so grateful to have you. You're wonderful.”

I felt a stir of frustration. I didn't want lofty declarations of love. I wanted to know... what? That he wanted more from me?

Wyll frowned, watching my face, gently brushing the hair out of my eyes. “Something's bothering you, isn't it? Tell me.”

“I'm not... giving you enough,” I said, wrenching the words out of myself. “I feel...”

Wyll coughed, clearly trying to hide sudden laughter. “Oh, dearest. What the hells brought this on?”

I shrugged, and his eyes softened. “Darling, I enjoyed fucking you. I loved it. But... do you know what I mostly think about, when I'm wishing I was in bed with you?”

“What's that?”

“Do you remember lying in the bed above your shop? Lying together with you pressed up against me, your dick hard and pushing against my arse? Telling me how much you longed to be fucking me then and there?”

I coloured. “I do.”

“I think of that,” he said softly. “I think of how desperate I was for you to take me, then and there. How disappointment rushed through me when you pulled away instead. How you don't pull away now. That I can come here, and you'll take me in your arms, and you'll make me feel good... and then you'll make me see the stars themselves when you slide your dick deep inside me. I think about being transported by pure bliss. That in those precious moments, all I can think about, all I can feel, is the man I love.”

I rubbed my cheek against his, taking comfort in his closeness even as emotions roiled inside me.

“You thrill me. You delight me. You make me scream your name in the throes of passion. Dash, you're everything I ever wanted. When you're on top of me, and your dick slides against me, I want to call out to the gods themselves and tell them nothing they can create could possibly be as wonderful, as astounding, as steeped in pure ecstasy, as the embrace of my sweet darling.”

“But –”

“But nothing. When you look at me, and that light of arousal burns in your eyes, my knees go weak. Everything I crave, I find in you. My heart, my soul, my body – they all find comfort and joy in you. Darling, sometimes I want to bend you over the bed and fuck you. But most nights, I want you to do that to me. I don't think it's a lesser joy. It's wonderful. Your dick

sends me to new heights of pleasure. I don't quite understand why you keep getting stuck on this. But dearest... what can I do to reassure you that you're giving me *exactly* what I want?"

I relaxed against him, thinking about his question. "I think perhaps this is just my problem to figure out," I said eventually.

"Nonsense," he said, kissing my cheek. "You're my darling. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But your problems are my problems, and at some point, you'll have to lance this boil."

I scowled, only half-serious. "You've learnt entirely too much about mind healing for my comfort."

He chuckled, sounding oddly satisfied. "Now you know how it feels."

"Oh, love," I said, with utter sincerity. "Thank you. Every time I think I can't possibly be more in love with you, you do something wonderful."

"It's wonderful to point out that you have a lovely, and very satisfying, dick?"

I laughed, feeling some of the anxiety and worry drain away.

"Come sit on the bed with me?" Wyll asked. "I want to cuddle with you."

We sat on the bed, and I rested against him, my head on his shoulder.

"I have to ask," he said. "What in the hells happened to make you think that you'd be an unsatisfying lover? You're considerate. You're skilled. You're passionate. When we're in bed together, I'm almost blinded by the light of your desire and love for me. Why would you think you're not everything I've ever dreamed of?"

My eyes filled with tears, suddenly. Unexpectedly.

"Was it Jurgen?" Wyll asked, his voice soft. "Darling, did he tell you that you were terrible in bed? Too small, too scrawny, didn't know how to please him, so he had to... whatever the hells he decided to do?"

I curled in on myself, but forced myself to not draw away, to instead slip an arm around his waist, as my knees drew up to my chest.

"I'm sorry, dearest. Was that too far?"

I shook my head and breathed in his scent through the tears sliding slowly down my face. "You landed on the right square in one move," I said. "I just... I don't know how to excise this from myself. People have told me these things since I was young. It's like trying to convince myself that the sky isn't blue, or the earth doesn't pull at me to keep me on the ground. I can argue against it. I can listen to you tell me the opposite. But deep down, it just feels like something I *know*."

“Well. At least you asked me, this time,” Wyll said, stroking my hair lightly, one arm around my shoulders in a loose embrace. “I can understand not being used to being desired, I suppose. Though I find it difficult to believe.”

“Believe what?”

“That you didn’t have a chance to get used to being desired until we met,” he said, a smile in his voice. “Hells. I still remember my first sight of you. You ran into battle without a single hesitation. And then you started hitting goblins with your bare fists. You were so fierce, so muscled, and the look on your face. Almost peaceful, there on the battlefield, with blood flying all around you. So focused. I wanted you to turn that focus on me and fuck me with the heat of the battle in your blood and the light of holy retribution in your eyes.”

“Wow,” I said quietly.

“*Wow* was exactly correct. And a few other exclamations of utter awe.”

I let the glow of his words sink through me.

“People told you those things because they were afraid,” he said softly. “Afraid of your power. Afraid of your threat. Afraid that you’d get up and walk away from them if they didn’t make you believe that you deserved nothing better. Someday, you’ll need to let go of those lies, and see them for what they were: fear. Fear of you, and all the wonder that you encompass.”

“Mmm. I’ll try, love.”

“Good. Because you’re astounding, and I love you.”

I woke later that night with my heart racing, pounding in my ears, and a raging panic seizing me in a vice-like grip. Had to stay still. Had to be *silent*.

“Dearest?” Wyll whispered. “Are you awake?”

“Sorry,” I said, trying to sound normal. “Just a nightmare.” I closed my eyes, trying to relax back into sleep.

Wyll moved closer, throwing an arm over me, then hesitating. “Darling, you’re shivering. What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine.”

I felt him move away, heard a couple of fumbling motions, and the lamp flamed into a gentle light. “Are you sure about that?” he asked, voice gentle. “Come on, talk to me.”

I turned over to face him and held out a hand. He grasped it immediately, fingers stroking mine. “I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t remember the dream.”

“I have you, dearest. What do you need?”

I closed my eyes, the question reverberating through me. It was Wyll. Whatever this was, he wasn't causing it. I didn't have to worry about him reacting badly, dangerously. And at that thought, I remembered my encounter at the Blushing Mermaid. I opened my eyes and tightened my grip on Wyll's hand. When his only reaction was to continue caressing my fingers, I relaxed.

"I thought I saw Jurgen today," I said. "That's all. It wasn't him. It was nothing."

"And yet?"

"Yet he still holds power over me," I said, frustrated, angry. "Shit, I hate this. We defeated the Chosen of three damn gods, and I'm terrified of *Jurgen*."

"Old habits can be hard to break," Wyll said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was *nothing*," I said. "I saw a man. I thought it was him. He turned around; it wasn't. That was all."

"How did you feel?"

"Scared. Worried. Uncertain." I paused, casting my mind back to that afternoon. "But then..."

"Hmm?"

"Then I realised it was ridiculous, and got ready to fight the bastard. But it wasn't him."

"So you're not terrified of him," Wyll said, reaching out with his other arm to invite me into an embrace. "You're prepared to face him. And win."

"Huh. I suppose I am. Apart from my initial reaction."

"*Courage is found in the battle against fear, not in the defeat of it,*" he quoted. "My father's words. He had a point."

"He usually does, damn him," I agreed, moving to get closer to Wyll, my head on his shoulder. He closed his arms loosely around me, kissing my forehead. "Thank you, love."

"You're welcome, oh light of my life," he said. "But – oh. This is why you started worrying earlier?"

"Oh," I said, feeling a wave of chagrin. "I hadn't realised that. Some mind healer I am."

"You told me yourself that being too close to the problem obscures one's view," he said, his voice amused.

"Hmm. You keep schooling me in my own area of expertise," I grumbled. "I don't like that you keep bearing the brunt of this."

He snorted. “I also *bear the brunt* of being betrothed to my favourite person in all of Toril. And beyond,” he said. “I think the benefits of loving you far outweigh the occasional restless night.”

I sighed.

“Hey. You're as sharp as the finest steel, hard as a diamond. And as soft as a kitten's belly fur,” he said, stroking my hair. “I love seeing all the different sides of you. Being able to love each and every one.”

“Mmm. I love you.”

“I know. I love you, my sweet darling.”

“Thank you. For walking me through that. For helping me to see.”

“You realise you taught me that, right?”

“Not so you would use it on me!”

He chuckled. “May I kiss you, dearest?”

I felt a lick of heat slide through me, and pulled his face down to kiss him hard, tongue sliding against his lips, seeking entry.

He gasped, mouth opening to me, body pressing against me, then consciously pulling away a little. “Sorry, darling. You lead,” he said. “I'll follow.”

“What?”

“Show me what you want, dearest. I'm yours.”

The cloud of arousal thinned a little, and I realised he was trying to avoid setting off my panic response. “Come here,” I said, pulling him back against me, feeling the warmth and solidity of him all over again. “I want to kiss you for a while. I want your hands on my arse. And then I want to taste you.”

Wyll's eyes filled with heat, and his lips met mine. I let myself drift away into pure sensation, aware only of his skin against mine and our movements against each other.

The elder brain

Chapter Notes

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

“Right. How are we doing this morning?” I asked.

“We found the thing,” Astarion reported, his mouth twisting in disgust. “Foul creature. Just a huge brain lurking underwater like a perverted leviathan. We cleared the way to it.”

“Minsc is still upset that you did not allow him to destroy the wicked beast in its lair!”

“Yes, Minsc. Good boy,” Astarion drawled. “Not much to report though. I can tell you where it is, and that’s about all. We stayed back, in case the artefact’s power was weakened down there. Controlling Minsc *and* me might have been a little out of reach of even Jaheira’s talents.”

I nodded. “Wise. I think it would be fine, but with it here and you there... I honestly don’t know.”

The door of the common rooms opened with a bang, and I groaned, turning. What fresh hell was this? The owner of the Elfsong, finally grown fed up with our wild exploits? A new evil power, determined to take us down? The Flaming Fist, wanting to arrest us for most thoroughly disturbing the peace?

It was Dame Aylin. And by the looks of her, she was in a towering rage.

“Uhh... I think I managed to get a message to Aylin,” Shadowheart said.

“Thanks,” I said drily. “Aylin. You heard about Lorroakan, then?”

“Where is he? I will cleave his soul from his body and break the remains upon the altar of my power!”

“Can you wait a couple of days to seek vengeance?” I asked. “We have an elder brain to defeat.”

“Vengeance is *not* a dish best served cold. Take me to this wizard!”

I sighed. Having an angry and frustrated aasimar on our hands did not sound like a great idea. Perhaps we’d be better off indulging her, dealing with a lingering threat, and perhaps recruiting her in our fight as a result. I glanced at Wyll, who shrugged.

“Fine,” I said, resigned to a surprise fight. “We’ll help. Anyone want to come along?”

Gale’s eyes were alight with enthusiasm. “I’m in,” he said. “That cad has been beating his apprentice, I’m sure of it. Taking him down will be just the thing to brighten my week.”

“No, this is foolish,” Shadowheart said. “You don’t have to involve yourself in every single fight this city sees, Dash.”

I shook my head. “We need to back up our allies, Shadowheart.”

“Perhaps she has a point,” Jaheira said. “Dash, I have led many a battle. But others, I delegated someone else to lead. If you plan to face the elder brain today, another showdown will only fracture your resources.”

I blinked. She was right, damn it. They both were. “Valid points,” I acknowledged. “So. Let’s assume that Wyll and I will face the elder brain today. Who goes with whom?”

“Gale with us,” Wyll said firmly. “He might be our best chance of controlling the thing.”

Gale opened his mouth, eyes frowning, but then paused in thought.

“We need someone from the scouting party,” I said, not waiting for Gale’s opinion. “I’d rather not be blundering around blind if we can avoid it.”

Jaheira nodded. “Astarion? Then I can go with Aylin. I have heard of this Lorroakan. Seeing him get his comeuppance would give me great satisfaction.”

I looked at Astarion, who shrugged.

“Good to see that sense prevails,” Shadowheart said, her tone dry. “I’ll go with Aylin and Jaheira. You can have your little boy power team.”

I laughed. “Thanks for indulging our odd masculine whimsies,” I said. “Right. I’m sure you two can sort out who goes with you and what you’ll need.”

She and Jaheira walked away with Aylin, already talking in low tones.

“So. Straight to the sewers?” Gale asked. “Or do we have other tasks on our agenda as well?”

“I need to head to the palace this morning, and at least spend a couple of hours at the Healing Hole,” I said.

“What’s at the palace?” Astarion asked, his face curious. “There seems to be a big secret.”

“Can’t tell you yet,” I said, shrugging. “I would – it’s not that I don’t trust everyone here – but it’s not my tale to tell.”

He scowled. “I hate secrets.”

“You hate other people’s secrets, you mean,” Gale said.

“No! Keeping track of my own is terrible, too! Secrets are annoying things.”

Wyll chuckled. “We should also check on progress for Karlach’s heart. I don’t think we need Astarion and Gale for that, unless you’d particularly like to come?”

“Ugh. Technical talk about mystical energies I know nothing of,” Astarion said. “Not my idea of a fun time. I’m sure Gale and I can use our time this morning putting together packs of scrolls and potions for everyone.”

“That would be very helpful – thank you. Gale?”

He nodded. “I can do that.”

Walking to the House of Wonders, I took Wyll’s hand. He squeezed my hand, looking down at me with smiling eyes. “I like that shirt on you,” he said. “It brings out the lovely colour of your eyes. Though I think I’d rather see you without it.”

I felt my cheeks warming. “My eyes are mud-coloured. Sweet of you to think they’re nice, though.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’re almost amber in shade. Utterly captivating,” he said. “I love staring into your eyes. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Hmmp. I thought we were past the short jokes,” I said, pretending offence.

Wyll laughed. “Ahh. You deflect compliments almost as well as projectiles.”

“Do you think we should split up more?” I asked. “I feel like I’m being unfair, always bringing you with me. Do we distract each other?”

“I think it makes sense,” he said. “I’d be more distracted if you were far away, in a battle I knew nothing of. Besides, we’re not just betrothed. We’re also sparring partners. We know each other’s moves and tactics. It gives us both an edge in any fight.”

“I’m not just being hopelessly partisan?”

“Not *just*, no,” he said, a teasing tone to his voice. “But in all seriousness, Dash: you’re overthinking things a little too much. The burden of leadership is on your shoulders. You want me with you to ease that burden just a touch? None of us will begrudge you that. Well... perhaps occasionally someone will have their nose put out of joint. But we all know that you do your best. Besides, not everyone wishes to join in every battle. Some probably appreciate the rest.”

“Am I being selfish towards you, then?” I asked, troubled all over again. “I’m sure you could do with a rest more often.”

He shook his head, the look on his face definitely shading towards exasperation. “Darling, no. I want to be at your side. I’m yours. Besides... I like watching you fight. It’s very sexy.”

I felt the knot of worry inside me loosen, and I lifted his hand to kiss it. “I love you.”

“That’s better,” he said, smiling. “Almost there, darling.”

I sighed. All we had to do was destroy an illithid elder brain. *All*. Like it or not, we had an excellent chance of dying this afternoon. Anxiety rose in me, and I resisted the initial urge to push it down and ignore it. Better to let it fuel me into making the most of the morning we had available to us.

“We’ve made some progress,” Zanner reported. “I’ve constructed the casing, and I’ll do the connectors next. Both fairly simple constructions. The valves... a little trickier, but I think Dammon had an idea that will work. I can explain in more detail, if you’d like?”

I shook my head. “It will largely pass me by and waste your time,” I said honestly. “While I’d love to learn more about infernal machinery, this is hardly the time or place. I trust you all.”

He smiled briefly. “It’s the power source that’s giving us trouble,” he said. “Dammon’s an excellent blacksmith, with a good hand for creating small parts from exotic materials... but he’s no engineer. Likewise, we’re excellent engineers, but the constraints imposed by a flesh receptacle... I suppose she wouldn’t consider housing her intellect entirely in a construct like a Steel Watcher?”

I winced. “I suspect not.”

He nodded. “Well, we’re still working on it. The problem, as I explained the other day, is that infernal power sources create vast amounts of heat. In an infernal environment, these emanations can bleed off with ease, leaving the engine running at a comfortable temperature. On this plane, though...”

“Mmm. You were talking about bleeding off the energy, somehow? Turning it into magical energy, like the Weave?”

“Exactly. We might be able to turn her into – well, essentially, a wild magic sorcerer. It would be troublesome. Difficult to control what might happen and when. Her powers would be highly unstable. But it might be the better option.”

“You’re right. I suppose we could always look for a better option later, too. As long as the bleed-off doesn’t make Karlach too dangerous to handle.”

“True,” he admitted. “We might be getting a little lost in details that can be refined at a later date. How is she feeling?”

I grimaced. “Alright – but I’d really like to see this dealt with soon.” I felt a stir of worry again. What if Wyll and I didn’t survive this afternoon? “Zanner, if I don’t come back, please continue working on this. Can I count on you?”

He tilted his head, as though he could see me. “You’re in a dangerous situation,” he said. “We owe you our lives, and those of our families. I swear it. We’ll do our best to save Karlach, regardless of your future input.”

I nodded, feeling Wyll move closer to me. “Thank you,” I replied. “You ease my heart.” At least if we died... perhaps Karlach wouldn’t. She deserved better than that. “And,” I said, remembering Lenore, “we might have some extra resources we can pull in to help with the power problem. No promises.”

“Well, your current team has been exceptionally helpful,” he said. “I’ll accept any assistance you can bring in. Let me know.” He turned away to his desk, his fingers already moving over a complicated diagram. We were clearly dismissed.

Lenore was sitting up when we walked into her room, the nurse absent.

“Where’s your nurse?” I asked sharply. If she’d been neglected, I’d rain hell on anyone responsible – Ulder included.

“She’s on a break,” Lenore said, her voice a little hoarse. “She’s only been gone a little while. A relief, I’ll admit – I’m not accustomed to constant company.”

I relaxed. “Alright. How are you feeling?”

“You told me I’d want to be up and moving before I could manage it,” she said, shifting restlessly. “Damn you for being utterly correct. Please tell me there’s something I can do. Read. Crossword puzzles. Something. I need something to engage my mind before I go insane.”

I glanced at Wyll. “I don’t think reading is a good idea,” I said gently. “Books are too heavy, and trying to follow the words will be more taxing than you realise. The same with crossword puzzles. However... I think I have a puzzle you might enjoy. Or you might object to it quite strenuously. I need to make something very clear: your room here, and my care, are in no way reliant upon your cooperation with this.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m intrigued.”

I explained Karlach’s heart, the project to rebuild it, and the power issue that Zanner was facing. “We heard rumours in the Underdark that a Lenore was working on a project with sussur and its potential to power devices. If that was you... well, I assume Gortash was trying to get the secrets of your research from you. I’d understand if you don’t wish to collaborate with us on this.”

She sighed. “He was. I refused. And it seems rather convenient that I’m miraculously saved... and then asked to give up the results of my research.”

I felt a lurch of disappointment, despite my reassuring words. I’d hoped so hard that she’d trust us enough to participate. “You’re right,” I said. “My thanks for considering it. How have you been eating?” I held out a hand to take her wrist and feel her pulse.

“Wait,” she said, pulling her arm away from me. “I didn’t say no. You really would continue to treat me regardless?”

I nodded. "You're my patient," I said, a little confused. "Your wellbeing and comfort are my primary concern."

"This person is important to you, isn't she?" she asked, watching me closely.

I pressed my lips together, carefully ignoring the tears that threatened to rise in my eyes. "She is," I said shortly. "But we'll figure it out. It's not your problem."

She nodded sharply. "I'll assist," she said. "In whatever manner I can. Your people will need to attend me here, I suppose."

I frowned. "What changed your mind?"

"Nothing. I hadn't made up my mind," she said. "I think I need to start trusting people a little more. If I had, perhaps I wouldn't have been isolated. Perhaps Gortash wouldn't have been able to take me and spirit me away."

"You're sure you want to do this?" I asked, unable to stop the hope showing on my face.

She nodded. "Bring them here," she said. "Now. What do you need to do with me?"

Wyll touched my shoulder. "I'll go talk to Father," he said in a low voice. "Make sure it's alright to bring others in."

I shot him a grateful glance, and took Lenore's arm. "Thanks, love. Lenore, how long have you been sitting up today? What have you eaten?"

"Who is that?" Lenore asked when I'd finished the cursory examination. "Your partner, I mean. He seems quite comfortable here in the palace."

I grinned at her. "That's Ulder Ravengard's son, Wyll."

"Ravengard's son is a devil?" she asked. "That sounds like a story worth telling."

"It really is," I said. "I'll tell it to you someday."

"Father said – rather grudgingly – that it's acceptable to bring Zanner and Dammon to see Lenore," Wyll reported. "He thinks word will spread eventually anyway. Perhaps no one will care that she's here, but he wants to keep her safe. He'll leave word with the guards that they're to be admitted."

"I appreciate his care," I said. "But I think this is a risk we need to take."

He just nodded in agreement, seeming lost in thought.

We stopped by the House of Wonders to talk to Zanner again.

"I can't exactly make progress on this project if I'm continually interrupted," he snapped. "What's so important that you must disturb me twice in one day?"

“You know how I mentioned a potential resource?” I asked. “We have a cleric in the palace who’s been researching the power potential of sussur. She’s willing to help with the project, if she can.”

“*Sussur?*” he asked, his face lighting up. “Sussur flowers. Of course. They drain the Weave from sorcerers and wizards. Holy hells, that could solve both problems. Drain off the excess as well as power the thing... push what they can’t use into an amulet or something. By Gond’s mighty hammer, I think you might have something. When can she get here?”

“Ahh... slight problem,” I confessed. “She’s bedridden. You’ll need to go to her.”

He clapped his hands together. “Certainly. I’ll go there immediately. Sussur! Genius!”

“My thanks,” I said. “We’ll see if Dammon can join you. Will you need the diabolist?”

He shook his head. “She delivered the blueprints. They were of some use, but I think that’s the limit of her help for now. Unless we need to obtain some more infernal materials, of course.”

“Good. I’d rather not pull in too many people. Please don’t talk about her presence here in the city. It’s not widely known.”

At the Healing Hole, only a few patients waited. For once, their needs were simple; some colds and chills needing tea and a warming chest rub, a couple of cuts to limbs from unruly knives. When I’d ushered the last out the door and locked it, I sat down with a sigh.

“I think we need tea,” I said. “Love, would you like one? A patient paid me in honey, so I can even sweeten it a little.”

“Sounds great,” Wyll said, putting the broom in its cupboard. “Then lunch, yes?”

“Mmm,” I said. “I suppose we should. I’m tempted to simply take you upstairs and try to seduce you instead, though.”

Wyll knelt in front of me, eyes serious. “Darling, I would love that. Feeling this body against me... kissing you, touching you... it’s bliss. But I think perhaps we’re running out of time.”

The words *running out of time* rang through me like a death knell. What if this was our very last opportunity, and we squandered it? *But we can do it*, I told myself firmly. *I won’t let this be the end for either of us. We’ll find a way through. We always have.*

“Battle jitters?” he asked.

I nodded, stepping forward to pull him into a hug. “I love you so much, sweetheart.”

Wyll rested his cheek against my shoulder, a horn sliding against my neck. “I love you, darling. We can defeat this thing. You know we can. Our biggest, most fearsome enemy is the doubt within us, not the elder brain.”

I smiled, letting my cheek slide over his horn, its ridges making me shiver. “I can always rely on you to stiffen my backbone.”

“And I can always rely on you to stiffen other things,” he said, pulling away a little, grinning at me. “You know, I’m looking forward to this fight. I want to watch you run off to hit something while my loins heat up with desire for you.”

I bit my lip as arousal slid through me, followed by self-consciousness. “Blarney,” I said, trying to pull myself back to a rational state of mind.

Wyll chuckled, stroking my cheek. “I want to kiss you,” he said. “But if I do, I might not stop for quite some time.”

I laid my mouth on his anyway, and let my doubts and worries disappear for a few precious moments, lost in the taste and feel of him.

“Alright,” I said, drawing away despite my desire to just keep him safe in my arms. “I’m fortified. Tea, lunch, then back to the Elfsong to pick up Gale and Astarion.”

“Ah, the sewers,” Gale said. “The malodorous byways of the malevolent and maladjusted.”

“You should write advertisements,” I said, grinning at him. “Somehow, you make them sound upmarket.”

Astarion snorted. “Down here, *upmarket* just means fewer rats.”

“Not so different from Heapside, then,” I pointed out.

“Down here,” he said, pointing the way.

“So what’s the plan?” Gale asked.

“Give you the netherstones, and you command the elder brain to destroy itself,” I said. “You’re most familiar with using willpower to command the Weave, and I suspect that experience will be very useful here.”

“That orb in your chest might not hurt either,” Wyll pointed out. “Like calls to like, after all. Didn’t Karsus create that crown in order to control the Karsite Weave?”

Gale nodded. “So. It all rests on me. Well. It’s not the first time responsibility has been thrust upon me.”

“You carry it well,” I said, elbowing him gently.

“There,” Astarion said, pointing at a dark tunnel entrance. “Shit. Those brain things have regenerated already. Be careful. The big ones explode, for some godforsaken reason.”

“Exploding brains,” I said. “I suddenly have empathy for them.”

Wyll snorted. “Enough talk.”

I took the hint and ran forward, targeting the larger intellect devourers to throw, hit, and kick them into their smaller, less explosive brethren. Astarion joined me, with Wyll and Gale hanging back to attack from the rear. Eldritch blasts and magic missiles burst all around us, until we stood in a cavern carpeted with brain matter.

“Well. That was quite... unpleasant,” Gale said, flicking a piece of brain matter from his boot and grimacing. “This outing is not exactly bucolic, is it?”

“You were expecting long grass and fluffy cows?” Astarion asked.

“Granted,” Gale said, nodding at Astarion. “Shall we continue?”

Wyll bent to get close to my ear. “Watching you kick those things was *hot*, ” he whispered, and grinned when I flushed.

“There she is,” Astarion whispered. “Just a giant brain in a crown, swimming in an underground lake.”

“She?” Gale whispered.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems appropriate, though,” Astarion whispered back.

I handed Gale the stones. “You’re up. You can do this, Gale.”

Gale straightened and walked down to the shore, the rest of us trailing behind. The elder brain rose from the water, and the artefact vibrated in my pocket.

Our dream visitor appeared as a projection beside us, in his illithid form. *So*, he said. *We approach the end of our time together.*

I nodded to him. “You’re here to help?”

As I can, he said. *I still have work to do here as well. But if I can assist in controlling the thing, I shall.*

“Thanks.”

A blast of compulsion hit us, and all but Gale and the illithid fell to our knees, fighting mentally to resist. Gale held the netherstones in the air, and concentrated.

Harder, the illithid said. *It resists.*

“I’m trying,” Gale said through gritted teeth. “This thing’s will is... it’s immense. And slippery.”

They battled mentally, the strain on Gale showing in the tense lines of his body, and the increased trembling in the arm that held the stones aloft. Waves of compulsion crashed into

us and receded, leaving all of us – the illithid excepted – shaking with the stress.

The brain dipped halfway into the water, the compulsion easing, and Gale's face turned triumphant. "Destroy yourself!" he roared.

A new wave of psychic energy crashed over us, and Gale dropped to the ground, limbs splayed, eyes closed. The elder brain sent out a blast of triumph, and burst through the ceiling of the cavern.

"Shit," Wyll said, struggling to his feet. "It's in the city proper. And we need to get out of here, before the entire cavern collapses."

"Worse," the illithid said. "That was no elder brain. It has evolved. That was a nether brain. No human, gnome, or elf could hope to dominate it."

"Shit," I said. "Am I to assume only you can dominate it, now? It requires an illithid to control it?"

He inclined his head. "Indeed. I am aware that this requires a new level of trust to be extended."

I sighed. "A problem for tomorrow, I think," I said. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Wyll and Astarion pulled Gale upright, one arm around each man's shoulder. "Let's go," Wyll said, his face grim, and we set off back through the sewers, silent and dismayed.

"That... could have gone better," I admitted, back in the common rooms at the Elfsong.

"It could have gone worse," Astarion pointed out. "We're all still alive, which surprises me just a little."

"Oh ye of little faith," Wyll said, grinning at him. "How's Gale?"

"Fine," I said. "I gave him some Wizard's Cureall tea and a massage. He seems to have bounced back quite well."

"Handy," Astarion said. "I'd rather not lose our key wizard."

"Is there panic in the streets?" I asked. "Having a giant brain suddenly appear..."

Jaheira shook her head. "Not at all. Everyone is just going about their business as usual. It's quite perturbing. That *thing* hovering over the palace, and no one seems to have noticed. Except Lorroakan," she added, her face suddenly triumphant. "That little worm noticed, and it gave us just the opening we needed."

"Oh," I said, suddenly recalling the mission they'd been on. "It went well?"

"That might depend on your perspective," she said, her expression rueful. "Lorroakan had a soul cage set up for Aylin."

“Shit.”

“Rolan was rather distraught to discover that his famous mentor was, in fact, a slaver. To his credit,” she said. “Lorroakan is deceased, and Rolan has taken over Ramizith’s tower. And the store. Only time will tell if he can defend it against the inevitable challengers.”

“Perhaps Gale can help him with some defensive spells,” I said. “I’d like to see him doing well in life. Those bruises...” I shuddered. I hated to imagine the abuse Lorroakan might have been inflicting.

“So,” Wyll said, a hand idly caressing my leg, “we try again tomorrow? With our dream visitor holding the netherstones?”

I sighed. “I see no other options,” I said. “At this point, we either trust him, or fail for certain. Thoughts?”

The others just shrugged. I looked around, realising that lines of exhaustion marked everyone’s faces.

“Right. Time to call it quits for the night,” I said, clapping my hands. “Great work, all of you. I know how hard you’ve been trying. We’re close, now.”

Back in our room, Wyll and I bathed quickly.

“Ugh. That’s better,” I said, towelling myself dry. “Brain spatter might be my least favourite bodily... fluid? Solid? Whatever.”

“It’s the bouncy-jelly texture,” Wyll said, grimacing and kicking our clothes closer to the door. “Disgusting stuff. I think we might want to burn those.”

Finally clean and dry, we fell onto the bed. I desperately wanted to think about anything other than the nether brain facing us on the morrow.

“My sexy darling,” Wyll murmured, reaching out to trace over my shoulder with a claw. “We might not have triumphed over that thing, but watching you fight was still wonderful. And surviving is an aphrodisiac all its own.”

I shivered, arousal taking the place of the nether brain in my thoughts. But one thing niggled at me. “Is it my imagination,” I asked, “or have you been giving me more compliments than usual today?”

Wyll smiled at me, looking me up and down, taking his time, a hand stroking my side as I lay next to him.

I flushed, feeling... not quite uncomfortable. It was Wyll. But... confused, perhaps.

“I have,” he said. “But I haven’t been searching for things to say, if that’s your concern. I just... decided to voice a few more of my thoughts.”

I moved closer, his arm wrapping immediately around me. “Why?” I asked.

“Because,” he said quietly, “when I was hurting, and felt unlovable, untouchable... you came to me, and you touched me. You told me I was beautiful. You let me see in your gaze just how much you liked what you saw. How much you wanted me. You did it over and over for me. Darling, that healed so many of my hurts.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “But... I’m still confused.”

“I realised that you’ve been very quietly telling me for months that you feel similarly about yourself. That you’re not attractive, not desirable. And I... I don’t think I’ve helped. I saw the veneer of confidence, and I didn’t think to spend too much time looking underneath it. I just told you once or twice how beautiful you were, and expected that to fix everything, because you’re wise and smart and sensible about these things.”

I snorted.

Wyll chuckled. “Quite. I should have been telling you everything that was in my heart, my sweet darling. I just... I didn’t want you to think that the outside was all I saw. Instead, I think I made you believe I loved you *in spite* of your body.”

“You don’t exactly seem the shallow type.”

“And I didn’t want you to change that opinion! But... dearest, I love to look at you. You’re a work of art. I love even more having the privilege of touching you. Tracing your muscles with my fingers. Kissing down the lovely bend of your back. Having your legs wrapped around me nearly sends me to climax all by itself. And your face... hells, I could watch your face all day and never get bored. So handsome, but so expressive. Almost everything you feel shows up straight away on this face,” he said, sliding a finger over my beard. “I want you to know exactly how attracted I am to your body as well as your heart and soul. You did that for me, and to my regret, I failed to return the favour. Because I couldn’t believe you could look in a mirror and see anything but beauty.”

I grappled with tumbling thoughts that refused to stand still long enough for me to properly think them. “I... don’t know how to respond to that,” I said slowly.

“Then don’t,” he said, pushing my shoulder gently until I rolled onto my back. “Don’t say anything. Just let me worship at the altar of your body. Admire you. Tell you you’re beautiful and kind and quite perturbingly muscled in all the right places.”

I felt my face grow hot.

“Oh. Did I make you blush?” he asked, leaning over me, an odd note in his voice.

I nodded, suddenly bereft of words.

He closed his eyes, breathing hard for a few moments. “May I kiss you, darling?” he asked, opening his eyes again.

I pulled him down for a kiss. As soon as our lips touched, heat pulsed between us, our mouths demanding, our hands sliding over bare skin to press us together. I felt the hot, hard evidence of Wyll's arousal against my leg, and desire flared higher in me. I might not know what to do about his words, but I knew *exactly* what I wanted to do with *him* .

“Would you fuck me, darling?” he asked, mouth smiling but his eyes oddly vulnerable. His hand drifted down to my hip, stroking slowly. “I want your dick in me.”

I drew in a breath, a little shaky. “Sweetheart, I want nothing more.”

He kissed down my neck, letting his teeth graze the skin here and there. I reached for him, to graze my thumbs over his nipples and make him gasp, but he drew back to capture my wrists in his hands.

“No, let me tell you everything I love about you,” he said, pushing my arms down to the mattress. I felt that familiar thrill run through me, and it must have shown on my face, because Wyll bit his lip, watching me. “That look, for one. When you're starting to lose yourself in what I'm doing to you. Hells. I'd die a thousand deaths to see you under me with that look on your face.”

I smiled and opened my mouth to tell him I loved his touch, but he silenced me with a kiss.

“Shhh. Let me,” he murmured, moving his mouth down my neck again. “Mmm. Your shoulders. These muscles that go from your neck to your shoulder blades. Whenever you pick up a staff, I want to kiss all over them. Feel their strength. Trace them with my fingers. It's rather distracting in battle, my darling.” He slid his lips along my shoulder as I shivered.

“These arms,” he said. “So strong, so sculpted.” He ran his fingers down my biceps, his face soft. “Having these arms around me is bliss. They've held me through nights that threatened to destroy my soul. Clutched me in the throes of passion and the extremes of every emotion. Pulled me close, always – never pushing me away. You can cause such pain and damage with these arms alone, love... but never to me. To me, these arms bring only comfort and joy.”

He took my hand in his, turning it over to kiss my palm. “Your hands, my darling. Your fists can break bones. You hurt and heal with these hands, dearest. I love that you can do that. Yet your fingers coax such sounds of desire from my throat. I love holding these hands in my own. You make me feel so secure, so safe, as soon as your hands touch mine.”

Wyll moved down to my chest, licking lightly over my nipples. They weren't overly sensitive, but I bit my lip as he played, regardless. “I love your chest, darling. You fought shirtless once, and oh. My heart. The play of light on your skin as you fight is sublime.” He bit into the pectoral muscle, still gentle, and grinned at the noise that came from my mouth.

He moved down, and I groaned, expecting him – wanting him – to touch my cock next. Instead he knelt between my legs, stroking his hands down my thighs, following the muscles with his fingers. “Such wonderful legs,” he said softly, while the blood rose to my face. “So much strength and vitality.” He picked up one leg and laid gentle kisses down my calf. “I love feeling these against me. I love watching you run into battle ahead of me. Knowing what

one kick from these legs can do to an enemy. And yet you drape a leg across me so casually when we cuddle. I never realised how aroused I could get by the legs of a warrior.”

“I don't know how to react to this,” I confessed.

“Oh. Have I discomposed the mighty inscrutable monk himself?” Wyll teased, a grin growing on his face. “Finally. Vengeance for thoroughly flustering me on multiple occasions.”

I chuckled. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“Mmm. A sentiment I return with all of my heart.” He slid his fingertips, with just a hint of claw, up my legs, pausing at my loins. “May I, my sexy darling?”

“Please.”

He bent to lick quickly over my cock, and I gasped.

“This wonderful dick,” he said softly, stroking it with his fingers. “When you fuck me, this curve here rubs over a very sensitive part of me. It could make me climax in an instant. I love playing with it. Letting it slide down my throat. The moment when you finally lose all control and let your seed spurt into my mouth, so I can taste you and your ecstasy all at once.” He bent to lick it again, raising his face to grin at me when he heard my breath quicken. “Shall I stop torturing you by telling you how attractive I find you, now? And play with this lovely dick instead?”

“Yes please,” I said, sounding strangled.

Wyll laughed, looking immensely satisfied with himself, and slid his mouth over my cock. Heat washed through me, and I groaned to feel his lips and tongue sliding over it, then the tightness of his throat, soft and yielding and wet and so, so warm.

“Gods, love. Keep that up and I'll lose all control in record time.”

He pulled away to chuckle. “Tempting,” he told me. “I love watching your face when you give in to your desires. But I want this,” he slid his tongue over it again, watching the pleasure judder through me with satisfied eyes. “I want you to fuck me. Unless you'd rather use my throat.”

I took a deep breath, trying to rein in the crashing wave of arousal threatening to take me over. “You really know how to make me weak with desperate desire, don't you?”

Wyll's eyes crinkled with amusement, then filled with heat. “Choose,” he said. “Tell me what you want, darling. I'm yours.”

I sat up and reached for him, and this time he didn't stop me. “This,” I said, caressing his arse with both hands. “I want to fuck you, love. I want to revel in having you under me. I want to sink my cock deep inside you and feel all your muscles convulse around it when I bring you to climax.”

“Oh, hells. You're not so bad at inspiring desperate desire yourself, you know.”

Wyll moved away to lie down on his stomach, and I caught my breath, once again struck by his beauty. The curve of his shoulders and back, arching into that perfectly-shaped arse.

“Gods, you’re beautiful,” I said, and saw his mouth curve into a smile as he rested his head on his crossed arms. I caressed his arse with reverent fingers, before a lick of pure arousal slid through me, and I reached for the oil to pour a measure into my hand. I ran a single, oily finger down his spine, admiring the gleam of it on his dark skin in the lamplight. I pushed my thumb against his arsehole, pulling a groan from his throat.

“Please, darling,” he said. “Stop teasing me. Fuck me. Before I combust.”

“Oh,” I said, sliding a finger slowly into him, biting my lip at the feel of the muscle tightening around it. “We can’t have that, sweetheart.”

His answering chuckle was throaty, if a little exasperated. “I want your dick, darling.”

“Fuck,” I said, as my cock made its willingness to oblige very obvious, so hard I ached with it. “Oh, love.” I stroked oil over it, breathing hard as the sensations combined with the sight before me to push me closer to the edge. I rested the tip of my cock against him, seeing his arse cheeks tighten and relax in anticipation. I pushed slowly into him, feeling the light of my desire travel up my spine from loins to the crown of my head, filling me with arousal. I leant forward to kiss his shoulder blades, sliding deeper, starting a slow rhythm, planting soft kisses on his back all the while.

“Oh. This is wonderful,” Wyll said, uncrossing his arms to take handfuls of blanket, a lazy stretch like a cat. “Darling. Just like that.”

I rested my weight on one hand next to his chest, so I could stroke the other over his hip in a counterpoint to my thrusts. Pleasure filled me, a slow, languorous thing, unlike the sudden, pulsating, demanding desire that we usually invoked. “You feel like biting into the first apple pie of the autumn,” I said, moving inside him, bliss swelling within me. “Gods. Sweetheart. I wish I could spend eternity like this.”

Wyll turned his head to smile at me, his eyes soft, before they half-closed and a slow shiver went through him. “Oh. There it is. You hit all the right spots, darling.”

I breathed, slow and deep, keeping my rhythm steady, trying to keep my thrusts at the same angle, watching the pleasure filling his face. His arse stroked me in turn, rings of muscle clutching my cock, making every thrust feel like multiple caresses.

“I love you,” I said softly, and Wyll answered with quiet sighs of enjoyment as he started to move underneath me, pushing back against me as I moved, face intent.

“Hells. Close, darling. So close...”

I pushed into him one more time, feeling the telltale pulsing of muscles under and around me as his climax washed through him, watching the waves of pleasure shaking him, over and over, his face alight, eyes closed. The sight pushed the brimming arousal to overflow in me. “Close, love. In or out?”

“Spill your seed inside,” he said, eyes still closed. “I like feeling you... oh hells...”

My back arched as the ecstasy took me over, and I thrust deep inside him as the climax went through me, all thoughts of danger and enemies gone in the blissful moment. We cried out together, Wyll shuddering underneath me as I spilled my juices in him, pleasure shaking us both.

I lost the rhythm and collapsed on top of him, my muscles feeling like jelly. He lay still beneath me, heavy breathing and a smile on his face the only things stopping me from being concerned.

“Oh, my sweet love,” I said, taking in a breath, smelling his skin, mixed with the scent of his arousal and his seed, spilt underneath him. I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder, a ridge in his skin sliding over my skin as I did, raising goosebumps on my arms. “Gods, I love you. You could brighten the darkest night, my stars.”

“My darling,” he said. “That was wonderful. Come cuddle close to me and let me tell you how much I enjoyed having your dick in me.”

“Gods,” I said, rolling off him, pulling him into an embrace. “You’re amazing, love.”

“Me? You just took me to the pinnacle of ecstasy itself, darling. Hells. That was unlike anything that’s gone before.”

“Good, then?”

He laughed, the sound throaty and rich. “My dearest. Better than good. I was feeling in need of comfort and sweetness after that... thing. And now I feel utterly cherished. And fulfilled.”

I stretched to kiss his cheek. “I’m glad you feel cherished, love. I could lose everything else, and still feel content if I had you.”

“Mmm. The same here, darling. It’s funny. Usually our lovemaking feels like a bushfire. Hot. Wild. Desire raging.”

I moved my cheek over his chest, enjoying the feel of his skin against me all over again.

“And this time?”

“Like a hearthfire. Warm. Comforting. Reassuring. Utterly safe. Quiet. Very satisfying.”

“Which do you prefer?”

He chuckled, his chest moving under my cheek. “Both. Neither. Everything is wonderful, from our very first embrace to this. Somehow you figure out my mood and fuck me just the way I want you to. It amazes me. Thrills me.”

“Hmm. You’re quite good at telling me what you want, you know.”

“Let me say nice things about you without diminishing them, darling.”

I felt a rush of chagrin, then warmth. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“Mmmhm. But I’ll compliment you out of it eventually. See if I don’t.”

I laughed. “Such a terrible fate in store for me.” I kissed the skin under my cheek, and both heard and felt him catch his breath. Surely he wasn’t ready to go again? In a spirit of experimentation, I let my lips slide over a nipple, and his breathing hitched again.

“Mmm…” he said. “Do that again?”

I slid the very tip of my tongue over it, just lightly, and he groaned, so I traced one hand down his side, over his hip, as my tongue played.

Wyll put a hand on mine, pushing it gently, and I let him guide my fingers to his cock, thickening and hardening as I stroked it slowly. “Hells,” he said, voice rough. “You make me insatiable.”

“I do?” I asked, letting my fingers drift over its length, arousal thrilling through me all over again at the feel of it, ridges caressing my fingertips, making them tingle.

“Mmm. Your body,” he said, hands exploring my back, sliding down to my arse, claws scratching lightly, raising trails of warmth as my nerves caught fire. “Your mind. Your heart. Hells, Dash. I want you.”

“What do you want?” I asked, prepared at that moment to give him anything his heart desired. “Tell me, sweetheart.” I stretched to lick his other nipple.

He rolled us over, his body on mine, moving down to bite gently at my neck. I touched a hand to his chin to lift his face, stretched up to kiss him. He made a sound of pleasure and deepened the kiss as I arched up to press against him, a long, leisurely slide of lips and tongues.

He pulled away slightly, watching my face intently. “It’s fine to say no,” he said, his voice hesitant. “Or stop whenever you want. But you once asked me to hold you down. To do what I wanted to your body.”

My breathing sped up, excitement pulsing through me. “Please,” I said. “But sweetheart…”

“I want to,” he said. “It’s not to make you happy. You were right. That look in your eyes when I hold you down…” His hands moved to my arms, and the alchemical thrill of fear-turned-to-arousal went through me. He smiled, almost predatory.

I grinned back, my breath catching. “Gods, love.”

“Mmm. That one.” He kissed me, hard, and I opened my lips to him. His tongue slid in, sure and demanding. His body moved slowly against mine, and I tried to press up to meet him, but his legs were on mine, keeping me pinned. I made an inarticulate noise, and he stopped, eyes on my face.

“Alright, darling?” he asked. I nodded, and he moved to my neck, kissing softly. Gods, I hadn’t realised how much I thought about movement... how to touch him; how to react to him. Now I couldn’t move, only experience. His teeth pulled at the skin on my neck as his cock slid over mine, and I groaned.

He checked in again, and I looked up, my eyes unfocused. “You’re with me?” he asked softly.

I nodded and pulled myself back to focus on him. “I’m here,” I said. “Just... overwhelmed. Feels...” he slid his body over mine, the jut of his hardness pushing against me on the edge of pain, just feeding the desire coursing through me. “Feels wonderful, love.”

He grinned. “Hells. I love seeing that look on your face. Even more that it’s just for me.” He moved to the other side of my neck, kissing, nibbling, biting, while he slid over me, his cock hard against my leg, his belly rubbing over mine.

When he stopped, I was panting.

“My darling,” he whispered, and kissed my mouth.

He moved down, slid claws up my chest and down my arms, capturing my hands in his. He licked up the length of my cock. He settled into a slow, intense rhythm, his tongue sliding along my cock over and over.

I felt heat building in my loins, wanted to move with him. But his chest was against my legs, his hands holding mine in a tight grasp, so I could only make breathy sounds of enjoyment as his tongue filled my senses, wet and heat and that slow, gentle, repetitive caress, pushing me closer and closer to a peak.

“Gods, Wyll...” I said. “I’m close, love.”

He stopped, and I groaned in frustration. He grinned at me, straddling my legs to keep them still. I stared as he stroked himself slowly, watching me.

“I love seeing you like this,” he said softly. “Hells, Dash, the look on your face.”

“By all the gods, I love when you touch yourself,” I said. “This is maddening.” I could reach for him now, I knew – but that didn’t fit what we were doing. Instead, I stayed still underneath him, watching him, biting my lip, letting my desire to have him touch me more thrill through me and frustrate me.

He picked up the bottle of oil, poured some into his hand, and slowly massaged it into his cock, throwing his head back and groaning. “Hells. It never feels like this alone.”

Heat built in my loins, threatening to spill over, send me over the edge at the sight. That cock, gleaming in the lamplight. I wanted him to keep going, to tease me all night. I wanted him to stop, right now, and shove that cock into me, make me cry out as it stroked me deep inside. The conflict tore at me, delicious and frustrating all in one.

“Gods, love. I’m about to climax just watching you.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Your cock. Inside me, love. Gods, please?”

“Are you sure?” he asked, hand pausing on his cock. “I know...”

“I’m so aroused I can barely talk, Wyll. *Please?* ”

Heat rose in his eyes. “Hells. I never thought hearing you beg would feel so good.”

I grinned at him, then got lost in arousal again. “Gods, how many times are you going to make me ask?”

He shifted so I could move, and spread my legs, kneeling between them. His oily fingers slid slowly down my cock, over my balls, and rubbed lightly over my asshole.

I groaned. I could imagine his cock taking the place of his fingers. I wanted that.

“Almost,” I said. “Almost what I want, love.”

He replaced fingers with the tip of his cock. It slid slowly against me, so promising, so deceptively soft-feeling.

I cried out. “Wyll, love...”

“Beg me,” he said, rubbing the tip of his cock over my asshole. The movement set off jolts of pleasure through my loins. Damn him; I wanted more.

I tried to grind against him, but he held my legs still, watching me. “Love, please. Fuck me. Please.”

“My good darling,” he said softly, and slid his cock slowly inside me.

I gasped. The sensation was so much stronger for the anticipation. I shook, the pleasure so deep it was difficult to breathe through. I panted, meeting his eyes, and they looked triumphant. He was enjoying this, and the effect it was having on me.

“More, love,” I said, and he slid in a little further, causing a new paroxysm to go through me.

He slid out and poured oil straight onto his cock, rubbing it in while I watched, mesmerised.

His cock slid into me again, slick with oil, the bumps and ridges on it caressing every sensitive spot, making them sing. He started a slow, steady rhythm, still holding my legs, so I couldn’t join in, only experience. With every thrust, he went a little deeper, filling me a little more. Pleasure pulsed through me every time he moved in me, whenever his hands tightened on my thighs, until my focus narrowed to just those sensations, the rest of the world falling away. Just pleasure, and the slight pain of his claws pricking my flesh, the contrast making the bliss deeper, more complex.

“My sweet darling,” he said, his voice hoarse. He was having trouble keeping control, I suspected. “Hells. You feel so good. My beautiful love.”

He slid a hand down the underside of my cock, and I convulsed at the new feelings, crying out, lost in his touch. “Close, love. Close. Please don’t stop. Gods.”

He pulled my feet onto his shoulders and pushed hard, suddenly, sheathing himself in me, and I called out, wordless, shaking as the climax ripped through me. This was no gentle peak – it pulled me from myself like a storm, tossed me, and all I could do was let it take me, arms outflung, hands grabbing the sheets underneath me, back arching, rapture pulsing through me.

“HELLS,” he cried out. He thrust hard into me a few more times as I shook, then withdrew to spill hot seed over my belly, making me gasp all over again.

I panted, trying to bring my body back into balance, but was adrift on a sea of pure sensation coursing through me.

Wyll watched me, breathing fast, a look of awe on his face. When I finally pulled out of the near-trance, he smiled at me. “My sweet darling,” he said. “Have I told you lately just how much I love you?”

I dipped a finger in our mingled juices, and sucked it slowly, meeting his eyes, relishing the taste of the two of us combined. I watched his face heat with renewed arousal, and he bent to lick my stomach himself. My cock swelled a little, watching him taste our seed, and he smiled, stroking gentle fingers down the over-sensitive skin.

“That was... hells, you think I was maddening? Watching you beg, watching you under me... oh, Dash. You drive me wild with desire.”

“Come and kiss me, love?” I asked.

He lay beside me, pressing into my side, kissing me slowly and thoroughly. “My darling,” he said. “You’re alright? I didn’t hurt you?”

“I feel wonderful,” I said, pulling him down for another kiss. “Mmm. Your mouth tastes so good, love.”

“It wasn’t too much?” he asked, watching me closely.

I shook my head. “Ask me again later, when I’ve had a chance to come down off the high – but I think I’m fine, sweetheart.”

“I’m glad,” he said, biting my neck gently. “You’re exquisite. Your face, when you’re lost in sensation – I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that. It drives me wild, all by itself. But being inside you... feeling your arse all around my dick... hells. It felt like ascending to the heavens themselves.”

“Mmm. It was amazing, love. Your cock is spectacular. Gods... I want that inside me again. Very soon.”

His cock stirred against my leg, and I grinned.

“No,” he said. “My turn next. I love having your dick in me too, darling. I want you to fuck me next. Slide that lovely dick into my arse.”

I could imagine doing just that, so strongly that I pictured it with perfect clarity; felt the warmth of his arse surrounding and squeezing my cock. I came back to myself to find him watching my face, biting his lip.

“My darling,” he said again. “Hells, you’ve turned me into a libertine. I want nothing more than to lie in this bed and be fucked by you until the sun rises, and I see the dawn in your eyes.”

“So debauchery is good?” I asked, chuckling.

“I might have been converted,” he said, his tone teasing. “We should try a few more times, just to check.”

“My stars,” I said, cuddling against him, feeling the exhaustion of the day’s events finally pushing me towards sleep, my muscles relaxing in the afterglow. “I love you.”

Wyll might have replied, but it was lost to the slumber pulling me under.

Chapter End Notes

Again, apologies for the slow posting, folks. This chapter got away from me a bit, as you can probably tell from the length. 😊

I might not be able to post a chapter this weekend. I have some medical stuff going on (pesky hearts!), and need to have minor surgery on Friday. Should be pretty simple if all goes smoothly, though, so I might manage it. The next chapter is in pretty good shape already, if shorter than the recent huge ones!

I hope you're having an awesome week! 💜

Love, Rowan

Threats of imminent death

Chapter Notes

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

Next morning, I woke with a feeling of dread crawling up and down my spine. Today, we needed to deal with the elder – no, the *nether* – brain. Our greatest, strongest foe. The thing that was behind every trouble we'd been dealing with to this point. There was every chance at least someone would die, irretrievably gone. And a decent chance that all of us would.

I relaxed into meditation, hoping to calm my body and mind, and focus myself for the challenges ahead. A quick visit to the Healing Hole later. Drop in to the House of Wonders to see how they were progressing on Karlach's heart. Check on Lenore, and ensure Zanner hadn't agitated her.

I let myself feel the worry and fear of loss curling through my chest. I looked at it, tracing its windings and connections. I wanted to live. And after so long alone... I wanted the people I loved, the people I'd collected around me, to live too. I breathed, slow and deep, and looked at the possibility of loss. It was inevitable. I knew that; I'd learnt the principle by heart in the monastery, then learnt it again through bitter experience in that same monastery. And I had survived. Sadder, more closed-off... but still carrying the memories of those I'd loved and the lessons they'd taught me. It was perfectly normal to not want more loss; but I could live through it, if fate and the gods allowed. I could even thrive, eventually. Even if my heart rebelled at the mere thought.

So. What could I not control? Our enemy, and what it chose to do. The place of combat. The actions of our allies. But other things I could. Like ensuring that Karlach got her new heart. Arming everyone in our party as best possible. Delegating people to direct our allies and handle logistics behind the scenes.

I opened my eyes, sighing and shaking out my shoulders, to find Wyll sitting nearby, eyes closed, face serene. He breathed in and out, then opened his eyes, smiling at me.

"Morning, dearest," he said. "A big day ahead of us. How are you feeling?"

"Apprehensive," I said, reaching out to take his hand. "But confident. How about you, love?"

"About the same," he said, looking rueful. "I suppose we've done all the preparation we can."

I nodded. "I think I'll stop by some of our allies, and check that they're ready to go."

"Why not ask Gale or Jaheira to do it?" Wyll asked. "I assume you want to stop by the Healing Hole and palace today?"

I nodded absently. "Good point. I keep forgetting that other people are perfectly competent."

Gale and Jaheira delegated, and the rest of the team designated to prepare weapons and armour for the fight this afternoon, Wyll and I set out.

“Should we be getting this close to the palace, with that thing up there?” I asked. “It’s not reacting to others, but will it react to us?”

Wyll shrugged. “Only one way to tell, I guess,” he said. “Hells. Seeing it up there, and everyone down here just going about their lives, as though absolutely nothing is amiss. It’s eerie.”

I nodded in agreement. Citizens should be running and screaming in fear, not blithely ignoring the giant brain threatening the entire world. We entered the palace, and Ulder met us near the entrance, a frown on his face.

“This way,” he said, beckoning us down a hallway. “Something strange is happening.” He ushered us into a small office, and we all sat.

“Let me guess,” I said. “There’s a giant brain on top of the palace, and only you can see it?”

Ulder stared at me. “I’m not losing all capacity for reason and rationality?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m not sure what it’s doing to the general populace. But those of us under the artefact’s protection seem immune to its effects.”

“So the brain is real,” Ulder said slowly.

I nodded. “We need to get moving. Things to do; then we challenge the brain this afternoon. Can we count on the Fist for assistance?”

Ulder nodded. “You may. I’ll gather a group of my finest fighters. You’re collecting other allies?”

“We are,” Wyll said. “The high harper is handling it.”

“Well. I’ll let you get back to it. My thanks for the report, and the reassurance,” he said, standing to let us out.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Lenore. She was sitting up, her eyes bright, and her movements more certain, less shaky.

“I feel better,” she said. “I want to eat something other than soup.”

I smiled and took her wrist to check her pulse. “Have you been up yet, today?” Her pulse was strong and steady.

She nodded. “A turn about the room this morning,” she said.

“Then I think you can start eating soft foods,” I said. “We’ll just need to ensure that your gut can process them. How went the meeting yesterday?”

“Well, I think. My research might indeed be of use.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “My thanks.”

“You’re welcome. They’ll be coming by again this afternoon.”

I frowned. “Hmm. We might want to bring that forward a little, or push it back to tomorrow.”

“Something planned already?”

I nodded absently. “Is there anything troubling you? Pins and needles in limbs, numbness anywhere?”

She shook her head.

“Good to hear,” I said, smiling. “We need to head off. With any luck, I’ll see you tomorrow.” An icy shard of foreboding stabbed through me, but I shook it off.

At the House of Wonders, Zanner was excited. “We have it,” he said. “Sussur flowers and bark. Bark to distill into the casing. Flowers to power the engine. She’ll need to spend time in the Underdark regularly, to collect the source of her power. But I suspect this will be an acceptable sacrifice, given the alternatives.”

I grinned. “That’s amazing to hear!”

“How much time until you have a prototype?” Wyll asked.

“A couple of weeks,” Zanner said. “All going well. Dammon is working hard, but the process is slow, difficult, and time-consuming. These materials are tricky to work with, let alone combine.”

I nodded, feeling a stir of anxiety. Did Karlach have that much time left? She *had* to.

“My thanks,” I said. “Sooner is better, but I understand that these things need time.”

At the Healing Hole, only one patient waited. They had a migraine; easily treated in the short term, at least. I made up a tea of willow and chamomile, and told them to avoid bright lights and loud noises for the next day or so. Then I sat on the bed upstairs, sighing.

“Gods. Only half way through the day, and I’m already tired,” I said, yawning.

“Tired, or emotionally drained?” Wyll asked, sitting next to me and slinging an arm around my shoulders.

“Hmm. Good point,” I said, leaning against him. “Emotional, I think. It’s been a big tenday.”

He nodded, his face sombre. “It has, indeed. But,” a smile turning up his mouth, “perhaps we could take our minds off our troubles for a while.”

I looked up at him with a grin. "I could enjoy being distracted."

His smile grew dangerous. "You know," he said, with affected idleness, "I haven't been riding for years."

"Oh?" I said, trying to follow his thought. "OH! Hmmm... do you think it's time you got back in the saddle, then?"

"I think I'd like to try bareback," he said.

A thrill ran through me.

"Hmm. Do you have a mount in mind?" I asked, pretending nonchalance.

He pulled me a little closer. "Only one," he murmured, one finger tracing patterns on my neck. "Only ever one."

"Mmm. Kiss me, love?"

He pounced on me so that I fell backwards, laughing. He kissed me, settling his body on top of mine as I pressed up against him. "Hells, you feel good underneath me."

I bit his lower lip and pulled him against me, rubbing slowly over his belly, watching him react. He looked down at me with glazed eyes.

"Sit up?" I asked, and he rose onto his knees, straddling me, his arse nestling against my cock. I felt a wave of arousal go through me – *gods, that arse* .

"May I unlace your trousers, beloved?" I asked, and he grinned.

"Please, darling. Rip them off, for all I care. I want to be naked against you."

I took my time unlacing his trousers, drawing it out, letting my fingers brush against his cock under the fabric.

"Oh, it's torment, is it?" he said, biting his lip and grinning at me. He flexed his arse muscles against me, sliding against my cock, and I groaned at the sensation, the knowledge that he was so close to me – that I could pull off those thin layers of cloth and sink myself into him, into bliss. But not yet.

"Gods, love," I said. "Your torment is sweeter than honey."

His face softened. "I love you."

I freed his cock from its fabric prison, and drew shaky fingertips down its ridged length. "I want to lick this, sweetheart."

"Mmm. Where do you want me?"

I pulled over a pillow to place under my head, and patted my chest. "Come here, love."

His eyes filled with heat, and he knelt over my chest, knees to either side of my shoulders.
“Like this?”

I smiled at him, but my attention returned to his cock, standing hard and ready so close to my mouth. I took his hips in my hands to guide them closer, and licked slowly up the length of that gorgeous cock, feeling every bump and ridge under my tongue. I kissed every centimetre I could reach, letting the textures slide over my lips, shivering at the feel of them against the sensitive skin.

I looked up to see Wyll breathing heavily, his hands clenched beside him.

“Hells, darling. Watching your face...”

I licked up the length of his cock again, watching him, and took it into my mouth, let the tip slide over the ridges of the roof of my mouth. I heard him sigh, and pressed my tongue up, rubbing it over a single ridge on his cock, fingernails digging into his hips a little as the sensations pushed me further into arousal.

His hands covered mine.

I moistened my lips and guided his hips in a slow rhythm, sliding his cock in and out of my mouth.

Wyll's eyes fluttered closed, his claws digging into my hands a little. “This feels wonderful, dearest. Like... hells, I can't think of anything this feels like.”

I increased the speed a little, watching his face, unguarded and open, focused on the sensations I was creating for him. I paused for a moment so I could speak.

“Do you want to finish like this?” I asked. “Or riding my cock? Or both?”

“Oh hells,” he said, gasping. “What a choice, darling.”

A colourless drop beaded on the tip of his cock, and I took the opportunity to lick it off, savouring his taste.

“Argh! Hells. Both. Both, if my poor heart can stand the strain you put on it.”

“Fuck my mouth, love,” I told him, and slid my mouth back over his cock.

He groaned and started to move, crying out as his cock hit the back of my throat.

“My darling. My love. Gods, I'm close, dear. I'm...”

He climaxed in a spill of heat, salt, and sulphur that was almost too hot, but never too much. I held his hips tight, keeping his cock right where I wanted it, sucking hard, prompting another loud, inarticulate sound from him. And then he was done, shaking in my grasp.

Wyll fell away to lie on his side, reaching for me. “Come here, darling. I want to kiss you for a while.”

I went to him, stroking his cheek, smiling.

He pulled me close, kissing my lips, sliding his tongue into my mouth.

“Hells. I love tasting myself on you,” he murmured, and returned to exploring my lips.

“May I touch you, dearest?” he asked, and at my nod, slid fingers down my throat and chest, over my belly, to slowly stroke my cock, achingly hard after watching him lose himself with such abandon.

“Oh, you were so patient,” he said, smiling. “Can I play with it, darling?”

“Please, love,” I said, closing my eyes. “Gods. I'm aching for you.”

He unlaced my trousers and pushed down my boxers, pulling them off, pressing his cheek against my cock. I groaned.

“Gods, love.”

“Spread your legs a little, darling,” he said, and when I did so, his wet finger slid over and around my arsehole, as his mouth closed over the tip of my cock.

I convulsed, caught between the two sensations, and he sucked more of my cock into his mouth.

“Sweetheart. We're going to miss the main event if you keep this up,” I gasped.

“A small price to pay,” he said, returning to his mouth on my cock.

I stopped arguing then, delighting in the feel of his mouth on me, his finger lazily circling, feeling my loins growing heavy with warmth and arousal.

“Do you want to climax in my arse?” he asked, and grinned as my cock twitched in his hand. “I'll take that as a yes, dearest?”

I nodded, beyond words, and he straddled my hips in one quick, easy movement.

“I love seeing you like this,” he murmured, dripping cold oil down my cock, making me gasp. “When you're so aroused you can barely talk, just from wanting me.”

I watched him through arousal-shaded eyes, breathing hard, as he took my slick cock in his hand and slid forward into place. Then his hot, tight depths surrounded my cock, took over my awareness, and he started to move, pushing down onto my cock, moving up with an odd flex of his hips. I pushed upwards into him, pure instinct guiding my movements, pleasure filling me.

“Your cock feels so good, darling,” he said, smiling at me as he moved against me. “Hells. I think I'm ready to climax again, already. What you do to me.”

I made inarticulate sounds, wanting to tell him how wonderful he felt, but helpless to form words in the face of the ecstasy taking me over. He took my hand and I squeezed it hard, our code for a climax approaching when words got too difficult. Bliss crashed over me, like a wave at the beach, pulling at me to let go of all control.

He grasped his cock with his other hand, stroking fast in time with the movements of his hips, throwing his head back.

“Fuck,” he said. “Oh, my darling. Come for me. Come for me, darling, please. Let me feel it.”

The appeal finished me – I grabbed his hips to shove up into him hard and fast, and felt the climax like a burst of light and warmth within me. I convulsed, jolting as my seed spilled inside him, over and again, the earlier suspense just adding to the intensity of the release.

He seated himself hard, driving my cock deep into himself as I shook with my climax, and stroked his cock with quick movements, groaning, me watching helplessly, bonelessly, as his seed spurted over my belly, a hot trail running down my side.

“OH. Hells. Oh, Dash. Darling,” he said, collapsing to lie on top of me, one elbow to the side to support some of his weight.

I breathed, trying to get back the capacity to talk, and laughed.

“Gods, love. You're amazing,” I said, feeling weak, but loving having him on top of me, still inside him but feeling sated and calm.

“I'm not too heavy?” he asked, nibbling on my ear.

“You're perfect,” I said, throwing my arms around him to hold him in place. “Stay like this forever, my stars. I have you right where I want you.”

“Exactly where I want to be,” he said, stroking my hair. “My darling. I love when you can barely talk. Watching your face.”

My cock softened and slipped out of him, and he moved down a little to kiss my throat.

“Watching you stroke yourself while you rode me – it nearly took away my powers of speech for good,” I said.

“I'm more dangerous than I realised,” he said, chuckling against my shoulder, hand stroking down my side. “I know we should clean up and get moving, but by all the hells, I just want to lie here with you.”

I drew his face up to kiss him, achingly aware that this could be the last lovemaking we ever indulged in. “Stay, love. Stay and kiss me awhile. Gods, I love you.”

“I can never resist an appeal like that,” he said, his eyes softening. “My sweet darling. I love you too. Always.”

It was time to fight the nether brain. We'd tried to take it on by ourselves, and failed miserably. But with the Emperor wielding the netherstones, and allies at our side... maybe we could win. Maybe.

We stood at the base of the nether brain's stalk. Once we touched it, it would know we were coming. The battle would be irrevocably joined.

I handed the netherstones to our dream visitor. "We give you much trust with these," I said, watching him. "Trust I'm not sure you've earned."

He inclined his head. *Yet this provides our best chance at survival – all of us. With these, and Orpheus' power... we have a chance this time. Your trust is well-placed, in the end.*

I blinked as I took in the meaning behind his words. He'd *eaten* Orpheus, legendary leader of the gith. Another death on our consciences.

I looked at Wyll. He smiled down at me, relaxed and confident. Gods. How was he this sure? "Wyll?" I asked, and he knelt on one knee in front of me. "I love you. Just in case... I love you so much, darling."

His face softened. "I love you too, dearest," he said, reaching out for me. "Hasn't changed; never will."

"A kiss for good luck?"

"We don't need luck when we have each other, darling. But always. I'll give you as many kisses as you want."

I held back tears. Now wasn't the time. I pressed my lips to his, and we held each other close for a moment. We drew back and smiled as Wyll rose to his feet. Despite everything, I felt better.

"Gale?" I asked. "One final hug before battle?"

He dropped to his knees and pulled me into a hug. "Thank you," he said. "For everything. No good luck kiss, I note, but I suppose I'll survive."

I drew away, laughing, and turned to Astarion.

"Ugh," he said. "Sentimental bosh. But alright." He knelt in front of me, and I hugged him fiercely. He returned the hug, kissing me on the cheek for good measure.

"I love all of you," I said. "Come on. Let's go give this nether brain hell."

At the top of the brain, we paused.

"A dragon. We have to fight a dragon," Astarion said, disbelief colouring every word. "Of course we do. Mind flayers and thralls weren't enough. It's just not a fun day without a dragon to heat things up."

“It’s called champions to counter each of us,” Gale said, his voice grim. “I say we set allies to attack them and the mind flayers, see if we can dodge through the resulting confusion to the crown. We’ll need to use the netherstones there.”

I glanced at Wyll, and he shrugged. I waved people through to focus on each of the champions, then reached out to Dame Aylin with a thought. *How are you at slaying dragons?* I asked.

I will stuff its fire straight back down its throat and carve it for dinner! she replied, and I grinned.

Have at it, please, I requested.

“Right. They’re somewhat handled. We just need to get over there, deal with the mind flayers and random thralls, and open a portal to the centre of the nether brain. Gale and the Emperor must get through. The rest of us –” I took a deep breath, “we’re expendable. If this doesn’t work, we die regardless or live as mindless slaves. So let’s make sure it works.”

My brave guys just nodded, determined.

“Let’s go,” I said, and we waded into the fray.

A short but bloody – and occasionally fiery – fight later, we got to the crown and the Emperor started the compulsion spell.

“Shit. Reinforcements on the way,” Wyll said.

I glanced at him. His right shoulder was a mass of red flesh and bone. Something had broken his collarbone, I’d guess. Damn – that had to hurt like all the hells. I handed him a healing potion, and he swigged it with a grimace, ducking as flames roared overhead.

“Can’t somebody deal with that hells-damned dragon?” Astarion muttered.

I sent up a prayer for Isobel to heal as many people down there as possible. Our best chance was to keep our battle line strong. Too many had already fallen.

The portal opened, and we jumped through.

“Oh goody. A new challenge!”

The nether brain floated beneath us. Bright side: it wasn’t breathing gouts of fire at our heads.

We spread out, and Wyll sent eldritch blasts into the brain. It responded with a wave of psychic energy so strong, we could actually see it hit him. He fell to his knees, and I restrained an urge to run to him and protect him. We had bigger issues here than whether the love of my life died, sad to say. The fate of the entire world rested on this battle – so we’d better make it count.

I raced down to get into close quarters, and set off ki blasts to weaken the nether brain. *It's working*, the Emperor said. *Back off a little. Blasts coming through.*

I retreated a few metres, and waves of psychic and fire energy engulfed the brain from two directions. Gale and the Emperor, I assumed. Then an explosion – Astarion.

We ran, and dodged retributive blasts, and hit the brain over and over... and finally it cracked.

Impossible — the brain sent — *PAIN. FEAR. TERROR!*

“Do it,” I said. “Tell the nether brain to kill all its parasites and spawn, and then itself.”

The Emperor inclined his head, and the nether brain exploded.

So did my head, in a convulsion of agony that dropped me like a stone to the ground. When I regained consciousness, the nether brain – the one we'd been standing on the whole time? – was plummeting into the ocean. Well. That was a problem none of us had foreseen.

I struggled to my feet and looked around. The Emperor and I were up; Gale was blinking muzzily at my feet, so I offered him a hand to rise. Astarion opened an eye and groaned. Wyll was still out cold, to all appearances. I started towards him, but the nether brain veered and I lost my footing, slipping, falling towards the water.

Then blue. Dark green. Black. The shock of the cold water woke me, but finding a direction in this featureless dark water seemed impossible. I needed to breathe. But I couldn't tell which direction to move in, and the water around me was turbulent.

Well – hells, why not see if the gods were watching? I sent up a silent prayer for light, and the mace on my back erupted in a bright light that cut through the watery gloom. I saw seaweed to my left – that was enough to orient me.

I reached the surface with a gasp, thankful to be breathing again. Then I had a chance to take in the scene around me. Broken pieces of wood and bodies floated all around me. We might have saved the world, but we'd taken a lot of people down with the nether brain.

Wyll. He'd been unconscious last I saw him. He'd have no chance in the water like that. *Shit.* We couldn't have survived all of this just for me to have lost him to *water*.

“WYLL!” I screamed, knowing it was useless. He could be anywhere. Anywhere underwater. Some of these body parts might even be his, the way he'd been injured. He wouldn't be able to swim properly, or fight any opportunistic sea creatures that might take us for carrion.

I struck out for the closest jetty, hoping against hope that he'd already be there. Gale pulled me out of the water, and shook his head at my questioning look. Astarion just sat, dripping, looking exhausted.

“He's got to be out there,” I said. “How do we find him? Think.”

Gale's eyes were sad. “I'll pray,” he said. “I have no spells for this. All I can do is ask.”

“Jergal!” I screamed.

Withers materialised on the jetty. Gale startled. “What...” he started to say, and I lifted a hand, cutting him off.

“Wyll,” I said to Withers. “Is he in your purview? Can you bring him back?”

Withers shook his head, and I thought I saw a glint of sympathy in those dark old eyes. “He does not dwell where I can reach.”

“Then he’s alive.”

“My reach does not extend that far.”

“Tell me what that means! We’re wasting time!” I yelled.

“I don’t know.”

A dark, yawning pit opened in my chest. *Gods, my Wyll.*

“No,” I said. “Come on. Help me. Help me find him. He’d do the same for us. HELP ME!”

“Hang on,” Gale said. “Zahn’s Location. Give me a moment. It’s obscure, and barely used anymore because it takes far more energy than just looking for something, but...”

He faced the water and crossed his forearms, and light spilled from the X formed, then spread out to his right. Which might be shoreline. I took off running, Gale yelling something I didn’t understand behind me. I saw a shape on the beach, and doubled my speed – but it was a fisher, her boat probably capsized when the netherbrain crashed in the harbour. I repressed the usual urge to stop and see if she could be revived. In a choice between a random stranger and Wyll, I would choose my love every time. If that damned me to the hells or the shadowfell, so be it. I raced on.

I saw him. Unmistakeable, in his sodden robes and his horns, though he laid on his stomach. He was so still. I fell to my knees beside him.

“Darling,” I said quietly, tears streaming. I got leverage on shoulder and hip, and turned him over. His lips were blue, his eyes closed. His chest wasn’t moving. This wasn’t good. This was terrible. If I couldn’t get him breathing, he’d be dead.

I shuddered, pulled out my last healing potion, and dripped it slowly into his mouth. His eyelids flickered, and I sobbed. Huge, ugly sobs wracked me as Gale and Astarion came to a sudden halt behind me.

“Oh, by all Dis’ hellbeasts,” Astarion said softly. “He’s gone?”

I shook my head as Wyll opened his eyes. “He’s alright,” I said through the sobs shaking me. “Shit. He’s alive.”

“Oh. Bloody hells. You scared me, you silly devil,” Astarion said, sitting down on the ground.

Gale put a hand on my shoulder.

Wyll sat up and groaned, then vomited. “Ugh. I’m not sure how grateful I’m feeling for the rescue just yet,” he said. “Couldn’t you have left me for dead? I feel like I just went ten rounds with Withers.”

I knew it was a joke. I *knew* it. My face crumpled anyway.

He looked at me then, and reached out with his left hand. “Oh, my love. What’s happened? Did we fail?” He coughed, vomited again, pulled seaweed from his mouth. “Ugh.”

I shook my head, holding his hand with both of mine.

“The nether brain is dead. We couldn’t find you,” Gale said for me. “We thought... Dash went toe-to-toe with Jergal himself looking for you. ”

Wyll’s eyes widened.

“And now everyone gets to live happily ever after, tadpole-free,” Astarion said. “Isn’t it lovely?” he made a dramatic gesture, and winced.

“Do you need healing?” Gale asked. “I think I have one left...”

“Not unless you can cure turning into ash,” Astarion said, staring at his smoking hand in horror. “Shit. Shit shit shit. I need to get out of here.”

He ran for the shadows, and I bowed my head, too full of conflicting emotions to have any idea how or what to feel.

Gale watched him out of sight. “I hope we can help him,” he said. “Sometime soon. Our friend shouldn’t be confined to the night. He loves the sun so.”

I nodded.

“Come on,” Gale said. “Let’s get back to our lodgings, if they’re still standing. I don’t know about you two, but I want to sleep for at least a day.”

We limped slowly back to the Elfsong, Wyll coughing every few steps as his lungs slowly cleared themselves of fluid, Gale tsking and trying to wring the water from his robes as we walked. I didn’t have the energy to care that I was soaked, and the cold wind was blowing at our backs, chilling us. Triumph and sorrow warred within me, and I suspected the others felt the same. We’d won, and we’d lost. How much, how many, we’d lost... remained to be seen.

Wyll and I lay in bed together, bathed and patched up, still exhausted.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I said. “You might disappear. Or mysteriously perish. Or...”

Wyll kissed my cheek.

“What if I lie with my head on your shoulder, so you can feel I’m here whenever you rouse even a little?” he asked. “Because I want to sleep, darling, and I can’t if you’re fretting yourself into a breakdown next to me.”

I chuckled, rueful. “I am being a little melodramatic, aren’t I?”

“Hmm. I’m going to want to hear that story properly sometime,” he said, folding a pillow and getting comfortable, his head on my bare shoulder, his arm draping over my chest, his eyes sagging closed.

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and took a deep breath, then let it out. I had a lot of things to think about, but right now I needed to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks! I made it through day surgery with no drama - a nice change for me! 😊

So now I'm lying around in my own bed, recovering from leg stabs and electric shocks to the heart... which sounds bad, but means I had time to edit this week's chapter! Woot!

*I've been waiting **so damn long** to post this chapter, since this was one of the first that I wrote. I hope y'all enjoy it!*

This isn't the end, by the way - I still have quite a few chapters queued up, and a more fulfilling wrap-up, I think.

Love, Rowan

Blood and fire

Chapter Notes

Warning: emotional rollercoaster ahead!

Uhh... all I can say is, trust the tags? My apologies in advance. Feel free to abuse me in the comments.

Love, Rowan

I yawned and sat up. Wyll lay beside me, his eyes opening a little as he reached out to stroke a finger over my leg.

“Morning, sweetheart,” I said, smiling at him. “How's your shoulder? In all the excitement, I forgot to do more than quickly check the potions worked.”

“Seems good,” he said, rotating it slowly, sitting up. “I suppose you'll want to slather me in ointments and fondle me in the name of ‘healing’?”

I laughed. “Always. But don't forget the sadistic sparring sessions, too.”

“So cruel,” he accused, eyes dancing. “I can barely face the prospect.”

“Hmm. Perhaps you should have asked someone kinder to marry you.”

“Maybe I should have,” he said, grinning at my look of feigned outrage. “Someone who'd kiss me good morning, at least.”

“My poor deprived sweetheart. I'm pierced to the heart to think of the agonies you must be suffering,” I said, clasping my hands to my heart in an exaggerated gesture of remorse. I straddled his lap, stroking his cheek, careful to avoid jostling his right side, in case he had some residual pain. But at the thought of his injury, and my subsequent panic for his life, real, unfeigned pain laced through my chest.

“Hey,” Wyll said, left arm wrapping around me. “What's wrong? Aftershocks?”

I nodded, leaning forward to rub my cheek against his and breathe him in. “It all just crashed back in again,” I confessed. “I thought I'd lost you in the depths of the Bay of Balduran, love. My entire world went dark.”

“I'm right here, darling,” he said, drawing away to watch my face. “And I love you dearly. What can I do?”

“Kiss me for a while, before we have to start the day?”

His lips were on mine without another word. I kissed him hungrily, smelling the salt on his skin, desperately aware of my near-loss, but grounding myself in this reality – of my love still with me, still fine, still in my arms.

“Gods,” I said, drawing away just a little. “It's so good to have you here, sweetheart.”

Wyll's face softened. “What happened? I've never seen you so clingy. Not that I mind,” he said, pulling me closer, nuzzling my neck. “But something made you very distraught yesterday, didn't it?”

“I thought you were dead,” I confessed. “With your injuries, and that fall... I almost drowned myself. I couldn't find you. I thought the worst, love.”

“No wonder, then,” he said. “Huh.” He pulled the amulet I'd given him from under his shirt. “Do you think this helped?”

“I forgot about the healing spell on that,” I confessed. “Shit. I'm glad I'm paranoid, now.”

Wyll laughed. “Me too, I think.” He coughed, wincing. “Ugh. This is starting to hurt a little.”

I frowned, watching him. “I'm going to get you a healing potion and make up a tea.”

“Ahh. The torment begins.”

I clambered down from the bed and rummaged in a bag to find a spare health potion, tossing it to Wyll. Who caught it easily, I noticed. Good – at least the collarbone injury seemed to be resolving. Now to get the water out of his lungs before it caused more problems.

“Why more healing potion?” he asked.

“Because it sounds as though you still have water in your lungs, and the Bay of Balduran isn't exactly the cleanest. Better than the Chionthar, but only because it's diluted. Dirty water –”

“Carries infection and sickness. Yes, we've all heard the lecture,” he said, grinning. “But I can breathe and talk. Isn't that a good sign?”

“Mmm. Take a deep breath. Does it feel oddly burbly?” I asked.

He pulled in a deep breath, and started coughing, spitting up watery phlegm.

“Point proven, I think,” I said. “Hang on, love. I'll make up a tea.”

I went through my herbs, picking out the strongest diuretics I had, with a couple of strengthening herbs. Even if all went well, Wyll was still in for an uncomfortable morning. That fluid in his lungs *had* to come out, as soon as possible. An overabundance of watery vapours... my mother had died *fast* when that hit her. No way was Wyll suffering the same fate. I'd fight every god I could find to stop that happening, if I had to. First, though, I'd dose him with every useful remedy I had on hand.

I made up a pot of tea, and left Wyll in bed. “Stay there, drink the tea, and cough as much as you need to,” I told him. “I need to go check on everyone else.”

He smiled at me, curling up on a pile of pillows. “I’ll be good, darling. Come back soon.”

I pulled myself away from that face, that smile he gave only to me, with a wrench. Duty called.

“How is everyone?” I asked, placing a basket of pastries and a carafe of coffee on a low table. “Has anyone seen Astarion?”

Everyone awake shook their heads. Shadowheart and Karlach were still asleep; Astarion was missing. Jaheira, Minsc, Halsin, and Gale were currently pouring coffee and picking breakfast pastries to munch on.

I eyed Jaheira. She’d been handling the reserves the day before; clearly they’d seen some fighting. “You look in pain,” I said to her.

“It’s nothing,” she said, waving me off with a brioche in hand. “I’ll be fine once I loosen up.”

I raised an eyebrow at her, and she sighed. “Fine, but can you massage me while I eat? My stomach is trying to devour my spine.”

I grinned at her and went back to the room Wyll and I shared, to find my muscle balm. I blew him a kiss as his eyes opened, snatched the balm from my bag, then paused and grabbed another pot of it. I had a sneaking suspicion Jaheira wasn’t the only sore one this morning.

Jaheira massaged into looseness, if not quietness, the others admitted their own aches and pains, and I treated them in turn to slow, thorough massages. By the time I was done, Karlach and Shadowheart were stretching and exploring the remains of the breakfast pastries.

“Karlach,” I said. “I talked to Zanner yesterday. He thinks they’ll have a prototype in a couple of tendays.”

“They came up with a solution to the power problem?” she asked, her face brightening. “Man, I thought that was going to beat them.”

I nodded. “They think so, anyway. Still need to get Dammon to put it together. It’s a delicate process, apparently.”

“*Such* a good day!” Karlach cried, dropping her pastry and dancing. “We killed the nether brain. We took down the Absolute. And I’m getting a new heart!”

I grinned as I watched her dance, but a thread of worry remained as I saw the flames wreathing her shoulders. We were putting a lot of faith in a lot of people to come up with a workable prototype in time. What if she didn’t *have* a couple of tendays left?

“We need to find Astarion,” I said. “I have to make sure he’s alright.”

Wyll nodded, swinging his legs off the bed and standing.

“No. Nuh uh. You stay in bed,” I said, advancing on him.

He knelt, grabbing me into a hug. “No. I'm coming with you. If nothing else, it will stop you fretting about me.”

I scowled. “I'll have you know I can fret just as well with you close by.”

He laughed. “Let me come. The exercise will drive the last of the water from my lungs. I promise I won't slow you down.”

I eyed him. He was moving well, and didn't seem to be in much pain. He was right; I would fret if I left him here, knowing that people who'd almost drowned sometimes relapsed and died quickly, with minimal warning. “Fine,” I said. “But promise you *will* slow me down. We won't be in a hurry to get anywhere. We just need to find him so he knows we care, that we'll help. If you push yourself, you'll recover more slowly. So just... be sensible. Slow me down. Can you agree to that?”

Wyll nodded, sombre. “I wouldn't want to give you any more worry, darling.”

Gale, Wyll, and I walked downstairs, headed for the cellar and its entrance to the sewers. At the foot of the stairs, in the main dining room, though, we paused. The place was packed with people, and at the sight of us, they erupted in loud cheers. I blinked, dumbstruck. What in all the hells was this?

The bartender made his way to the front, and saluted us, hand over heart.

“We heard what you did. Some of us saw it. You saved us,” he said, in a voice pitched loud enough to break over the murmurs. “You have the love and thanks of the entire city. Our heroes.”

I stared at him, then the crowd of people, tears coming to my eyes.

“We did our duty,” Wyll's voice rang out. Then he coughed. The room fell quiet, people straining to hear. “My apologies,” he said, his face wry, his voice hoarse. “Like our city, I did not come through the fight unscathed. But here is what I want to tell you: I am a Ravengard, son to Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard. Duty and honour run in our veins – along with an abiding love for Baldur's Gate. I did my duty. My friends did more than simply their duty; they helped in any way they could, *because* they could. And that is the spirit we'll need if we're to carry on and rebuild our fair city. We must help each other as we can, simply because we can. That is the charge I pass on to every person here: care for those around you. Our love is our strength. Our compassion holds us together.” He coughed again, grimacing, and I stepped up onto a chair.

“We have work to do,” I said, loud. “Our thanks to you all for coming here. For telling us that you appreciate us. You've warmed our hearts. Now we ask this: that you go out right now and find the tasks you can do to help your fellow mortals. Look after each other. And know that we'll continue to work on your behalf.”

I stepped down, watching the crowd slowly mill around and dissipate.

“Nice speech,” Gale said behind me. “I expected oratory skills from Wyll. Not so much from you, though.”

I shrugged. “I just repeated what Wyll said – louder, and in fewer words. With a direct recommendation for action.”

Gale chuckled. “You two will be a force to watch in this city, soon. You complement each other well.”

I grinned at him, leading the way to the cellar now that the press in the room had eased. “I suppose shouting out orders and bossing people around do come naturally to me now.”

Wyll’s fingers stroked over my jaw, and I looked up to smile at him.

“I love you,” he said softly.

As we walked through the kitchens of the Elfsong, I snagged two bottles from the cooler bin. A token of faith that we’d find him, I told myself.

Astarion might have spent centuries traversing the sewers of Baldur’s Gate, but between us, Wyll, Gale, and I had also spent considerable time getting to know their layout and secrets. It only took us a couple of hours to run our errant vampire to ground.

“Astarion!” I called, walking towards him, pausing when he turned to scowl at us.

“You just don’t take hints, do you?” he asked, his tone exasperated. “I thought it was rather clear that I didn’t want to be found.”

“I needed to know you were alright,” I said, motioning for the others to stay where they were, advancing by myself. “Last I saw, you were smouldering. I was worried.”

He scoffed.

“*Are* you alright?” I asked. “You can’t be. I know this has to be devastating for you. What can I do?”

“Nothing,” he said, shrugging, curling in on himself a little. “You can’t do a thing.”

“I brought wine and blood,” I said. “It’s not much. Not nearly what your heroism deserves.” I proffered the bag with the bottle of wine, and the bottle of blood from donors at the Healing Hole.

He took it and sighed. “Fine. *Thank you*. Will you go now?”

“If you’ll promise to keep in touch,” I said. “Astarion, I understand how much you’ve lost. But we won. We did something amazing. You’ll always be a hero for that alone.”

Wyll and Gale approached, Wyll's hand on my shoulder, caressing gently.

"Will you come back and celebrate our triumph with us?" Gale asked.

"This isn't my triumph," he spat. "You lot. You all lost your tadpoles, and your lives got better. I lost mine, and my life got orders of magnitude *worse*."

I sighed. "You lost the sunlight, your ability to travel normally. I understand this feels more like a curse than a blessing."

He glared at me. "I'm fine. You can go."

"That stasis spell on the tadpoles," Gale said, sounding thoughtful. "Netherese magic. I wonder. What if it wasn't the tadpole that gave you the ability to walk in the daytime?"

"What are you drivelling about, you mawkish creature?" Astarion demanded, shifting restlessly. "Of course it was the tadpole! It wanted me able to move around."

"Except that I've never read of that happening before in ceremorphoses," Gale pointed out. "What if it was the stasis spell? It froze the tadpole into an unnatural state of being. Perhaps it did the same to you."

"Are you saying that you might be able to recreate the effects?" I asked, hope dawning in my heart. "Let Astarion live as he did with the tadpole?"

Astarion's eyes widened as he grasped the implications of the conversation.

"Perhaps," Gale said, lifting an admonishing finger. "If my understanding is correct. If I can replicate Balthazar's work. He was melding magic from old and exotic schools. It will be no picnic to emulate. And let's not forget, I still have an orb in my chest that could blow up and kill everyone at any moment. I must get that crown back to Mystra."

"You've decided against trying to control the orb yourself, then?" I asked, attention momentarily diverted from Astarion's plight.

Gale nodded. "I think perhaps one giant folly and a great adventure are enough for one lifetime," he said. "I might be ready to live a quiet, retired life again."

"But you'll help?" Astarion asked. "For what? What can I pay you?"

Gale snorted. "As though I'd charge a companion in arms for my assistance! No, I'll help. It might just take longer than you'd like."

Astarion shrugged, his hunched posture relaxing, straightening. "I'll go to the Underdark," he said. "My siblings will be needing help with the spawn by now, I'm sure. I'll have plenty to do. Plenty of entertainment to be had."

"Will you come back and celebrate with us?" I asked. "I want you there."

He shook his head. "I can't," he said shortly. "I can't sit there while you all cheer and drink and be happy. But thank you. For seeking me out. For giving hope. I... appreciate it."

"Of course," I said, touching his arm. "Astarion, I meant it. I love you. I'll do my best to make sure you're well. We all will."

"Well, this is different," Karlach said. "Instead of hanging around upstairs, we're hanging around downstairs! Great outing, guys."

"Come on," Gale said. "The Elfsong is practically the only tavern left standing. Certainly the only one that wasn't looted to the hells in the chaos."

"Fair point," Karlach allowed, and downed her pint in a single, long swallow. Gale watched with admiration.

"Besides, the Elfsong has the best ale," Wyll pointed out, waving his goblet.

"I wish Astarion were here," I said, sighing.

"We haven't seen the last of our pointy-faced friend," Shadowheart said, pouring another goblet of wine. "Don't worry. Astarion's a survivor. We recognise our own. He'll be back, once the pain is lessened."

"I agree," Jaheira said softly. "That one will adjust. He's free. He might not have the sunlight, but he's no longer a slave. And I think you taught him how to care for people. He will thrive. Eventually."

"I hope so," I said, staring into my wine. I felt at fault somehow. For not protecting him from his own nature? For not dragging him back to a fellowship he didn't want right now? I didn't know.

"You want all around you to be happy," Halsin said, covering my hand with his own. "Time to take a step back, Dash. I think we must forge our own paths, now."

He and Jaheira went in search of more food, and Shadowheart prowled away in the opposite direction – seeking more drinks, I suspected. All to the good – I was in the mood to enjoy not being completely functional and hyper aware of everything around me.

"One thing still confuses me," Wyll said, thoughtful. "Gale said you went toe-to-toe with Jergal while I was out, after we defeated the nether brain."

Gale nodded. "I did. He did. The most extraordinary thing. How did you know?"

"Know what?" I asked, sipping my wine.

"That Withers was Jergal," he said. "I only figured it out when you screamed for Jergal and Withers appeared, but you weren't surprised at all, were you?"

"Hang on, what?" Wyll said. "I'm hopelessly lost."

“Withers is Jergal,” Gale told him. “The god. Of death. You should have seen my face. We thought you were dead somewhere. Dash stood there and *screamed* at the sky for Jergal. As though he expected him to appear instantaneously to atone for the crime of letting you perish. Lo and behold! Withers appeared.”

“A sight I’m sorry to have missed! And you’ve... known they were one and the same for how long?” Wyll asked me.

“Uhh... since he turned up?” I said, feeling oddly sheepish. “I’m sorry; I thought it was obvious.”

“Obvious?” Gale exclaimed. “That we were playing host to a god? How do you figure that?”

“We were in an old, derelict temple to Jergal when Withers woke up in a sarcophagus,” I said, counting off the reasons on my fingers. “He has a list of the dead. He can bring people back from the dead. He’s a living skeleton covered in mummified flesh. He’s always doing something with a scroll listing the dead, checking off names, that sort of thing. He has a gold facepiece exactly like the one Jergal is described as wearing.”

“Oh,” Gale said, thoughtful. “When you put it like that, it does seem rather obvious. How perturbing that I never noticed.”

“And you didn’t tell us because...?” Wyll asked.

“I... thought we all knew?” I said. “I now realise that was a silly assumption.”

“But based on us being smarter and more observant than we are, so perhaps we should simply appreciate it,” Gale said.

I laughed. “I’m sorry. We had a lot going on. I’m sure I’d have mentioned it if it occurred to me.”

“No, no. It’s a hilarious story to tell at parties,” Gale said, waving a hand. “How I camped with Jergal for months and never realised, and my friend knew all along but thought I was smart enough to have known, so never told me.”

“Did I tell you how I got out of the water?” I asked.

“You didn’t tell *me*,” Gale said.

“Hmm. I prayed to Lathander when I was deep underwater, and I couldn’t find which way was up. I was close to drowning, and... he sent light.”

“Interesting. It really does sound as though you’re moving towards becoming a cleric,” Gale said thoughtfully. “An interesting choice – not one I’d necessarily have foreseen for you.”

“Mmm. Not an idea I quite relish, yet. But – that’s a problem for another day,” I said.

“Speaking of problems...” Karlach said, her voice sounding strangely strangled. “Guys... get me out of here.”

I looked over at her, to see flames wreathing her hair. “Shit. Karlach.”

We ran outside, and she pelted away towards the water, Wyll and I in hot pursuit.

“I can’t hold it anymore,” she said, stopping and falling to her knees on the jetty. “I can’t... nyarghhhhh...”

I reached out for her.

“Too hot,” she said, dodging my touch, panting. “Did I... did I do good?”

“You were amazing,” I said softly. “Karlach... honey... you’re my hero.”

She smiled through the flames licking around her head. “I adore you. Thank you. Gods, I wanted so much...”

Wyll dropped to his knees beside me. “Karlach! Don’t – let us take you to Avernus. Don’t go like this. Please.”

Karlach shook her head. “Not going back. Never going back, big guy. I’m gonna see what comes next. ARGH!”

Tears streamed down my face. “We’re so close, honey. So close to that new heart. Don’t die now. You can’t.”

“Too late, soldiers. It was too late when you met me. But you gave me purpose. You gave me hugs. I love you both so much.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Shadowheart said, pushing forwards, grabbing Karlach’s wrist.

With a flick of her other hand, completely ignoring the scorching Karlach must be giving her, she opened a portal to a dark, red realm, full of flames. Dry, grasping heat blew from the portal, stealing the breath from our lungs. “If I want something done properly, I just have to do it myself, don’t I?” she demanded as we stared at her.

Karlach seemed so shocked that her flames dampened slightly. “What...”

“You’re coming with me. No arguments. No fighting. *Now.*” She pulled Karlach to her feet and shoved her through the portal, jumping in after her, closing it with a snap of her fingers.

Wyll and I stared at the empty, scorched piece of dock where Karlach and the portal had stood. Puffs of smoke slowly dissipated, the smell of sulphur fading.

“Well,” I said, my voice shaking. “I guess they just made things official.”

Wyll giggled beside me, sounding more than a little overwrought.

“They’ll be alright there?” I asked. My only experience of the hells had been a brief glimpse from the nautiloid that kidnapped me.

Wyll nodded, sobering. “Avernus is tough; but Shadowheart and Karlach are tougher still. They’ll have their challenges, but I think they’ll survive just fine for a few tendays.”

Healing the hurts

Next morning, I woke with worry gnawing at my belly. There was always more, wasn't there? New problems, new panics, new wounds that needed healing. It was never going to stop, was it?

I sat down to meditate and sat with that thought. It had been bothering me for a while, and maybe I needed to deal with it. New problems every day. There would be new villains, new challenges. Would we ever reach a point where we just relaxed and didn't have anything to worry over?

No, I thought. We'll always find something else. Some injustice, some evil. But why? Because we know too much now. We see too much of what was always there. I took in another breath, released it. If it would always be there, maybe I needed to stop acting as though at some point the world would just calm down and start operating smoothly, because it never really had. And if I let go of the hope of things calming down, what was I left with? *The moments we take for ourselves, the rests and holidays we have regardless.*

Maybe the satisfaction of doing *something* needed to replace the hope of fixing everything. Jaheira was a perfect example of someone seeing that the fight would never end... and continuing regardless. With that thought, my worry faded a little, replaced with determination. *We did* have a lot of work to do. It might never end, but neither would the joy and love in my life.

*Let your worries be bound by this day
And what you can achieve in it*

The old mantra rose in my head, and I smiled. *Damn you, Lathander. Always a pertinent quote.* I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing. Pulling in the light; pushing out the negativity and pain that I took in from other people, from the situations all around me. Taking strength for this day from the universe around me. Tomorrow could wait; I'd worry about it then.

When I opened my eyes and stood up, Wyll was awake, sitting at the table, eating breakfast. "Morning, darling," he said, smiling at me. "What's on for today?"

"What would you like to do?" I asked. "I feel like I don't ask you that enough. How are you feeling?"

He took a deep breath, coughing slightly as he exhaled. "Better. Much better, I think. Though I might let you be the judge of that. And I need to visit Father later, but for now, I think I'd just like to be with you."

I put my ear to his back as he breathed. His lungs still didn't sound quite *right*, but they were quieter. Less bubbling; no crackling, which might have indicated a deeper, longer-term problem. "You're right," I said, dropping a kiss on the back of his neck. "Your chest sounds better, love." I poured a coffee, and Wyll pushed over a plate of eggs and pickled cabbage.

“Sweetheart, I’d love to have you with me. If you’ll rest when you need to, anyway. It’s going to be a busy day.” I picked at the pickled cabbage. I loved eating a little with a meal, but an entire pile of it? “Hmm. I’m sure this is very good for me, but I’d kill for some bacon.”

Wyll laughed. “The cook said he’s having trouble sourcing ingredients at the moment, so we’ll probably have more of it for a while.”

“Oh well. At least my bowels will be happy.”

“You’re going to the Healing Hole soon?”

“To start with, at least. I don’t know if everyone who needs help will know to go there. I might need to hit the streets. Our people will need help.”

He smiled at me. “I love you so much, darling.”

“Are you sure you want to come? You could rest instead.”

“I’ll come,” he said. “You don’t mind if I use your bed above the shop if I want to nap?” His face stretched in a yawn.

“Not at all,” I said, grinning at him. “I don’t think it will hurt to have you seen out and about, helping people, either.”

His mouth downturned. “That’s not why I want to come, though.”

“I know, love. But people will appreciate it regardless. I suppose we need to start thinking about how things look, now and then. Gods know the city needs to have confidence in its leaders right now.”

“Ugh.”

“If in doubt, just be yourself. You’re wonderful, kind, compassionate, and self-sacrificing. The people are about to fall head over heels for you. Just as I did.”

“Hmm. I can’t help but think you might be a little biased.”

“Very, but I’m also right,” I said, watching Wyll, feeling fondness well up in my heart. I was selfishly glad he was going to join me – I was still reeling from finding him lying on the beach, so still and cold.

I shuddered and turned my mind to what we needed to do today. Maybe... hmm. I loaded my bag with healing potions. Just in case.

We found a crowd of people sitting or standing near the Healing Hole, waiting for treatment. I assessed them with an experienced eye – crushed limbs, broken bones, burns, gashes hastily bandaged on-site with whatever had been available. No one seemed in terrible shape, no one about to die. But then, most of these people had been waiting a day for treatment, and the

most injured had either died or were at the Open Hand temple now. They'd been waiting while we slept and ate and celebrated. I felt a wash of guilt, but shoved it away brusquely. I knew better than most the dangers inherent in giving more than I had available, simply because the need was so great.

“Right. Sweetheart, would you try to sort people into three groups? Most urgent in one – people who will die or be permanently injured if they don't get help in the next couple of hours. Next for broken bones and things that really need to be seen to in the next day or so. The last for less pressing injuries – cuts that need to be bandaged, sprains, things that might get infected or further injured without treatment, but they're not going to bleed out or something of the sort. Is that alright?”

Wyll nodded. “I'm sure people will be cooperative.”

I snorted at his naivete. “Love, you're in for a hell of a day.”

While Wyll sorted people into groups, with the resultant yelling and abuse I – at least – had expected, I made up two large kettles of tea. One with the strongest pain-dulling and soporific herbs I had; one with gentler, safer herbs like willow bark. I pulled out pots of wound balm, boneset balm. Honey, salt, and clean bandages. The lime mixture for keeping broken bones in place. I could at least boil water in bulk now for cleaning wounds later; everything else, I'd have to put together as I went.

My first patient was a woman whose leg had been crushed by a fall of masonry from a tower as the brain thrashed in the sky above the city. She panted, her eyes glazing, upper teeth biting her lip hard.

“Hi,” I said to her as Wyll lifted her onto the small bed in the back. “I'm Dash; this is Wyll Ravengard. I know you're in pain. We'll try to calm that down before we do anything else.”

She nodded slightly, tears in her eyes.

“The strong pain tea?” Wyll asked in a low voice, and I nodded.

She drank, and I looked at her leg, trying to keep my face neutral. It was bad – shards of bone poked out of her skin. If I could use healing potions... but if I did, we'd be out after just a few patients.

I motioned to Wyll, and he followed me upstairs. “How many are as bad as this?” I asked.

“A few,” he admitted. “Six or seven. The rest aren't as terrible.”

“What do you think about using our stock of healing potions here?” I asked. “Usually I wouldn't, but I feel responsible. We didn't *cause* this, but our actions hurt a lot of people regardless. We'll lose most of our supply if we do, though. And the others aren't here to argue. If something happens...”

“Will they completely heal people?” he asked. “Or just help?”

“Just help,” I said, my heart sinking. “I don’t think we have any strong enough to completely heal crushing injuries like this.”

“I vote for doing it,” Wyll said. “These are our people, Dash. And the circumstances are unprecedented. They have just as much right to live as we do.”

My eyes filled with sudden tears. “Come here,” I said, and he knelt so I could pull him into a tight hug. “Gods, I love you,” I said, drawing back. “You’re going to be a wonderful duke.”

Downstairs, the woman’s eyes were drifting shut. “I’m back,” I said to her. “I’m going to inspect your leg. It might tingle a little, possibly sting, but it shouldn’t hurt.” I held my hands over the shattered leg, breathing slowly, letting my awareness move through the skin, down into the muscle and skeletal tissue. It wasn’t quite as bad as it looked, from the swelling and bone shards I could see with regular sight. The rear bone was broken fairly cleanly... the shin bone was the one in multiple pieces. “OK, we’ll need to set this as best I can, then bandage it,” I told her. “This bit’s going to hurt, a lot. I’m sorry, but I can’t avoid that.”

“No potion?” Wyll asked quietly.

I shook my head. “Not until after it’s set. Just in case.”

I made up the lime mixture, set bandages in it to soak. Cleaned the leg as best I could, wiping the skin down with grain alcohol, trickling salt water over the broken flesh around the protruding bone, then nodded to Wyll. He pulled on the woman’s leg, and she yelled while I added splints, realigned the bones as best I could, and wrapped lime-soaked bandages around the limb. “Keep that still until it sets,” I said, handing her a healing potion. “Wyll, sit with her until I get back, please? Maybe tell her about the nether brain.”

“The thing in the sky?” she asked, still panting for breath. “By the Oakfather. You’re *that* Ravengard?”

I left Wyll regaling her with a story, a careful hand on her ankle, and brought in the next patient, laying him on a pallet on the floor. He didn’t look terribly hurt, except for a look of dull hopelessness on his face, until I pulled up his shirt. His abdomen was dark with bruising, and starting to swell down low.

“Shit,” I muttered. “I’m so sorry,” I said more loudly to him. “I need to deal with this as fast as possible. I can’t give you anything for the pain. Wyll!”

Wyll came over.

“I need you to hold him down,” I said. “Saer, do you have someone with you?”

He nodded weakly. “My wife.”

Wyll brought her in as I poured boiling water over a scalpel, followed by a splash of alcohol over it and a portion of the man’s abdomen. He eyed it, his face doubtful. “You’re going to cut me?”

I nodded. “It’s not something I like doing, but you’re in a bad way. This will hurt, but if I don’t... if infection sets in, you’ll be in a world of pain. Unimaginable pain. See, your bowels contain unclean vapours. If they’re damaged – and the swelling shows that they are – then those vapours enter the rest of your organs and contaminate them. It’s a particularly horrible way to go. I don’t recommend it.”

“What are you going to do?” his wife asked, eyes narrow.

“Cut him open. Pour a healing potion directly onto the affected area,” I said. “His stomach won’t be working properly, and it would take too long to absorb. This... it’s extreme, but it gives him the best chance.”

The man’s face showed fear, then resignation. “Do what you must,” he said.

I directed Wyll to his shoulders, his wife to his legs. “Just hold him down, keep him as still as possible,” I said. “Saer, try to stay still, if you can.”

I sliced quickly and carefully – there was little room for error here. Cut too shallowly, and I’d be torturing him with multiple cuts. Cut too deep, and I’d do even more damage. The cut was perfect – I could see the sac that held his organs through the layers of muscle and the upwelling blood, so I cut again, piercing the sac as he whimpered. As I dribbled the healing potion in, I sent up a quiet prayer. This was his best hope, true, and healing potions *usually* fixed up this sort of thing if they could actually get to the damaged parts of the body, but...

As I finished, the muscle around the cut started to knit together, and I breathed my first deep breath in what felt like hours. “Stay there for a candlemark or so,” I told him, and went back to my first patient. Her bandages had dried tight and hard, and she was sitting up, her face lighter, no longer etched with pain and misery. “Use these crutches for a few days,” I told her. “Come back to see me in a week, on the crutches. I know you’ll be tempted to use that leg immediately, and it might not even hurt much – those healing potions are good. But the broken areas will be fragile for a while, and if you break it again... I’ll have no healing potions left. These are expensive and rare.”

“What do I owe you?” she asked.

I thought about it. “Honestly, more than you can afford, to replace that potion. But – give me what you can, when you can.” Wyll nodded in agreement and showed her to the door.

Through most of the day, Wyll was by my side, holding limbs in place, mixing teas, helping wherever an extra hand and a steady head would make a difference. I chased him away for naps a couple of times, and he returned with renewed energy.

“This is Wyll Ravengard,” I said to patients, over and over. “He’s here to help me look after people today. Don’t worry if you see him coughing; he isn’t contagious. Just breathe in water after he killed the nether brain.”

Wyll’s tales of the nether brain and our fight against it worked wonders to distract and calm people in pain. On a cynical note: they also helped cement a particular version of events in

people's heads, before the inevitable rumours had a chance to pick up too much speed.

Eventually, I straightened, wincing as back muscles twinged in complaint. I'd seen so many people. An endless parade, it seemed, of crushed limbs, broken bones, cracked skulls, gashes, burns, and internal injuries.

"I need to go talk to Father," Wyll said, a hand gently massaging my neck. "Darling, you look all done in."

"Hmm. I feel it," I confessed. "I can't believe you still have the energy to even contemplate walking up to the palace."

He grinned at me. "You take wonderful care of me, dearest. Besides, you did all the hard work today. I only assisted. And napped."

"I don't want you wandering about alone."

"How about I head straight to the Fist barracks and ask for an escort to the palace and back?"

"That would be acceptable," I granted. "Thank you, love."

"Anything to stop you worrying, or exhausting yourself coming with me," he said, kneeling, his face soft. "Darling, please look after yourself. I'll see you soon."

I moved closer for a hug, resting my head against his, feeling a wave of exhaustion and a temptation to just fall asleep in his arms. I shook myself a little and kissed his cheek.

"Off you go," I said. "See you back at the Elfsong. Hurry back."

I sighed as I walked back to the tavern. So many injuries. So many people hurting. I couldn't regret our actions – we'd been fighting for our lives, and the lives of all our people, let alone the world. But these people we'd been fighting to save... they were still suffering as a direct result of our actions. And I felt responsible for making it right, as far as we possibly could. Except we couldn't. The job was too big. The damage was too widespread.

"Flowers, saer?" a woman asked to my left.

I shook myself and turned. Her small cart was covered in exotic blooms. "Flowers?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Last we'll see for a while," she said, her face turning sad. "We're digging up the greenhouse. Putting in vegetable crops. It's a good plan, but... I'll miss the flowers."

I felt a stab of sadness, watching her face. She was right – it was the right thing to do. But I could understand, I thought, why it also hurt. "I'll buy something," I said abruptly. Was it an indulgence? Utterly. But we deserved a little indulgence. I thought about buying roses for Wyll, to remind him of the common, roadside climbing roses I'd picked for him as we travelled. But then I saw and smelt them – lilies, dark orange shading to peach, smelling

sweet and a little spicy. *Like you*, I remembered Wyll saying to me once. Lilies, the flowers of love. “Those,” I said, pointing. “All you have.”

Back at the Elfsong, I talked the bartender into lending me a couple of vases, and headed upstairs, my arms and hands full. I filled the vases with water and flowers, then stood back to assess how they looked. They were striking and pretty – just like Wyll.

I stopped by the common rooms used by the group, to find it largely deserted. Minsc lay snoring on one bed. The others must be out – helping, or shopping? Did it really matter which? I could hardly begrudge any of them some rest time for themselves.

I walked down to the kitchens, and the cook grabbed my hand to wring it, fervent. “Knew you were a good one,” he said, tears in his eyes. “Bloody hells. I’ve been hearing tales of your exploits all the livelong day. Thanks, mate. Now buckle up, I got some grub for yas.”

I flushed, utterly thrown by the sudden change in attitude. By the realisation that for a while – *until you disappoint them, in a couple of tendays*, a cynical voice inside me said – we were the heroes of the entire city. We’d fought and destroyed the forces arrayed against the city. For a while, nobody cared that I was a gnome. That Wyll was a devil. They cared only for our deeds. That would change, and in a hurry. But for now, a warmth filled me.

The cook loaded me up with a selection of small pots, nestled in baskets, covered in straw. “A treat,” he said gruffly. “As thanks from all of us. Shit, I’m glad we didn’t kick you out in the end.”

I laughed. I’d often wondered if someone was having arguments over whether we should be cordially invited to get the hells out. “Thank you,” I said sincerely. “For all your hospitality. This tavern has done us a great service, over the past few tendays.”

Upstairs, I unpacked the baskets onto a couple of low tables. Sweet and savoury smells wafted from the little pots as I sniffed appreciatively. Seemed the cook was extra-grateful.

“What in the hells is that glorious smell?” Halsin asked, walking in the door behind me. “You went out to get us dinner?”

I shook my head as Jaheira and Gale followed him in. The rest of our group now, I realised. We were shrinking more each day. “The cook wanted to show his appreciation,” I said. “In a form I thoroughly approve of.”

“Hundur sauce?” Gale asked, grabbing a plate and lifting a lid inquisitively. “I didn’t expect to find this here. Or a reasonable approximation, anyway.”

I picked up a round of flatbread, tore a little off, and dipped it in the sauce that Gale had identified, popping it in my mouth. I grimaced. Something fishy, something fruity. Those flavours often worked well together, with the right spices. This was not one of those times, in my opinion.

“What? You don’t like hundur sauce?” Gale cried, taking his own taste. “It’s nowhere near the quality I could produce, but it’s not bad.”

“I think I’ll leave that one to you.”

“Barbarian,” he said, shaking his head in what I thought was joking admonition.

“No, that’s Kar-” I stumbled over the name, remembering that she wasn’t here, a lance of pain arcing through my chest. Perhaps wouldn’t ever be, if we didn’t get our arses moving on producing her new heart.

“I miss her too,” he said quietly, putting a hand over mine where it rested on the table. “We’ll do it. We have to. And until we do, Shadowheart will look after her. They’ll look after each other.”

Later, with Wyll returned, food eaten and wine drunk, I curled against my love in the midst of the people we cared for.

“We should get to bed,” Wyll said, his face soft as he kissed my forehead. “Does anyone need anything?”

People shook their heads as we stood. “Good night,” I said, yawning widely. Wyll had made a good call.

Wyll unlocked the door of our room, and stopped dead, me nearly falling into him. “Darling!” he said. “What’s this?”

With a start, I remembered the flowers I’d bought him earlier. “An offering to my dearest, sweetest love,” I said. “Simply because I love you, and their beauty reminded me of you.”

A smile grew on his face as he walked over and picked up a vase, burying his face in the flowers to inhale. “How did you know lilies were my favourite? I can’t remember ever telling you that,” he said, finally looking up, one eye wet.

“I – didn’t,” I said, a little chagrined that I couldn’t come up with a more romantic response, but the exertions of the day were dragging at me, slowing my thoughts. “I just wanted to buy them for you when I smelt them.”

“Darling,” he said, kneeling in front of me. “Thank you. I love them. They’re beautiful.”

I put my arms around his shoulders, rubbing my cheek against his, breathing in his scent. Sulphur, oakmoss and vanilla, the salty musk of exertion. “They smell almost as good as you do.”

“Sweet-talker,” he said, sounding amused. “I feel very loved, darling. I wasn’t ever allowed these, as a child.”

“Why on Toril not?” I asked. “What mischief did your father expect you to get into with *lilies*?”

“Interesting that *mischief* was the first thing you thought of,” Wyll said, drawing away a little to grin at me. “No, my father never said why. I thought it must be because they attracted

spirits when the sky grew dark. Turned out, though, they were my mother's favourite flower."

"And now yours," I said softly. "Oh, sweetheart."

"It doesn't make me sad," he said, looking thoughtful. "It's nice to have something in common with her, though."

"I'm glad I bought them for you," I said, kissing his neck. "I'll buy them whenever I can, just to spoil you."

We bathed quickly and fell into bed.

"Hells," Wyll said, pulling me close. "What a day. More of the same tomorrow?"

"Probably," I said, yawning. "People will spread the word. If others need healing, and the wait is too long at the temple... I'll be busy for a few days, I suspect."

"You're not tiring yourself out too much?" he asked, a worried note in his voice.

I shrugged and cuddled close, my head on his shoulder. "I'll need to recuperate afterwards," I said. "But these first few days... they're crucial. We let people die and their injuries get worse while we recovered and celebrated. I can't regret that, but I still feel responsible for the suffering that occurred."

"Father said to tell you that he owes you a debt," Wyll said. "He's doing his best – sent the Fist's healers out, and I suggested his cooks organise some tureens of soup or something for the people who can't go back to their homes. But he's feeling helpless. Most of the lower city don't trust the Fist. The refugees hide when they see them coming."

I snorted. "I wonder why."

"Hmm. Anything else I need to know? How's Lenore?"

"She's fine. Up and walking around. Still a little weak, but much better. I made sure to visit her briefly before I returned."

"My opal," I murmured, sleep dragging at me, pulling me down, slowly but surely. "You're wonderful." I closed my eyes, letting it take me over while Wyll's arms tightened around me, so I fell asleep with his scent in my nostrils and his warmth soothing my tired muscles.

Self-indulgence

Chapter Notes

Hey folks,

There are some heavier chapters on the way, so I thought I'd give Wyll and Dash a few moments to just... breathe and talk, and enjoy each other. No drama, no chaos, just each other and a bed for a while.

I hope you enjoy!

Love, Rowan

The next morning, I woke feeling lethargic. Soon... soon we had to go back out. Me to the Healing Hole, Wyll probably to the High Hall to talk to his father. But just then I didn't want to get breakfast or meditate. I wanted to lie exactly where I was and cuddle up to my love. I moved closer to Wyll, and he stirred, eyes opening a little.

"Hmm... snuggles?" he muttered, rolling onto his side, pulling a round pillow under his head and holding out an arm.

I put my head on his shoulder and cuddled close, under his arm. "Morning, love."

He breathed out a contented sigh. "My darling," he murmured, kissing my forehead, closing his eyes.

A while later, I roused again, Wyll moving next to me. My stomach growled, but I ignored it. What I most craved was right here – bed, and Wyll.

"The sun is in the sky, and you're still in bed?" he asked. "Are you feeling alright, dearest?"

I blinked the crust out of my eyes and stroked his chest. "I am," I said. "I just... I wanted most to spend time in your arms, so I decided to give in to indolence and sloth for a while."

He chuckled quietly. "I think you've earned a short break. Maybe even a weekend getaway."

"Ha. Gods, I'd kill for a holiday."

"Hmm. I know the city needs us right now, but we really should do something for ourselves. Do you have any ideas? Something that's just a little self-indulgent?"

I breathed and thought about the question. Was there anything I really wanted to do, just Wyll and I? Something that wasn't focused on Baldur's Gate, on others, on healing someone.

There were so many things that I'd *like* to do, but one shone more brightly in my heart than the rest. I drew away a little so I could watch Wyll's face. "I want to marry you," I said.

A look of pure joy flashed across his face, followed by concern. "Really? It seems a little frivolous to hold a society wedding when we have so many issues to solve."

I shook my head. "Society and state weddings be damned. I think we should probably hold one eventually – it will give people something to celebrate next year once this victory fades – but no. Wyll... I'd like to just... marry you. Quietly. Secretly. Me, you, your father, our friends if they can make it." I sighed, frowning, trying to enunciate something that was only a feeling. "I know you're mine. And I'm yours. But, I don't know... I want you to be mine in all the ways you could possibly be mine. And the converse. I want you to be my husband, love."

Wyll's answering smile still held a touch of the shyness I both found adorable and wished to banish for good. "Hells. When you say it like that, it sounds like a benediction from the gods. Let's do it. But where? Who would we get to perform the rites?"

My mind flashed to one location. Was it appropriate? I had no idea. "I don't know human customs that well," I said slowly. "Would it be offensive to do it under the Wilden Oak? Ever since you proposed to me there, love, it's held a special place in my heart."

He grinned at me. "You're such a sappy creature."

I snorted. "As though you're any better."

"Seriously... that sounds nice. Just us, a priest, my father, any friends who are still around. Anyone else you'd want to invite?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know that many people here these days. Except... hmm. Cora and Roger. It's a little bittersweet, but I'd like to show appreciation for their care all those years ago."

"I like it."

"How about you? You must have more friends than I've actually met."

Wyll shrugged, his face sliding into the pleasant façade I usually only saw directed at others. "No one especially important. After I signed a pact with Mizora... let's just say I realised how few real friends I had."

"Oh, sweetheart," I said softly. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head, eyes softening again as he scanned my face. "I have you, and our group of friends," he said. "We might have come together by chance, but I've found real love and companionship. I'm content."

"I love you."

“And that’s why I can’t hold onto regrets. They all float away like autumn leaves when I look into your eyes.”

I smiled at him. “Sweet-talker.”

“Every word true, though. So. Our wedding,” he said, and a thrill went through me. “Who can we get to say the rites?”

“Huh,” I said slowly. “I hadn’t really thought about it, but... well, might there be a priest of Lathander somewhere in the city? There must be, right? I know you tend towards Helm and the Triad, so I’m open to other ideas...”

“No,” Wyll said, tilting my chin up so he could kiss me, taking his time to caress my lips with his. “My sunrise. Of course we can have Lathander bless our marriage. It’s perfect, so long as you’re comfortable with it.”

“Mmm. My relationship with him has been a little tumultuous, hasn’t it? I’m not sure I’ve entirely forgiven him for high-handedly turning me into his cleric, but he helped us win through when most of the gods just sat back and watched. I think that makes up for a lot. And besides... he’s the god of sunrise and new beginnings. With what you and I have dealt with, I think I like both of those things as a symbol of our marriage.”

Wyll smiled, stroking my hair. “I love this idea, darling. All of it. It’s perfect.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I feel like I’ve made all the decisions so far.”

“A nice change from my time as the Blade, and for that matter, my future career as a duke, gods willing. Hmm... would you let me dress you for the occasion?”

A rush of relief went through me. “Love, I have no idea about clothing. That would be perfect.”

“Hmm. White and yellow,” he said, eyes thoughtful, looking me up and down. “Like a cloud at dawn. White and gold ribbons braided in your hair. So that when we dance, they flare out around you like the rays of the sun. And frame this beautiful face.”

I felt my face warm as I smiled at him.

“Hells,” he said, his fingers twining through my beard, his voice a little hoarse. “You’re blushing, and we’re talking about officially belonging to each other, and now I want to kiss you.”

“Just kiss?” I asked, my hand still absently caressing a scar on his cheek.

“Mmm. No. I want to feel you fuck me while you pull my hair, tell me I’m yours. Claim me.”

I felt my whole body react to that imagery, arousal sliding through me, and knew my eyes were filling with heat as I watched him.

He bit his lip, watching me in turn, fingers caressing down my neck, light and teasing.

I slid a hand round to the back of his neck to pull his head close, and kissed him hard, demanding, shoving into his mouth, feeling the heat of desire fill me.

He made hungry sounds into my mouth, a hand sliding down to my arse to pull me tight against him.

I kissed him while the fires burnt ever higher within me, using tongue and teeth to pull new noises from him, every little evidence of his desire just arousing me further. Eventually I pushed him onto his back, kneeling to roughly pull off his loose trousers, and groaned at the sight that greeted me. I licked up his hard cock, tasting him, loving that he was so aroused by me wanting him, hearing him gasp in answer.

“On your belly,” I said roughly, and he turned over for me. I spread his legs, licked over his arsehole, felt the shiver that ran through him.

“It's alright, sweetheart?” I asked softly, stroking his hip with one hand.

“Wonderful,” he said, his voice rough with desire.

I licked again, hard swipes and prods of my tongue over his sensitive places, until he shook underneath me, breathy moans greeting every movement.

Arousal flooded me, paralysing me for a moment with its sheer intensity. I wanted to sink myself into this delectable arse. Ride my love until he cried out in ecstasy underneath me. Claim him, with every fibre of my being. I reached for the oil, spread it over my cock, straddled Wyll's hips, and slid slowly against him, his quiet moans turning to half-uttered pleas.

“What do you want, love?” I asked.

“Tell me I'm yours, darling. Please.”

I leant forward to grasp his braids, pulling his head up and towards me. He went with me in utter trust, pushing his torso up, arm and shoulder muscles bunching, his back arching in a perfect curve, until one of his horns grazed my cheek.

“Like this?” I murmured. “Not too much?”

“It's good, darling.”

I let myself enjoy the feel of it – dominating him like this, him underneath me, hair in my grasp, sliding against his arse, knowing he could throw me off in a second if he wanted to, but that I was giving him exactly what he wanted, so he'd simply submit with joy. “You're mine, beloved,” I growled in his ear. “Mine. My darling. My love. My betrothed. And I'm going to make you my husband.”

“Please,” he said, his voice breathy.

“But first... I'm going to fuck you,” I said. “Slide my cock into your arse. Make you feel good, sweetheart.” I ran fingers around his side, over one of his nipples. “I want you to come

for me, and I'm going to fuck this pretty arse until you do."

He whimpered, and a twist of pure exultation went through me.

I lowered him back to the mattress, pushed the cheeks of his arse together against my cock, slid against him, jolting as pleasure surged through me. "Fuck. You feel so good, sweetheart."

"So do you," he gasped, hands tangling in the sheets, twisting them underneath us. "Darling, please..."

I recoiled, slid my very tip inside him, and waited for the sounds he was making to turn frustrated before I shoved into him, using a bit of force.

Wyll cried out into a pillow.

I leant forward to kiss his shoulder blade – as high as I could reach with my mouth when he wasn't contorted. "You're alright, my sweet love?" I asked.

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Keep –"

I thrust into him again, prompting another muffled cry that cut off his words. I pushed into him over and over, heart thrilling at the noises of pleasure he made, the feel of him shaking underneath me, the sight of his shoulder muscles bunching as he pushed back against me, matching my rhythm, deepening every stroke, his arse clenching around me until all I could see, all I could think about was the man underneath me. Making him enjoy every second, pushing him towards that transcendent climax, bringing him joy and pleasure by giving him nothing to worry about but the needs and demands of his own body.

"Hells. Hells, I'm close," he gasped.

"Tell me what you need," I said, reaching up to stroke his neck.

"Pull my hair. Go harder."

I did exactly as he asked, reaching to pull his braids, shoving into him hard, feeling him tense, desperate for that point of release now, eyes closed, utterly focused as he moved underneath me.

When the climax hit him, I could feel it, see it in every line of his body, hear it in his voice. He buried his face into a pillow to muffle his shout of overflowing pleasure as the climax pulsed through him. I could feel his muscles convulsing, see his hands grasping at the sheet and releasing, over and over, as the bliss roared inside him.

Then my body pulled my focus back to myself, the euphoria filling me at the feel of his pleasure hitting him, the hot and slippery depths sliding around my cock, pulsing and caressing, and I was lost to my own climax, crashing over me, inescapable now even if I'd wanted to stop it.

"Oh gods, love," I gasped, letting go of his hair, letting go of everything but the pleasure overtaking me. "You're amazing. Oh gods." The euphoria flowed through me like wine till I

was lightheaded, feeling as though I was suffused with light and joy.

When the climax finally let me go, I relaxed on top of him, breathing hard, my cheek against his back.

Wyll chuckled, his breathing slowing under my cheek. "I don't want to move. Ever."

"Mmm. I'm not sure I can. All my muscles have gone weak."

He twisted around to gather me into his arms and pull me down to the bed, my head on his shoulder. "I love you, darling. That was perfect."

I cuddled close, throwing an arm over his waist. "Wow. You always surprise me. I never thought I'd enjoy being all domineering like that."

"Odd, isn't it? If anyone else had ever tried something like that, I'd have decked them on the spot."

I chuckled, picturing the scene. "But this is something you can ask for, I suppose."

"Exactly. And I trust you with every fibre of my being."

My eyes filled with sudden tears. I lifted my face to Wyll's, let him see the emotion flowing through me, a mix of sadness for the torments we'd separately suffered and joy for the healing we'd found in each other's arms.

"My darling," he said softly. "I love you. I can't wait to marry you."

"Mmm. Same here. Did you think, back when you talked about love stories and marriage, that we'd ever be here, like this?"

"Ha! Not really, no. I was utterly certain that you'd laugh at my ridiculous ideas and go find someone more amenable to fuck."

I snorted. "As if I'd want anyone else. My romantic giant."

"You know," Wyll said, curling around me, kissing the top of my head, "I'm not sure I've ever told you how much it meant to me that you sought me out, that night."

"What do you mean?" I asked, cuddling close.

"I felt so alone, but also impossibly hideous. I was certain that I was doomed to spend the rest of my life alone. Unloved. Untouched."

"Oh, sweetheart," I said, my heart breaking a little at the thought.

"And then you came to find me. Held my hand. I thought *oh... I'm not entirely untouchable, perhaps*. But then, it was you. I knew you'd be kind to anyone."

I rubbed my cheek against his chest. "Mmm. I was definitely just motivated by kindness."

He chuckled. "And then you flirted with me. I was... flabbergasted. I thought I'd misunderstood. So I flirted back, expecting to be put firmly in my place. And instead, you told me you'd come there looking for me. That you wanted to kiss me. Dash, I don't think I have the words to express just how my heart lifted and lurched all at once."

"I can't believe you thought yourself hideous," I said softly. "My wonderful, handsome man."

"I'd tried to put thoughts of my crush on you far from my mind," he said. "Hells, as the Blade, I was someone. I had something to offer. As a devil, I had only pain and ugliness to bestow."

"Don't," I said, sadness curling inside me. "Sweetheart..."

"Past tense," he said, pulling me closer still. "Don't worry. I don't think that these days. Even on my worst days. You've given me that. What I mean is: I could see no future in which you'd ever be interested in me. So I let it go. Tried to convince myself I didn't care, I'd be fine. But then the tieflings gave me a wide berth, and all the hopelessness crashed back down on me."

"Ingrates," I muttered.

"They weren't mean about it. They knew me. They knew I helped with the goblins. They just... found me horribly unnerving. A devil in their midst, after Elturel and Avernus. I understood why. But it still hurt. Just weeks before, I'd been their hero and protector. Then I was a thing of fear and quiet revulsion."

"I didn't realise how much it affected you," I said. "I'm sorry, love. I should have realised just how much you were struggling."

"How could you, when I kept it all inside like a dying cat?" he asked. "Darling, you sought me out and you touched each one of those wounds. You made every single one feel better; hurt less. Gods, if I hadn't already wanted you, I think I would have fallen in love with you just for that."

"I'm glad you didn't," I said. "Fall in love with me just for that, I mean. I'd much rather you love me for myself."

"How could I not?" he said, his voice warm. "My sweet darling. But you were like the dawn after a long, hopeless night. You turned around everything for me in a few moments. I went to bed that night with hope in my heart for the first time since Mizora changed my form. And uhh... perhaps an alteration in my pants, too."

I chuckled. "So that's why you kept comparing me to a sunrise. I thought you were just being adorably romantic. And to think, you could have had me that very night."

I felt him shake his head. "Not you. Just your body. Which..." his hand moved slowly down to my arse, caressing lightly, "is wonderful, my sweet. I love touching you. But your three circles? It's so much better having all of you. I'm glad I didn't give in to the temptation. And believe me, I *was* tempted."

Tears prickled my nose. “You make me so happy, love.”

“Same. Always, darling. And I hope I’ll make you happy until the end of time.”

Preparing for hell

Chapter Notes

Hi folks!

A nice long chapter for you this week. Dash and Wyll are starting to realise that the next few challenges might be more difficult than taking down the Absolutist cult ever was.

Quick history lesson: *Lunar caustic is an old name for silver nitrate. It's a chemical compound that's been known and used for centuries - for alchemy, bacterial control on wounds, photography, all sorts. There's a good chance anyone who had dabbled with medicine and making potions would have silver nitrate on hand, or at least be familiar with it.*

I've been adding tags as I go, to try and make sure that people know what they're getting into with this fic. I realised (belatedly) that the whole racism-against-gnomes thing would be stressful for some readers, so I put in a couple of tags to that effect. Sorry if you got hit with that; I often struggle to put myself in others' shoes to the point of grasping what needs trigger warnings and tagging. So if you think Wyll's Gate needs additional tags, please tell me. I won't be offended at receiving the feedback!

I hope you enjoy! 💜

Love, Rowan

After our lazy morning, Wyll and I made our way to the Healing Hole, then to the High Hall to meet with Ulder.

Ulder motioned us into his office. I walked in and stopped dead, surprised by the person rising from his chair to greet us.

“My good fellows! So lovely to remake your acquaintance in this city of cities!”

I winced. “Volo?”

“Ah, you’ve met?” Ulder asked.

“Indeed we have, Grand Duke! In fact, I had the honour of being assisted from a goblin camp by these lovely chaps. Now. Where are these famed champions of the city?”

Ulder motioned towards Wyll and I.

“Well! You don’t say! My, my. I would never have thought it.”

“While it’s lovely to see you again, Volo, I’m a little confused,” Wyll said. “Father, I thought we were discussing future plans today?”

“We are! But I wanted you to meet the man I hired to write songs about your exploits. Perhaps give him some first-hand details. That sort of thing.”

Wyll sighed. “Wonderful. Let’s get it over with, Volo. Which of us was riding the dragon into battle?”

“Why, you, of course! It would hardly do to have a *gnome* riding a dragon! Quite ridiculous!”

Ulder looked confused.

“A dragon improves any story,” I stage-whispered to him, and a glimmer of amused understanding came over his face.

“Exactly!” Volo declaimed, arms wide. “I knew you’d understand!”

“So you’re writing a song about... what exactly?” I asked, wary because I knew Volo’s habit of playing more fast and loose with the truth than most bards – which was already saying a lot – and his tendency to pick less-than-savoury aspects of a tale *for the drama, my good fellow, I’m sure you understand.*

“Why, your marvellous assistance in removing me from the clutches of the goblins, of course! What else? My audiences will be on the tips of their toes. I’ll have to embroider it a little, perhaps make myself seem a little helpless, but such are the sacrifices we make for our art, hmm?”

“No, I commissioned a tale of the battle against the nether brain!” Ulder objected.

“But I wasn’t there! So it can’t have been very significant, historically speaking.”

“Perhaps you could write both?” I asked, trying to suppress the smirk growing on my face. This was going to be a disaster, but probably a very funny one.

“Well, I suppose perhaps I could. For a little extra consideration, the financial variety, I’m sure you understand...”

“And the multiple rescues of your august personage?” I asked, biting my cheek to keep the smirk from my face, if not my voice. “How much consideration might *that* buy us?”

“Well really! I already sold you a most wonderful, marvellous prosthetic for only a *smidge* over cost price. Shall I be repaying you for the rest of my illustrious life?”

“Here’s hoping,” I said.

“Fine. You indubitably rescued me from durance vile. Not that I couldn’t have escaped on my own, given time. But, as you hastened the process quite wonderfully, I suppose it behooves me to show magnanimity in return and give in to your outrageous demands.”

“Thank you,” I said, in an attempt at gravity. “Your sacrifices for this city have been noted.”

“Well. I shall take my leave. I trust that I may call on you if, perchance, I have any questions about your adventures?”

Wyll and I inclined our heads, and Volo marched out. I collapsed into howls of laughter, while Wyll chuckled.

“You’ve made some interesting acquaintances,” Ulder said. “Might I be updated?”

“Volo is a lovely chap,” Wyll explained. “But most of his stories and songs are... let’s just say heavily embroidered. And he’s quite immune to any criticism of his work.”

“He likes to add at least one dragon to every work,” I agreed. “But he seems popular, regardless. As long as his songs are positive and get the right message across, I suppose he’ll work out alright.”

“But what exactly are you planning, Father? I thought we would be talking about how you’ll hand over the reins to me, and instead we’re commissioning ballads and battle stories?”

“First lesson, Wyll: power is never taken. It is given by a populace: whether paralysed by fear, lulled into apathy, or courted into confidence and pride. Gortash chose the first; I mean to choose the last.”

“Because we can’t just announce Wyll as the new grand duke,” I said, grasping his meaning. “The people need to want him to take over.”

“Exactly. Frankly, we probably could simply announce it, pad the decimated Parliament of Peers with likeminded folk, and have done with it... but emergency measures *must* fall apart eventually.”

“I see,” Wyll said slowly. “And you think ballads and stories are better than reasoned discourse?”

“By far,” Ulder said, nodding. “One problem that plagued my early days as duke was my lack of support from the patriars. I had some backing from the lower city, but my grasp of political manoeuvring was poor, at best. What I want to do is to build such a wave of popular support for you that the patriars will shrug and throw their weight behind you for a while.”

“And this is the way to achieve it?”

Ulder snorted. “You know, I’ve been hearing tales of your exploits for years. I never realised that the Blade of Frontiers was *you*, of course – Florrick decided not to tell me that detail. But you’re already a folk hero. Beloved by the people. And now they are beginning to realise, as I do, that the Blade and Wyll Ravengard are one and the same. A façade, they might think, but no – rumours are flying as we speak about the hero of the people with the appearance of a devil... who bandages the people’s wounds in the lower city. An inspired choice,” he said, inclining his head to me, then Wyll. “You’ve done half of my work for me in just a day or

two. Once we tell the stories we want people to hear about the battles you fought, you'll seem the only logical choice for Grand Duke. As you in fact *are*."

"And the patriars? How do we gain their lasting support?" Wyll asked.

"How else? By appealing to their pockets," Ulder said. "We *must* reopen trade throughout the Sword Coast. If you can do that... well, the patriars might not like you, but they'll tolerate you well enough for the time being. Remember that most of their houses still rely on trade to prop up their lifestyles. I might have suggested a political marriage, to give you better access to their ranks – but I think that ship has well and truly sailed. Besides, you could simply find yourself embroiled in some ridiculous rivalry or feud. Sometimes being apart is the better option, though it limits your allies in the upper city. A lonely path to walk."

Wyll reached out for my hand, and I gave it, squeezing his gently. "Speaking of which, Father. We'd like to get married, quietly, in the next couple of tendays. If you have no objections?"

Ulder's eyes crinkled in good humour. "Might I be invited?"

"Of course. But we want to keep it... not a secret. Just not a public spectacle. Perhaps later, we can have a big state function. For now, though, we'd simply like to be wed."

"Hmm. I remember my own eagerness to lay my claim. I have no objections to the plan. Dash: you'll be a welcome addition to the family."

"My thanks, Ulder," I said, warmth welling in my heart. I'd known he accepted our relationship, even somewhat approved of it. But with the discussion of gaining support from the patriar families, I'd been feeling more and more like an incumbrance. An inconvenient roadblock. "You're sure? I know I'm not a politically savvy choice."

Wyll opened his mouth to object, but Ulder scoffed. "Dash, my boy, you've done more for Wyll's political ambitions than you realise, if you can still make such a statement."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

"Stories are flying around the lower city. Stories of the Blade, Wyll Ravengard, who killed the illithid threat facing our city, and the entire world. Who destroyed the Chosen of the Dead Three. Who went down into the lower city to bandage those who were injured in the fighting and the chaos. My spies traced those stories back to a single shop near the docks."

"Oh," I said, light starting to dawn. "I did make a point of introducing Wyll to my patients."

"And encouraged him to tell them stories, no?"

I nodded, thinking it through. I had indeed done that, and partly because I wanted to get *our* stories out there before the rumour mill spun out of control. "I don't understand why that makes me politically valuable, though. I'm a gnome. I'm nobody."

Wyll guffawed. "Leader of the group who defeated the Dead Three. Nobody."

“You’re building a reputation as a healer of the sick and injured. That Wyll is with *you*, and not a scion of the patriar families... it cements him as a folk hero in the hearts and minds of the common folk. They supported my bid for duke grudgingly, because I was the best option they had, the only one who came from them. But Wyll? Wyll they will *love*. And you’re proof that his care for the people isn’t just a clever front. You’re a valuable asset.”

I blinked as I started to assimilate this new way of looking at our relationship.

“But that’s not why –” Wyll started to object.

“Yes, yes, that’s not why you’re together,” Ulder said, waving a hand dismissively. “I know that. You know that. The people don’t.”

“A pity we can’t win over the patriars similarly,” I said, thoughtful now. “Healers are just servants to them. I doubt saving someone’s life will win their support better than a bribe would.”

“Ha! You’ll adjust to this life faster than I expected,” Ulder said. “Which reminds me. Wyll said that you plan to tackle the government of Baldur’s Gate together, should we succeed in this endeavour.”

Wyll’s hand tightened on mine.

“We do,” I said, looking Ulder in the eye. “I can’t take as active a role as I’d like, what with the Healing Hole and my work there. But I’d like to figure out a way to do both. I think I can be useful. To back up Wyll, if nothing else.”

He nodded. “I agree. Wyll tells me you’re a cleric now?”

I made a face. “That’s right.”

“And you’re less than impressed?” he asked, the hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Indeed,” I said shortly. “But it was useful when we were in desperate need, so... I’m disinclined to complain about it.”

“Hmm. That might help a little, hinder a little. You being a cleric of Lathander puts you incontrovertibly on the side of good, at least.”

“Would it help to have alliances, of sorts, with some of the temples here?”

“Definitely help. Our people rarely follow gods blindly, but where their priests approve, often their followers do also. You have connections at the Open Hand?”

“We do. Their head priest was murdered by Bhaalists.” I looked at Wyll. “Might the head priestess of Umberlee speak on our behalf?”

Wyll shrugged. “With a goddess as capricious as hers? She might.”

“*Umberlee* owes you a favour? Now there’s a story I’ll want to hear later. Who else?”

“Hmm. Vicar Humbletoes, but I doubt he’d involve himself in politics. The Sharrans are ash and dust. The Gondians, of course. The Ironhands owe us a few favours, in my opinion, but that seems unlikely to help. The Dead Three probably disapprove of us somewhat.”

Ulder actually cracked a smile. “Hmm. Sailors and beggars. You’re cementing your popularity in a particular demographic, aren’t you?”

“Mmm. Still not very useful when it comes to the patriars.”

“You might be surprised. Everyone has a little concern for the state of their soul, and where they might end up in the afterlife. And the trade-rich patriar families might hesitate to annoy *Umberlee*, if they want safe passage for their ships.”

“So. How do we start? Introduce ourselves anew to the patriar families?” Wyll asked. “What do we tell them about the horns on my head?”

“I... might have commissioned a ballad about your pact,” Ulder said, pursing his lips, looking a little embarrassed. “It’s being sung in the upper city bars and gathering places as we speak.”

Wyll put his head in his hands. “I don’t think I want to know,” he said, his voice muffled.

I laughed. “Please tell me you didn’t ask *Volo* to write that one, too.”

“No, no dragons in this tale. It’s a lovely ballad about a hero who meets a devil, and... umm.”

Wyll grimaced. “Falls in love, right? Because she’s really a mortal tiefling.”

“In my defence, there are *much* saucier songs already circulating about the Blade of Frontiers.”

“My father commissioned the writing of a song about me seducing *Karlach*,” Wyll groaned. “I don’t know whether to be furious or embarrassed. Or both.”

“It’s proven very popular,” Ulder said.

“Oh. That’s so much better. Darling, I’m sorry. I’ll have to apologise to *Karlach*, too.”

I was too busy cackling with laughter to register the apology for a few moments.

“Sweetheart, don’t apologise to me for a thing. This is hilarious. And I really must seek out those bawdy Blade songs people keep talking about.”

“Oh gods,” Wyll said, face back in his hands.

“Your tumultuous love life aside,” I said, pausing for a groan from Wyll, “we probably do need to talk to the patriar families. Perhaps get them on board with rebuilding.”

Ulder snapped his fingers. “Of course! They’ll be expecting a ball, drinks, attempts to butter them up. What if we simply offer them the opportunity to be involved in our charitable endeavours instead? It will put them on the back foot. Confuse them.”

“Why would they agree, though?” I asked. “Won’t we be laughed out of every parlour in the upper city?”

“Not if contributing is seen as a patriotic act that will be heavily publicised,” Ulder said, his face thoughtful. “Imagine: the first family to agree is lionised in the press. Applauded as taking their noble responsibilities seriously. The patriarchal families may care naught for the occasional bad publicity for one of their number, but they’re well aware that the commoners outnumber them. They don’t want another Calimshan.”

“And you have a family in mind?” Wyll asked, leaning forward, his dismay forgotten.

“The Eltans,” Ulder said. “Not as influential as most, nor as rich, but that might work in our favour. The other families won’t like the idea of them rising in influence and power.”

“Didn’t Dillard Portyr die during the recent troubles?” I asked. “Who took over for him?”

“His niece, Liara.”

“Oh,” Wyll said. “Not Dillon, then?”

“No, Dillon has managed to garner a reputation for being somewhat dissolute,” Ulder said. “I understand you were friends, but –”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Wyll said, his face hardening. “We’ve already rekindled our acquaintance. It wasn’t pretty.”

“Liara’s under your supervision, isn’t she?” I asked. “In the Fist?”

Ulder nodded. “A Blaze. She’s quite good. I’d consider her for commander someday, if it wouldn’t remove another commoner from the Council of Four.”

“Hmm. Given the rumours around Dillard in the last few years, they might be willing to jump aboard our ship,” Wyll said, frowning a little. “Though Dillon... I’m not sure he’ll be so willing to work with us. With me.”

“Still, two families are a good start. I’ll begin organising a meeting to discuss what we can do. I’ll need some ideas from the two of you.”

“Figure out a way to turn sea water into fresh, and bring more vegetables into the city,” I said promptly. “The Portyrs own ships, don’t they? If they weren’t pressed into use by Gortash, they could be very useful just now.”

“Noted. Well, I’m sure you have a lot to do, as do I,” Ulder said, standing. “Lovely to see you both, as always. Keep me posted about the wedding. I’d like to attend and join in the blessings.”

Wyll and his father grasped hands, then Ulder knelt on one knee for a hug. I put my arms around his shoulders, tears coming to my eyes. “Thanks,” I said, very quietly in his ear. “You know, Wyll might like a hug occasionally, too.”

We checked in on Lenore on our way out of the High Hall. She was awake and sitting on her bed, legs crossed, poring over a stack of papers.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

Lenore looked up sharply, the glare on her face dissolving as she realised who was interrupting her. “Restless,” she said. “I want out. May I go? I’m not a prisoner?”

“You’re not,” Wyll said. “I’d like to find out whether Father has any concerns about keeping you safe, though, before you go. He might want to assign a couple of Fists to you.”

“I’ll talk to him myself,” she said with a decisive nod. “That eased my concerns that I was simply in a more plush gaol. My thanks.”

I checked her pulse, felt over her abdomen, and looked her over. “You seem to be improving by leaps and bounds,” I told her. “I thought it would take another couple of days for you to be feeling so well.”

“I want to get out of here,” she said, shifting restlessly. “And I want to get to work on that project. Creating prosthetic hearts using my sussur power technology... my previous research was too broad, I realise now. I was trying to look at *all* the power possibilities, instead of focusing down so I could actually achieve something concrete.”

“So you’ll be at the House of Wonders if we need to contact you?” I asked.

“I think they’ll take me in, given the incentive. If not, the Society of Brilliance usually has a spare bed.”

“Let us know. I walk past both each day, so I might be able to come to you if something goes wrong and you can’t get to my shop.”

“Well,” Wyll said when we were back on the street. “That was... an interesting afternoon.”

“Dragons, ballads, a new ex-girlfriend...” I said, grinning at his look of mortification.

“You’re not upset?” he asked. “That ballad... it probably makes me sound as though I go from love to love with barely a thought.”

“And do you?” I asked, taking his hand.

“You know I don’t.”

“Exactly. So the more gullible amongst us might think you threw over Karlach to be with me. Or that you’re cavorting with all of us in turn, gods know. But I know the truth, and so do

you.”

“The truth?” he asked, eyes crinkling.

“Mmm. That you’re madly in love with me and me alone, and are desperately trying to make me yours.”

Wyll snorted, grinning, then stopped to kneel in the middle of the street and pull me into a hug. I melted into his arms, for once heedless of the looks and mutterings of passersby. “I love you,” he said, drawing back to watch my face. “My darling.”

“I know,” I said, indulging in a brief kiss. “Come on, you giant lump of a man. We need to check up on Karlach’s heart.”

Zanner Toobin reported that the first molding was complete, and they were working on other parts needed. And sent us away, with firm instructions to *leave me be, for the crying god’s sake – I’ll send someone when I have news to share!*

“That leaves us with more of our afternoon free than I expected,” I said. “Is there anything we should be doing to get ready for going to pull Karlach out, gods willing? Supplies we’ll need, anything like that?”

“Let’s go through it with pen and ink later,” Wyll suggested. “Let’s have some lunch. I’m starving.”

Stomachs attended to, we wended our way back to the Elfsong, and into the communal rooms our remaining companions still shared. Gale sat at a desk near the window, frowning at a large, open book and scribbling in a journal. He didn’t look up.

“Right,” I said, pulling out ink, pen, and paper. “Avernus. Can we start with supplies? What will we need? What’s essential?”

“Food and water,” Wyll said. His mouth straightened, brow furrowed. “It’s difficult to find food there, at least anything that actually nourishes the body. And even what we take in... it will taste like ash and dust within hours. The place just saps all the goodness from it.”

“Sounds like we have a fun time ahead of us,” I said, grimacing. “Oh well. Maybe alcohol will help?”

“I never tried it,” Wyll said. “Huh. It’s dangerous to be off your game in the hells. But it might at least cut through the sense of having just eaten a handful of sawdust.”

I wrote down *Liquor*. “Do healing potions work there?”

Wyll nodded. “Anything that gives a positive effect is muted, slowed, at best. They won’t work as well as they would here. But they will work. As long as you don’t die before they kick in.”

I wrote down *Strong healing potions*. “What about supplies I wouldn’t even think of? Anything special that we could use in Avernus that we wouldn’t use here?”

“Holy water,” Wyll said, his face thoughtful. “Not something Mizora ever let me carry. It will hurt most devils and demons. Same with silver. If we’re wearing silver jewellery... it won’t stop them attacking us, but the pain might distract them a little.”

“What if we combined silver and holy water?” I asked.

He blinked. “Like shrapnel grenades?”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of that. Good idea. No, I was thinking of lunar caustic. It’s a substance that can be dissolved in water – so it could go into holy water. And silver is Selune’s metal. Hmmm...”

“What are you thinking?”

“I wonder if a cleric of Selune could bless the silver nitrate. Might give us a double whammy of holiness.”

“No idea, but it’s worth exploring. There must be a few Selunite clerics in the city.”

“Pity Aylin keeps disappearing.”

“Mmm. And Shadowheart was rude enough to wander off to Avernus.”

I chuckled and wrote down *Holy water and lunar caustic – cleric bless? Then Silver grenades?* “OK, this is looking good. What else? Any weapons we should or shouldn’t take?”

“That mace you got from Vicar Humbletoes. That should hurt devils nicely. But it might attract them, too. The Blood of Lathander... I think it would definitely attract devils. Any light, imps will tend to swarm you.”

“Is it worth the risk? Are we better off moving as quietly as possible, or having as much firepower as we can gather?”

“Probably quiet,” Wyll said. “If we can avoid making too many waves, we might avoid Mizora noticing us.”

“Next question: how the hells do we find Karlach and Shadowheart?”

“Isn’t that just the million-gold-piece question.”

“Gale used a locator spell to find you after we destroyed the nether brain. Something old and obscure, I think. I wonder if he could put something like that into an object, so he wouldn’t need to come with us.”

“Could work.”

“Gale?” I called out. “We need your help with something.”

“Busy,” he said, bent over three tomes now. “Come back later, please. Much later, by preference.”

“Gale!” I said sharply. “It’s about Karlach.”

“You have a team working on that,” he said absently, still scanning one of his books, a finger moving slowly down the lines of runes. “I only have myself. A mighty intellect I may be, but I still need to concentrate.”

“Gale Dekarios!” I yelled. “Get that giant head out of your self-absorbed *arse* for a moment!”

His head snapped up and around, and he stared at me.

“I’ll help where I can,” I said more gently. “I know your problem is time-sensitive too. But Karlach’s is more so. I need your help figuring out how to find her. I’m sorry to interrupt your thought process. But this is important too.”

Gale sighed, and closed the top-most book, adding a ribbon for a bookmark.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, clearly resigned to the interruption now.

“We might have a prototype heart for Karlach soon,” I said. “But we have no idea where she is, or even if she’s still alive. We need some way to find her, so we’re not trying to comb Avernus for her while she’s dodging Zariel’s forces.”

“Hmm. I can see how that might be counter-productive,” he said, frowning, walking over to sit on cushions with us. “Why not just use a locating spell?”

“Because I don’t have one, and I don’t know what works in the hells and what doesn’t,” I said, trying to exude patience. “I need advice and assistance from *someone who knows these things!*” I might have failed at the patience a little.

“You’re worried,” he said, his face softening from its irritated, stern lines. “Alright. Let’s talk this through. Wyll? Any input?”

“It’s tricky,” he said. “Magic works as you’d expect, for the most part. But some types work better than others. In Avernus, fire magic is powerful... but everything is resistant to it. Healing magics work, especially if they come from a cleric, because the gods have influence in the hells as well as on Toril. But they’re usually sluggish, a little difficult to cast, and they sit uncomfortably on a body.”

“Location spells?”

“Directions, geography... these things are mutable in the hells. A locator spell might work, but it would need to be working constantly to track where you currently are compared to your quarry. And it can’t exactly tell you *go north* if north can change places at any time.”

Gale frowned. “Mutable geography and a dynamic locator spell. Hmm.” He walked over to his pack, pulled out a large book, and sat down with it, intent. “Off you go,” he said, motioning with a hand. “I’ll have something for you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Gale,” I said, feeling a little offended by his absorption, but not wanting to disturb his reverie again, either.

Back in our room, I paced, restless and irritable.

“What else do we need?” I asked.

“Well. Standard advice is to always take a cleric,” Wyll said, his brow furrowing. “I never found a need for one, myself. I could keep my spirits up in Avernus simply by focusing on my target.”

“We’ll have Shadowheart... if we can find them.”

“And you,” he said with a grin. “Don’t forget your new... qualities.”

I scoffed, then frowned. “Shit. Is this going to be another shadow curse? The land itself smacking me because of my divine alignment? At least this time I’d feel I somewhat deserve it, I suppose.”

Wyll shook his head. “As I said to Gale, the gods have some sway in the hells, too. They can’t be inimical to the land... they’re part of it.”

“Huh. I’ve only worked on my offensive spells. Defensive spells and healing are going to be more useful, aren’t they? Exactly not my strong point.”

“Well, Gale will take a while to put together that locator spell,” Wyll offered. “And who knows how long the prototype will even take? I’m sure you can manage to learn, what with your superior focus.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, suspecting mockery, and caught the twitch at the corner of his mouth that said he was trying not to laugh at me. “Even my own true love mocks me,” I said, trying for a mien of sad offence, suspecting I was managing only a silly pout.

At Wyll’s laugh, I sat next to him and leant over to pull him off-balance so he fell into my lap. “Silly creature,” I said, kissing his forehead. “I love you.”

He lay in my arms, body a little twisted, but relaxed. “My sweet darling,” he said, rubbing his cheek against me. “To be serious for a moment: I have utter faith in you. I’m sure you can pick up these skills – you just need a good tutor. I have more faith in you than in me, in all honesty. If Mizora decides to take my powers when I get there... I’ll be useless.”

I snorted. “You’re an expert in traversing Avernus. You’ve fought all sorts of devils and demons. You know how to deal with the denizens, if we decide violence isn’t the answer. And love, I’ve sparred with you, both armed and unarmed. You’ll be more than useful. You’ll be essential. Besides. We can spend some time polishing your non-magical skills, if you’re worried.”

“Hmm. I suppose. You really think I’d be helpful to you?”

“Essential, love,” I said, stroking his cheek, watching him. “So, who might be able to help me learn the protection and healing side of things?”

“I don’t know any clerics, but I’m sure there are some at the palace, or in the Fist,” Wyll offered. “We could ask Father.”

“Hmm. Could take a while.”

Wyll sat up, snapping his fingers. “I’m a fool,” he said. “Halsin.”

“Famously *not* a cleric.”

“Druids and clerics have a lot of similarities. You could argue that druids are simply nature-focused clerics who work specifically to keep the balance.”

“I suspect you’d have an argument on your hands if a druid heard you. Regardless... you might be right. Halsin can heal with magic, and I’m fairly sure I’ve seen him use protection spells, too. If he can teach me...”

Wyll nodded. “He’s not in the common rooms?”

I shook my head, feeling a pang of sadness. Gone were the days when I could walk in there and see most of my friends immediately. People were leaving, and soon it would be only Wyll and I.

“You’re alright?” Wyll asked softly.

I nodded. “Just a little melancholy. Everything’s changing. As it ought to. But still.”

He sat up, his arms around my shoulders. “I’m still here,” he offered. “I’m still yours, darling.”

“Mmm. That always helps, sweetheart. Thank you.”

Halsin was in the Open Hand temple, bent over a prostrate patient. He straightened, patting the apparently-unconscious man, and smiled at us. I explained our mission, and he nodded.

“You have the base skills,” he said, his deep voice calming. “You’re a healer. You work with energy already. Here. I need to heal something inside this man – his liver, I think. Join me. See if you can sense what I’m doing.”

He laid his hands on the man’s abdomen, and nodded for me to place my hands over his. His eyes closed, and I felt... something. Not light, but... a little like electricity, sparking and fizzing, somehow green like leaves in spring. It moved through Halsin’s hands and into the patient. If I unfocused my eyes just right... I could see his liver coruscate like a summer storm, a deep black gash slowly shrinking.

“Got it,” I said quietly. “That’s... it’s amazing.”

“I thought you’d like it,” he said, looking up, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “Do you want to try?”

“I don’t want to risk hurting him. And he can’t agree to this.”

“I’ll be right here,” he said, reassuring. “You’ll be saving my energy for someone else.”

I sighed and placed my hands on the man’s shirt, where Halsin’s had been. Then I frowned and rucked up his shirt so I could touch bare skin. “Habit of a lifetime,” I said, glancing up at Halsin. I concentrated, feeling the wrongness in the man’s liver, the half-healed injury to the essential organ. I inhaled, trying to connect to Lathander, pull down that lightning sensation, and feed it into the man’s body. Light gathered, and I frowned. Not right. Not what I needed. Not quite... I reached further, but felt as though I was groping in a dark cave, catching only air. Halsin’s hands covered mine, and suddenly I could feel it. A connection, deep in my core, and if I just twisted and pulled... with a spark, power flowed through my hands, and the man under my hands gasped, convulsing, his eyes open and staring.

“Shit,” I said, drawing away, panicked. “What did I do?”

“Put your hands back on,” Halsin said. “Sir, you’re at the Open Hand temple. Don’t worry – we’re healers. We’re trying to help.”

I placed tentative hands back on his abdomen, and focused again. The gash, the shadow... it was utterly gone. “I did it?” I asked.

“A little lacking in subtlety and finesse,” Halsin said, smiling at me. “But yes. First try. Most impressive.”

“Thank you,” I said to the confused patient. “Halsin, thank you. Can we try protective spells when you’re done for the day? Will you have the energy?”

He nodded. “I have three more patients to see. All rather easy cases. I’ll see you back at the rooms?”

I picked up the practice rapier and grimaced, swishing it through the air to get a feel for it.

“This thing is longer than I am tall,” I complained. “Why couldn’t I decide to use a shortsword like normal?”

“Oh! Is that the real reason you became a monk?” Wyll asked, his voice teasing. “All the weapons were too heavy for you? Would you like something more your size? A dagger, perhaps?”

I lifted my top lip in a mock snarl at him. “Say that again with a sword in your hand.”

He grinned and picked up his own practice rapier, settling into an elegant guard position. “En garde, dear.”

I copied him as best I could, right foot pointing towards him, left at right angles, knees bent. Then I frowned. “Hang on – wait a sec,” I said. I breathed in and out, relaxing, scanning for the faint hint of a memory that had tickled at my thoughts as I got into position. I closed my eyes, and saw a sunlight-filled room in my memory. Moving slowly from one position to another, feeling the ki flow through my body as it shifted. “Huh,” I said, and breathed in light, pushing it down my legs and back up, feeling the tiles beneath my feet. The pose didn’t feel unnatural now – it felt familiar, and I knew how to move in and out of it. “Got it.” I raised my rapier and saluted, rapier in front of my face, in a deliberate copy of Wyll’s *Blade of Frontiers* pose.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Would I do that?” I asked.

“Indubitably,” he said, chuckling. “Gremlin. En garde.”

I extended my blade to tap lightly against his, and the bout started. As per usual in our armed sessions, Wyll could get more hits on me than I could on him. But this time, with the ki flowing smoothly within me, I found a rhythm to our lunges and parries that I never had before.

“You’ve been practicing,” Wyll said, panting.

I shook my head. “Just found my centre,” I said, breathing hard. “That was fun.”

He snorted. “What do you think? Can we face off with devils like this?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put money on me surviving if I tried it. I’d rather bare hands. But you? Definitely. You still have it, love.”

“You’re not just saying that to boost my confidence?”

I put the sword down and reached for Wyll’s hand. “Never,” I said. “Sweetheart, utter honesty. I’d rather have you at full power, just in case. But if you’re restricted to mundane weapons only, I think we’ll be fine. You’re good. Stop doubting yourself.”

After a protective-spell workshop with Halsin, I felt... tired, to put it mildly. I walked into our room and shoved the door closed, groaning.

“Bath’s filled,” Wyll said from the table, where he was frowning at a piece of paper. “Would you like me to heat it?”

I nodded, a wave of gratitude and exhaustion hitting me. “Please, love. I’m so tired. Why am I so tired?”

Wyll laughed. “Because you’re taking life too easy, clearly. Such a lazy day you had.” He walked over to dip his hand in the water, wisps of steam soon rising from the tub.

I snorted, mentally reviewing my day. Healing, talking to Ulder, learning healing magic, sword practice, learning protective spells... hmm. He had a point. I clambered into the tub and leant back on the side of the tub, sighing. "My head hurts."

"Hmm. A migraine again?" Wyll asked, looking worried.

"Might be. Shit. What if I get a migraine every time I use a healing spell?"

"Can you heal yourself to fix it?"

"Feels like I'd get stuck in a spiral of making myself feel like shit every time I make myself feel better."

"Ha! Your usual tea? I'll go get a hot kettle from the kitchen."

"You've had a big day too, love."

"Shush. Let me look after you, silly little gnome."

After a soak, tea, and a quick dinner, Wyll and I fell into bed, clad only in house robes.

"How are you feeling about all this?" he asked.

"Define *this*," I said. "Avernus? Governing the entire city? Coping with the revelations of my intended's turbulent love life?"

"Beast," he said, throwing a pillow at me with a languid arm. "You'll be teasing me about that for tendays, won't you? But – Avernus. Taking over from Father."

I grinned at him, then sobered. "Feeling more confident about going to Avernus. I've never been, if you discount the fleeting glimpses I caught while imprisoned on that damned nautiloid. As to the governing thing: feeling less confident, if anything. You were groomed for this for half your life. Me? I'd be better at running a brothel."

"Well, the difference is mostly one of scale," Wyll said, chuckling. "Darling, I think you'll do well. You might not be trained in diplomacy, but I've seen you talk yourself out of all sorts of situations, and us along with you. You have the knack for reading and understanding people."

"I just have no idea about laws, and trade, and deals, that sort of thing," I said, moving closer to Wyll. "I feel like an utter fraud."

"Would you take it amiss if I organised a tutor?" Wyll asked, extending an arm and pulling me into an embrace. "It wouldn't hurt me to revisit the basics, either."

"There are tutors for that sort of thing?"

"No, we just absorb it from the aether."

I snorted. "You're a menace," I said, kissing the side of his neck. "But please do."

Wyll lifted my chin to kiss my mouth.

“Mmm,” I said, eyes closed. “I love you.”

“My darling,” he murmured, horns brushing my forehead. “Hells. With you in my arms, I feel as though I can face any challenge.”

I kissed him again, let all of my concerns about my skills slide straight out of my head as I focused on the sensation of his lips on mine, his hand moving down my back to press me tight against him. I might not be able to do everything I needed to – but together? Together we could do *anything*.

A home of our own

Chapter Notes

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

“Morning, darling.”

I looked up from my meditation and smiled. “Good morning, love. What’s on the agenda today?”

Wyll pulled a piece of paper from the pile on the desk. “Father organised an appointment at the Eltans this afternoon to talk them through what we need from them, hopefully get them on board with our plans. We’ll meet with him beforehand to strategise.”

“I suppose I need to wear the uncomfortable clothes?”

“The ones without bloodstains? Yes, darling,” Wyll said, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “It’s a terrible imposition, I know.” He held out a hand, and I took it to stand up. “How are you feeling? Is that migraine gone?”

“Mmm... mostly. The pain’s gone, but I still feel a little fuzzy. I just need to be careful what I do and say.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem; we’re just meeting with patriars and asking favours. What could go wrong?”

I grinned. “So true. Breakfast?”

Wyll gestured to the table next to the fire. A coffee pot, mugs, and a plate of bread rolls filled with... bacon? already sat waiting.

I inhaled. Definitely bacon. “How did I miss you bringing in breakfast?”

“You did seem deep in trance. I thought I’d just let you be. We have a lot happening lately.”

I yawned. “To think I expected things to be quiet after we defeated the nether brain.”

“I do love your optimistic side.”

I sat and poured out a cup of coffee, taking a sip, watching Wyll tear a piece from a roll and pop it in his mouth, shifting restlessly. “What’s up? You seem... worried?”

“I think we should move to the upper city soon,” he said. “I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it.”

“What, move in with your father? I must admit, I don’t think I’m keen.”

“No! Uhh... no. I’d like us to have our own space. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about leaving our friends, though.”

“Well, I think everyone will be leaving in the next few tendays, anyway.” I frowned. “I know we’ve put together a decent nest egg, what with all the death and mayhem, but... buying a house? In the upper city?”

Wyll shook his head. “I don’t think buying is a good idea, even if it’s possible. We’d have to find a family willing to effectively lose their patriar status for good. But we could buy a lease for a place. For a year or two. Father’s happy to pay for it, as a wedding present of sorts.”

“That... feels like charity,” I said slowly. “I’m not sure...”

Wyll reached out to take my spare hand in his. “Dearest, is it possible you’re confusing love and charity?”

I blinked, confused. “What?”

“Father loves us both. He wants us to have the best possible start to our new life together.”

I stared at him, trying to process the difference.

“Let people do nice things for you occasionally,” he said, his voice soft. “And us. This isn’t charity. This is a gesture of caring. A gift.”

“Oh. I –”

“You’re flummoxed when people want to treat you the same way you treat them?” he asked, grinning.

“I don’t remember leasing out a house for anyone recently!”

“You did, however, provide free medical services and care for tendays without a hint of a bill.”

“He’s your father!”

Wyll sat back and sipped his coffee, watching me with amused eyes.

I frowned, wondering why he looked downright smug, then reviewed the conversation in my memory. “Oh. If I can do something because he’s your father...”

“Oh, thank the gods. I thought I was going to have to drag you through that chain of logic step by step.”

“Hey! All this... family and money stuff... I’m not used to it. He really won’t mind? He won’t expect... I don’t know... for us to decorate it his way, or something? I don’t know.” I didn’t know how to react to this idea. All I knew was that I felt deeply uncomfortable with it.

“No, Father just wants us nearby in case of crisis, and in a nice place.”

I nodded slowly. “This is why you were looking worried?” I asked. “You weren’t sure how I’d react?”

Wyll blew out a breath, his shoulders loosening. “Exactly. You’re a little too self-sufficient for your own good at times.”

Well. He had a point, annoyingly. And I had a sneaking feeling that I was bringing all his worries to life with my lacklustre reaction. “Guilty. Alright. How does one go about house-shopping in the upper city? I have no idea about these things.”

Wyll’s answering smile was bright and happy. “I organised for us to look at a place this afternoon. We can look at it after meeting with the Eltans. I already have the keys.”

“What’s our budget? What do these things even cost?”

He frowned. “Any chance you could leave it up to me? I don’t want you to worry about it.”

I grimaced. “Fine. What will we need? I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

“Well, we’ll need a decent-sized entertaining area, in case we want to hold private dinners and the like. At least two suites, and perhaps one guest suite? Rooms for staff – a cleaner and a cook, at least. Somewhere for Fist to stay when guarding us. I suspect Father would prefer I carry on the tradition of having Fist to guard us, rather than the city guard.”

Anxiety slid down my spine like an ice wyrm. “This sounds expensive.”

“It’s the upper city, darling – of course it’s expensive. But if we succeed in being elected, we’ll have a good income to support ourselves.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Father will help with wages if we need him to, and we leave once the lease expires. No harm done.”

“And he won’t hold that over our heads later?”

Wyll sighed. “Think of this as... a favour we’re doing for Father. He wants us to do it, so he’ll do everything in his power to ensure that we can manage it successfully.”

“And if we fail?”

“Then we shall have done our best, and no one can ask more of us than that.”

“Huh.”

“So may we?” he asked, eyes twinkling with suppressed excitement.

I eyed him. “You’re secretly loving the idea of looking at houses, and I’m spoiling it for you, aren’t I?”

He stood, came around the table to kneel beside me. “Darling, you could never spoil the joy of finding a home with you,” he said, putting a hand on my knee. “I know this is all going to require some adjustment.”

I put down my roll and slipped an arm around his shoulders. “It feels odd,” I confessed, kissing his forehead. “I hadn’t thought about this – the practical sides of taking over from your father.”

“But you do like the idea?” he asked. “Of moving in together, somewhere other than a tavern room? Something more... permanent?”

I blinked as I realised what he was getting at. This room at the Elfsong was all very nice, clearly meant for a couple, but that couple could be together for a night, a tenday, a year... what Wyll was talking about was a *commitment*. “Shit,” I said slowly. “This is big, isn’t it? Not just living with you. Making a *home* with you.”

Wyll nodded, an odd vulnerability in his face as he watched me.

“Sweetheart,” I said, my heart overflowing. “I’m sorry, I didn’t... all the details just overwhelmed me. I didn’t mean I don’t love the idea of that. I...” I searched for words, but with the upwelling of joy came tears – a lot of them. I slipped off my chair to pull Wyll into a proper hug, my head on his shoulder as the sobs took me over.

“Hey,” he said, his voice gentle as he held me. “What’s going on, my darling? Are these happy tears?”

I nodded, my cheek rubbing against his neck. “I just realised that I could have somewhere that’s *mine* – for the first time in my life, really. And it will be with the love of my life.”

Wyll’s arms tightened around me for a moment. “When you put it like that,” he said, his voice unsteady. “Oh. I understand the tears, now.”

I drew back to blow my nose, throwing the sodden hankie into the laundry basket. “I love this idea, sweetheart,” I said. “I’m sorry I’m being so weird about it. But I love you. I want to live with you.”

“You’re not being weird,” he said, face soft. “You’re having emotions. And you’re right. This is a big deal, and I sprang it on you with very little warning, like a suit of new clothing. I was thinking about practicalities, and the fun of furnishing a place together. But we’ve both lived from packs for years... I forgot that conceptually, it’s a big change. It’s alright if we need to take this a bit slower. Find rooms at a hotel in the upper city, or something like that.”

I shook my head. “Big change doesn’t mean it’s not a good change,” I said. “Love, I want to live with you. Even if we argue about every little thing. I just... committing my heart to you felt simple. A natural progression. But this is a whole new stage of life, isn’t it? Building a family together.”

He nodded.

“I want this,” I said again. “Just... be prepared for my emotions to be all over the place.”

Wyll laughed. “I think that might be true for both of us. Hells. The idea of having a fixed abode, after so many years. Being a family, together. You’re right. It’s big.”

I watched his face light up and smiled, stroking his cheek, letting my fingertips rub over the ridge on his cheekbone. “I can’t wait,” I said, and leant forward to kiss him.

At the High Hall, we sat down with Ulder and Counsellor Florrick. I wriggled in my seat a little, sighing. My legs would be hurting in a few minutes from this oversized, hard chair. Well – that was the benefit in meditation training, right? I could ignore the pain... and when I couldn’t, I could plan to fix all of this to make it more friendly to people of all sizes.

“So what can we reasonably ask of the Eltans?” Wyll asked. “They’re not exactly rich, in monetary terms. What might they offer?”

“A few are still involved with the Fist. I doubt that will help us much,” Ulder said. “The Fist don’t have the best reputation in the lower and outer cities just now.”

I nodded in quiet agreement. “What do we need, though?” I asked. “Perhaps we’re looking at this wrongly. We need to figure out what the need is before all else.”

“Everything,” Wyll said, his face grim. “You name it, Gortash probably ruined it.”

“Truer than I’d like to admit,” Ulder said. “I never thought our government was so fragile.”

“There are only so many safeguards we can build against the schemes of evil people,” Florrick said.

“So. Roads are destroyed, as we saw coming in,” I said, reaching for paper, pen, and ink, writing down *Issues* and underlining it, then adding *Roads need repair* underneath. “The shadow curse has only just lifted, so the roads through that area won’t have been maintained for a century or more. At this point, we might as well rebuild them, I’d guess?”

Ulder nodded. “I don’t remember much of my time there, and what I do remember, I don’t trust.”

“Understandable,” Wyll said softly, touching Ulder’s hand with his own. “What of the Chionthar? The curse blocked the barges from travelling down the river, too. That should be easy enough to re-establish.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe not. If the river’s been clogged up with rubbish, or silted up...”

“Hmm. We need a river engineer,” Ulder said. “Dash, you aren’t perchance...”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’m good with gadgets, but I don’t even like boats.”

Wyll snorted. “Says the man who piloted a submersible.”

I winced a little, old memories and pain surfacing. “That’s different. Submersibles go *through* the water, not on top of it.”

“The Eltans might be able to help with that,” Wyll said. “Cordula’s sister is an engineer, isn’t she? Like an architect, but not. A building engineer?”

Ulder nodded. “Good. That’s something concrete we can ask for.”

I wrote *River transport possible?* down under *Issues*, and added *River and building engineers* in a new *Asks* section.

“They have a couple of ships,” Florrick said. “Nothing fancy, but if the roads and river are impassable, we’ll need them.”

“Surely they’re in use?” I asked.

“Hmm. Sea trade usually falls off soon, since we’re coming into winter,” Ulder said, his face thoughtful. “Too many storms. Too much ice on the sails. That sort of thing.”

“Shit. So our only way of moving food is by sea, and that option will soon be unviable?” I asked, writing it down, worry curling through me. This was worse than I’d thought.

“Unless we get Umberlee on our side,” Wyll suggested. “That might improve the odds of our ships getting through.”

Florrick snorted. “Good luck with that.”

I wrote it down under *Asks* regardless. We could pare down our ideas later.

“What are our priorities?” I asked.

“Food. Shelter. Getting people off the streets before winter hits,” Wyll said.

“Keeping the peace. The looting is small-scale at the moment, but it could turn into riots or a crime wave at any second,” Ulder said. “The Fist can handle that, at least.”

I sighed. “Ulder, I need to say something that might offend you.”

He glared at me for a moment, then his gaze softened. “Go ahead.”

“The Fist can’t be in charge of keeping peace in the lower and outer cities.”

“That’s ridiculous. That’s their *job*.”

“And one they’ve been performing quite appallingly for months, if not years,” I said, quaking internally at the idea of upsetting the grand duke of the city himself, but determined. “Ulder, they’ve lost any credibility and confidence they ever had down there. They won’t stop riots from occurring. They’ll cause them.”

“They’ll be fine, now that I’m back at the helm. A few surprise inspections, changes of shift leaders...”

“Dash is right,” Wyll said, looking as though the words were barbed, catching in his throat as he spoke. “Father, the Fist... their reputation is in tatters. No one trusts them.”

Ulder glared at both of us in turn.

“What do you suggest?” Florrick asked in clipped tones.

I wrote *Keep the peace in the lower and outer city* under *Issues*. “Honestly, I have no idea. But someone must have the key to unlocking this puzzle, somewhere. Perhaps pull in some temple representatives, or something?”

“An advisory council?” Ulder asked, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes, his mouth still set in a scowl. “Not something I ever felt a need of.”

I clamped my mouth shut on the rejoinder that I wanted to give. Perhaps I’d upset the most powerful man in the city enough for the day.

Ulder eyed me, the scowl deepening. “Hmm. I didn’t need an illithid parasite to catch *that* thought. Very well.”

Wyll was watching us both, eyes worried.

“Finances,” Florrick put in. “What we’ll need for addressing all of these problems: money.”

“Hmm. The Eltans are hardly wealthy,” Wyll said, gratefully seizing the opportunity to change the subject.

“And patriar families are likely to see charitable efforts as signs of weakness,” Ulder said, his face slowly losing its stormy lines. “However. These are strange times, and our leading families *must* pull together. If I have to remind each and every one of the uprising in Calimshan, so help me, I shall.”

The rest of the meeting passed with more harmony, if fewer answers. But we ended with a firm idea of what to ask of the Eltans: charitable donations, use of their fleet for the next couple of moons, and any engineering assistance they could offer.

“That’s quite a list,” Wyll said, his mouth twisting. “What will motivate them to help?”

“Annoying the rest of the patriars,” Florrick suggested. “They’re the youngest of the noble families, the last to acquire property in the upper city. The other families will *have* to follow their lead, eventually. That will rankle. But it will also improve their position in everyone’s eyes, and increase their profile.”

The Eltans’ home was... a little shabbier than I’d expected. It was nicely furnished, in what I assumed was an older style, as rugs and hangings showed distinct signs of wear.

“Wyll!” Cordula said as we were shown into the parlour. “It’s lovely to see you again. Although I’d love to hear the story behind those horns, someday.”

Wyll put a hand on my shoulder. “Cordula, this is Dash, my betrothed, and hero of the Illithid War. Cordula Eltan, daughter of Lord Eltan.”

“Oh! Goodness,” she said. “Welcome, Dash. Our humble thanks for your care of our city. Wyll, my mother is waiting for us in the library. I wanted to say hello first. See if you’d like to come over for dinner sometime, just us young folk, like it used to be.”

“We’d love to,” Wyll said, smiling, seeming oblivious to the flash of mild chagrin on her face.

“And what part do you play in all this?” she asked me. “I heard a rumour that you’re a midwife? Surely that’s not correct.”

I shook my head, smiling, even as something in her tone grated on my nerves. “No, a healer and cleric. But Wyll and I are both helping Ulder with his responsibilities.”

“Is he unwell?” she asked, gaze sharpening.

I shook my head. “There’s a lot to be done for the city and its people. More than one man could reasonably take upon his shoulders.”

“Wyll!” a man exclaimed, bounding into the room as though it were a sparring ring, not a parlour full of knick-knacks and spindly furniture. “Man, it’s good to see you. It’s been an age!” He took Wyll’s hand, but instead of shaking, bowed to kiss it, his lips lingering just a little too long.

Wyll smiled and took the hand back, placing it back on my shoulder, one finger playing with my neck just a little. The message was clear even to my unpractised eyes – he was happily committed elsewhere, and the flirtation wouldn’t be followed up. “Florian,” he said. “How lovely to see you again!” His face was pleasant, no emotion on display, but I could see a tightness around his eyes that told me he wasn’t happy.

“Tell me. Did you really seduce a tiefling out in the wilds? Ye gads. Out amongst the twigs and goblins! How positively rustic!”

“The story was rather embellished, I’m sure,” Wyll answered. “Her name is Karlach, and she helped us in the Illithid War.”

Florian shuddered dramatically. “Brains in the sky,” he whispered. “Horrendous. You must have been so brave!” He looked at Wyll with admiration in his face – if I wasn’t mistaken, some of it was actually genuine.

“This is Dash,” Wyll said. “My betrothed. We met on our adventures.”

“Charmed,” Florian said, glancing at me. “So, Wyll. You left us so precipitously! Were you really running around the backwoods helping peasants and slaughtering goblins for all those years? So dreary!”

I carefully swallowed the laugh that I wanted to let out. If Florian was trying to be appealing to Wyll, he'd made some bad conversational choices. But then... maybe the idea was more to ensure that I knew my place. I seemed to be an unwelcome surprise.

"Come, mother is looking forward to seeing you," Cordula said, her gaze a little exasperated as she gave Florian a look. Because he was misbehaving, or because he'd messed it up? Gods, I was seeing double meanings in everything.

We walked into the library, a small and cozy room filled with bookshelves, many filled with books in handsome leather covers. An older human woman in light leather armour stood to greet us.

"Wyll! My dear boy. It's been an age. But I don't need to ask what you've been up to – I think we've all heard the tales. Quite remarkable, for someone of your age. Please excuse my outfit; I have a session with the weapons master soon. And who is this?" she asked, inclining her head to me. I realised with a start that she was the first person to acknowledge me without a prompt from Wyll.

"I'm Dash," I said, stepping forward and offering my hand. "It's such a pleasure to meet you, Lord Eltan," I said as she took it briefly, her fingers limp.

"Dash is my betrothed," Wyll said easily as Lord Eltan gestured to a group of seats near a fireplace. "How have you all been?"

"Well enough," she said, motioning a servant over to place a teapot and dainty cups on the coffee table. "Cordula is married, did you hear?"

"I didn't! I hope she's enjoying married life."

"Well. It's hardly for enjoyment, is it? But she's content with her match." She poured tea into cups for us. "How's your father?"

"He's well! Sorting out the chaos left by Gortash. Sadly, the man lacked the training to do the job."

"Mmm. I've no doubt it's a difficult one. Definitely not a job for the young or faint of heart. Especially in these trying times."

"Indeed," Wyll said, sipping his tea. "I don't doubt that the patriarch families are marshalling their forces to assist in the rebuilding efforts."

"I think perhaps you overestimate their interest in charitable endeavours."

"Perhaps; but it's their interest in self-preservation I'm concerned with. A hungry, cold populace... well. We saw what happened in Calimshan. I'm not eager to see that happen here."

I listened, trying to follow the feints and ripostes of the conversation. It sounded like gentle, polite conversation, but was anything but.

“What have you in mind?” she asked, her tone curious.

“We need to start rebuilding before winter arrives, and many of our former trade routes are closed. We need funds, and ships. Engineers, if possible. Both to help with rebuilding, and to reopen the trade routes.”

“Hmm. None of these are traditionally the purview of the patriars.”

Wyll nodded. “But extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. We must all pull together, Lord Eltan, lest we all sink together. And those who step up first... well. I’m sure they’ll earn themselves a valuable place in the city’s histories.”

Lord Eltan’s eyes narrowed a little. “An interesting idea,” she said, putting down her cup. “Well. I’m sure you have much to do today, and I must attend my lesson before my weapons master gets cross.” She stood, a clear indication that the audience was at an end. “It’s been such a pleasure to see you again, dear boy. And to meet you... Dash.”

“That was... interesting,” I said when we were out on the street.

Wyll held out a hand, and I took it. “I’m sorry,” he said. “The way they treated you was appalling.”

I shook my head. “No one tried to stab me, no name-calling, and they didn’t kick me out summarily. I’ve had far worse receptions in my time.”

“Hmm. Still. I couldn’t believe Florian’s nerve.”

“That might be a pattern we need to get used to, love. But it was impressive, the way you handled that conversation with Lord Eltan. So many subtleties. I’m starting to rethink my suitability for doing this with you.”

Wyll shrugged. “Courtly dancing with words instead of feet, that’s all.”

“Do you think they’ll help?”

“I think so. I hope so. We need to get moving on this as soon as we can.”

He pointed to a two-storey brick house surrounded by a tall wall, backing onto the hill that we’d just walked down from the High Hall. “Here it is. The place I wanted us to look at first. I know it from years ago,” he said, unlocking the front door. “Father used to visit regularly.”

“Seems small,” I said approvingly. Rather narrower than many of the houses here, but on a wider lot than the townhouses we’d passed. The front was uninspiring: just an expanse of red brick, a couple of very small, very high windows, shaded by a large oak tree in the front courtyard. I couldn’t see into the backyard, through the courtyard wall, made from solid grey brick... wait. No. I walked over to the fence, crouched down and put a hand to the stone. “I’ve never seen rock worked like this. Except...” I stroked the cold rock under my fingers, trying to catch a memory. Why did this feel good? How did they get it so smooth?

Wyll turned his head to grin at me. “Wait and see what’s inside.”

I shook off my fascination with the wall and joined him. We walked into a rather dark, dingy-feeling space, the very high ceiling lost in gloom. I frowned. Wyll’s enthusiasm and the surroundings seemed entirely mismatched... but I didn’t want to be a wet blanket. I opened my mouth to say something vague but positive, as I heard a click, and a rattling above us. “What the...”

With creaks and groans, slats turned, letting in daylight from outside, revealing a large skylight in the ceiling. Soon the foyer was still dusty, empty, and unkempt... but it was full of light. A spiral staircase to the back left led upstairs, worked in iron, with lacy panels of fancywork.

“Oh,” I said quietly. “That’s lovely, dear.”

He grabbed my hand and led me through the double doors in front of us. With the doors open, light streamed in from the foyer behind us, illuminating the shelves lining the walls, gleaming from the stove on one wall and the desk beside it.

“A library?” I asked. “Not a dining room or a parlour. A library is the first room in this house?”

Wyll chuckled. “The original owners were... a little peculiar, by all accounts.”

“So far I’m liking this brand of peculiarity.”

“The next room isn’t exactly in vogue, either. But I think you might like it regardless.”

He opened the doors with a flourish, pressing another button. Dozens of lamps flickered to life around the walls, occasional dark spots showing where maintenance was required.

I stepped inside and stared. The room was a small ballroom in configuration, complete with an unlit candelabra dangling from the ceiling. It was large enough to hold dances, just – but also small enough to use as a formal dining room. Judging from the trestles stacked in one corner, I wasn’t the only one to have thought so. But the room itself was taking most of my attention. This wasn’t the sort of thing I’d expected to see. The walls were solid stone, polished black basalt with green veins running through it. I walked to the back of the room, absently noting the lack of windows, and put a hand on the wall.

“It’s solid,” I said softly. “This wasn’t constructed. This was... carved?”

“From the hillside itself,” Wyll said, kneeling beside me, his voice hushed. “I suspect some magic went into getting the walls looking so uniform, though.”

“This can’t be human work,” I said, taking a breath, letting the feel of the rock under my fingers flow through me, feeling a knot of tension I hadn’t realised was even there suddenly loosen at the communion.

“Deep gnome work, centuries old,” Wyll said quietly. “According to the people who lived here, anyway.”

“Oh,” I said, coming out of my reverie. “This is what you wanted me to see. This is why we’re looking at this house first.”

Wyll’s arm stole around my shoulders in a light hug. “I... was trying to think about what it might be like. Living as a gnome in a city built for humans. I can’t imagine a lot of it. I know that. But I thought... maybe you’d feel more at home here.”

I turned to stare at him.

“One of the suites upstairs is carved into the hillside, too,” he said, uncertainty written on his face. “No pressure, darling. If I got it wrong, just tell me. There are other places we could look at. I just thought...”

“You utter numbskull,” I said, tears coming to my eyes. “You’re perfect. This is... how the hells?” I’d never lived in a cave in my adult memory. So why did this room, this house, feel so much like home?

“I didn’t mess up?” he asked.

“Let’s see upstairs, first.”

He chuckled. “There’s a kitchen through there,” he said, pointing at a small door to the right.

Upstairs looked more like I’d expected. Polished wood floor, a long hallway stretching into darkness. Wyll opened the door to the first suite – a perfectly serviceable lounge area, decorated in blues and greens, bare windows streaming light over furniture shrouded in sheets. Another brass-worked stove by the wall, I noticed with approval.

“Come see the back one,” he urged, and I let him pull me away down the hall, past another door that I assumed led to another set of rooms.

The back suite was... different.

“Oh,” I said quietly.

The walls were the same black basalt as downstairs, but softened with golden velvet hangings. No windows streaming light here, but when Wyll pushed a button, a couple of lamps flickered on to provide a dim light. Unlike the front set of rooms, this one was relatively empty of furniture.

“The lighting could do with work,” he said. “I think it’s been neglected. This was sort of... an emergency guest suite, when I visited. My friend and I used to creep in here and play at ghosts.”

I took a breath. This should feel claustrophobic, shouldn’t it? But all I felt was a deep sense of rightness clicking into place, as though I’d finally fed a hunger I’d had gnawing at my insides all my life. “You wouldn’t feel uncomfortable in here?” I asked, realising my voice was unsteady. “If it felt creepy to you as a child...”

“I always sort of liked it,” Wyll said. “I don’t know why. It felt safe and secure. I know I’m fond of wide open spaces and nice views, but... this is nice, too.”

The bedroom walls were lined in green velvet, a deep, almost mossy green. No bed. Just a large tub built into the floor on the left, steps leading down into it, an odd brass contraption at one end, a hole in the middle.

“This is odd,” I said, peering at the tub. “That hole in it looks deliberate. For... washing laundry?”

“Drains out somewhere,” Wyll said. “Plug it for baths. But look at this.” He turned a piece of the brass contraption, and water gushed into the tub.

“Oh hells,” I said, putting the pieces together. “Actual plumbing. Running water. I didn’t realise anywhere in Baldur’s Gate had this.”

“It gets better,” Wyll said, his voice amused. “Put your hand under the water.”

I did, and gasped. “It’s warm?”

He turned the contraption again, and the water slowed and stopped. “The pipes go under the floor. Heat the floors in winter.”

“You’re joking.”

“Would you believe this was a matter of shame for the family who own it?”

“Oh. Because it’s deep gnome work?”

Wyll nodded.

“So it would be preferable to lug buckets of water?”

“Hmm. According to those who don’t have to do the work, I suppose.”

“How does it all work?” I asked, trying to picture a water heater that didn’t explode if left untended.

“No idea. But you like it?”

I abandoned the intriguing tub to fall into his arms.

“I’m guessing that’s a yes?” he asked, his voice warm and amused.

“Schatzi, I love it. You’re amazing.”

“Schatzi? That’s a new one.”

“Huh,” I said, realising as he said it. “I... I haven’t heard that in a long time. It’s a pet name. Means *treasure*. Umm... the literal translation would be *gemstone*, I suppose.” I frowned,

searching for an elusive memory. Long grey hair, a murmur of “Schatzi!” But nothing else would surface, the memory retreating as I tried to hook it and pull it into my mind’s eye.

“I like it,” he said, his voice wavering.

“You’re alright?” I asked, drawing away a little, concerned, to see his face.

“Very,” he said, pulling me back into a tight hug. “Just overcome with emotion. I love you.”

I cuddled close, inhaling his scent of sulphur and oakmoss. “It might have been an accidental endearment, but it *does* suit the opal of my heart rather well,” I said. “I keep finding new depths to you.”

“My romantic darling,” he said. “So. That’s a yes on the house? You don’t want to see if we can find others?”

“Is it expensive?”

“Surprisingly not. Although not entirely shocking, I suppose. The patriars are a conservative bunch. Plumbing and lighting that doesn’t have to be lit by hand? Appalling.”

“Mmm. I guess being half underground isn’t to everyone’s tastes, either. You’re sure you wouldn’t find it oppressive?”

“Positive. I used to beg to sleep over here so I could stay in this suite. Despite Father pointing out that we weren’t that close with the family living here.”

I laughed, picturing the scene. “That’s adorable.”

“I was, apparently, a rather adorable child. A quality that faded as I aged.”

I snorted. “Did not.”

Back at the Elfsong, I climbed onto the bed and fell on my side, groaning. “Well. That was... quite the day.”

Wyll sat down next to me, his face amused. “How did you enjoy your first official encounter with the patriars?”

“I think I preferred the goblins.”

He huffed a laugh. “You’re not the only one to feel that way.”

“I shouldn’t be rude,” I said, feeling repentant. “Those are your peers that I’m badmouthing.”

“Sort of,” he said. “Father and I... we’re not patriars, you know? We’re like a confusing hybrid breed. Too influential for the lower city. Too low-class for the upper city.”

“Hmm. That’s why you snuck down to the lower city as a child?”

He nodded. “The upper city children thought I was so brave and daring.”

“And the lower city children?”

“Thought I was a toff, until I won a few fights.”

I grinned at him. “Sounds like you were a troublemaker.”

“Guilty, but I rarely started the fights. Just finished them. Well, mostly.”

“And now you’re leasing property in the upper city,” I said. “With an outer city gnome, what’s more.”

“True. Our children will be hybrids too.”

I felt a stirring of joy, and closed my eyes to concentrate on it, let it fill me. “Sweetheart, I love thinking about a future with you.”

“Remember when we didn’t think we had one?” he asked, reaching out to stroke my beard. “When I told you I’d never be duke, and we might not even live to next tenday, so why worry about something so absurd?”

“A lot you knew, you silly giant,” I said, leaning into the caress to look into his eyes. “Look at us now.”

“Mmm. I love you.”

I smiled at him. “We should get out of these clothes and bathe, shouldn’t we?”

“We should definitely get out of these clothes,” he agreed. “I could take or leave the bath.” His fingers slid down my neck, suggestive.

“Help me out of these ridiculous things?” I asked. I was fully capable of undressing myself, I was sure... but dressing had taken uncomfortably long for me this morning, whereas Wyll had managed it in half the time.

He moved closer to kiss my neck, and I bit my lip, letting go of the idea of bathing for now, lost in the sensation of his lips on my skin, moving slowly downwards as he unbuttoned the coat, unhooked the shirt centimetre by centimetre, utterly focused on his task, on uncovering and caressing my chest.

“Mmm. Not... quite what I had in mind,” I said.

Wyll looked up at me from kissing my belly, his face alight with amusement and ardour.

“You want me to stop, yes?” he asked, slipping a finger under the waistband of my trousers.

“Don’t you dare. It’s far superior to what I was thinking,” I admitted, inhaling as his cheek brushed my loins in a soft whisper of touch.

He untied the ribbons lacing my trousers, lifted the waistband of my briefs to slide his forked tongue against my stiffening cock. I whimpered, unable to help lifting my hips a little, enjoying the tease and the triumph in his eyes, but wanting the heat of his mouth sliding over me, wanting to push into him with abandon.

“Yes?” he asked, pulling my trousers and briefs down a little to lick me again.

“Gods, you feel good. Please, sweetheart.”

“Call me Schatzi again.”

“My Schatzi,” I said softly, stroking his face. “I love you. I want you. Quite desperately.”

His answering smile warmed my heart... and then his mouth warmed my cock, taking it in, tongue rubbing against it as I made broken sounds of arousal for him. Eventually he drew away, kneeling at my feet, tugging gently at the trousers to pull them off, and folded them roughly, placing them aside, sliding his jacket off his shoulders and hanging it over the foot of the bed, slowly unhooking his shirt.

“Gods, you’re beautiful,” I told him, watching the display with hungry eyes, his chest coming into view... then came to myself, remembered that we were supposed to be undressing, and I was lying here in shirt and jacket instead. I sat up to pull them off my shoulders, eyes never leaving the increasing expanse of skin that Wyll was baring for me, and added them to the pile of loosely-folded clothing.

Naked now, I watched Wyll slowly strip for me, my fingers idly stroking over my cock, arousal building within me at the sight.

“Hells,” he said hoarsely, watching me in turn, while fumbling with the laces of his trousers. “Darling...”

I sat up, took his hands in mine, and bit down on the ribbon lacing his trousers, pulling away to release the knot, hearing his breathing grow ragged. I used my teeth to loosen the lacing, then rubbed my cheek slowly over his loins, looking up at him, the heat in his eyes sending a thrill through me.

He sat to pull off the trousers, throwing them instead of the careful folding he’d been doing until now, and pounced, pushing me onto my back, settling on top of me. “Such a tease,” he said, kissing my neck.

“Tease?” I asked, wrapping my legs around his waist. “Sweetheart... Schatzi... you can have anything you want of me.”

“Your dick, darling,” he said, his hand sliding down to my arse.

A wave of desire washed through me. “Of course, love. But I want to taste you first.” I turned my face to meet his lips with mine, letting his kisses fan the flames of my desire, feeling the press of his arousal against my thigh. I rolled us over, knelt over him, moved down to press

my cheek against his cock, kissed it, feeling him shiver underneath me as a hand tangled in my hair.

“Guide me?” I asked, let him pull my mouth to the tip of his cock, took it in my mouth as he groaned and lifted his hips, pushed my mouth further over him, letting his cock slide slowly to the back of my mouth, down my throat, as his breath stuttered in his chest.

His free hand sought mine, and I gave it to him as he started to move, thrusting upwards into my mouth, gasping. “Hells, darling. Oh...” His words trailed off into quiet noises as his cock pushed into my mouth, his back bowing, the hand in my hair holding my head just where he wanted it.

I pushed up with my tongue, feeling the ridges of his cock caressing it, loving the textures sliding against my lips and tongue as he panted. Before long, I tasted salt and sulphur, and he stopped moving, breathing hard, stroking my hair. I looked up, letting him slide out of my mouth, watching him shiver in reaction. “What do you want, love?” I asked.

“Fuck me,” he said, closing his eyes. “Just like this. Darling, please? I want to spill my seed against you with your dick inside me.”

I reached for the oil, very willing to give him exactly what he asked for, and stroked it slowly over my cock, watching Wyll – so hard, with that tiny bead of fluid building, just ready to be licked off – I leant forward, gave into temptation, licked it off, so I could fuck him with the taste of him on my tongue.

He was still reacting to that single lick when I slid my cock over his arse, and he gasped all over again.

“Now?” I asked, and at his nod, slid into him. The rush of euphoria felt just like the first time I’d done this, his muscles surrounding and caressing, his heat leaving me breathless. I dripped a little oil over his cock, making him gasp, then moved, setting a slow, steady rhythm with my cock pushing into him, my belly sliding against him.

“Oh hells. Don’t stop,” he said, his back arching to push against me, fingers tangling in the sheets underneath him.

“Gods, how do you always feel so good?”

Ragged breaths were his only reply, so I increased the tempo in time with his breathing, watching him concentrate on the sensations flowing through him, seeing the climax starting to take him over.

I pushed into him one last time, feeling the bliss flood through me as his muscles pulsed rhythmically all around my cock, pulling out to spill my seed over his belly, mingling with his own. “I love you,” I said, feeling the aftershocks of pleasure juddering through me, slowly relaxing against him.

“Mmm. My darling,” he said, eyes half-closed. “That was wonderful.”

“Better than Florian?” I teased, moving up to cuddle against his side.

Wyll snickered. “Oh hells. Florian and his flirting. When he’d have snubbed me worse than Dillon did, only a tenday ago.”

“Perhaps I should be kissing your hand more often, to make sure you’re not tempted to stray.”

“Ha! With your romantic streak? I have trouble seeing anything that might tempt me from your side, even if I were as shallow as he obviously assumed.”

“Well, he does have quite a lot of height on me.”

“Hmm. But is he the most attractive man I’ve ever met? Anyone else would fall short.”

“Oh! Short jokes! While I’m baring my insecurities, no less!”

Wyll grabbed me into a hug, laughing. “You know you’re my world, darling?” he asked, sobering. “We might see a lot of this. People assuming that they can woo me from your side, or vice versa. But I can promise you that no one else will even register for me. I’m yours, my sweet.”

I smiled, my arms tightening around him. “I know, love. As long as we can come home together at the end of the day, or night, and laugh together... I’m content.”

“Home,” he said quietly. “I never really thought I’d have one ever again. To find a home with you, my perfect darling.”

“Makes it all worthwhile, in my eyes.”

“Really? Being abducted, infected... all our trials and torments?”

“Made sweet not just by the end result, but your presence throughout,” I said, and drew him in for a lingering kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this chapter took so long to get out. It caused me some major headaches during the editing phase. 😞 Bright side? The next chapter is already edited and ready to go, so you get a double dose this week to (sort of) make up for my tardiness.

*So this word **Schatzi** (pronunciation: shah-tzy) that Dash suddenly uses. It came about a bit oddly. I grew up in a weird little German-Australian town in the middle of nowhere. One of my parents is German, too. A few months back, I was mulling over pet names for Dash and Wyll to use for each other, and something in the back of my head said, Dash has to use Schatzi for Wyll. I speak a bit of German, but I'm far from fluent, and I*

*couldn't remember for the life of me what it meant or why the hell my subconscious was so adamant about it. All I could remember was that it was an endearment of some sort. I looked it up and damn near fell over. **Jewel? Treasure?** Ye gads, it was perfect. So I yinked it for the rock gnomes. I guess they speak German now? 🙄*

I hope you enjoyed this very belated chapter!

Love, Rowan

The power of love

Wyll and I woke up before dawn to an uproar downstairs.

“Ugh,” Wyll said, rubbing his eyes. “Should we investigate?”

“Could be our fault, so I guess so,” I said, yawning as I clambered out of the bed.

We threw on robes and ran downstairs as the noise escalated. Through the incoherent shouting of the undercook and kitchenhand, we soon understood one thing: something infested the cellar, something violent, something dangerous. Something they’d never seen before. Not rats, then.

“What is it?” Gale asked, joining us, staff readied and sparking lightly at its tip. “What happened?”

“No idea what this is,” I said grimly, over the wails of the kitchenhand. “Does it matter? Let’s deal with it.”

Gale and Wyll nodded, and we descended the cellar stairs to find an incongruous collection of low-level devils and imps. What the hells were they doing *here*? Had they come through Shadowheart’s portal days ago, somehow? Regardless, we had to clear them out. Having devils infesting the city would be even worse than Bhaalists. Devils would slowly, systematically, destroy the hearts of everyone living here.

Gale threw an ice dagger at an imp, and it exploded in a shower of shards.

“Vermin,” Wyll spat, throwing an eldritch blast to explode another imp, only to stagger and fall to his knees. I looked around wildly, but there was no sign of a devil having done anything to him.

I swore and ran forward. Whatever had downed Wyll, my first priority had to be killing these things. And if I could get between them and Wyll to do so, even better.

With Gale to provide blasts of ice crystals from behind me, the infernals were easily disposed of. I motioned to Gale to clear them up, and turned to Wyll, who was still kneeling where he’d dropped, swaying.

“Love? What’s wrong?” I asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. It was ice-cold. “Shit. Did Gale hit you with a stray bit of ice?”

He shook his head, his teeth chattering. “Mi-Mizora.”

“What did she do? I didn’t see her,” I said, looking around wildly.

Wyll shivered, and I realised I was asking questions instead of helping.

“Come here, sweetheart,” I said, pulling him into a hug, inhaling slow and deep, willing my body to produce more heat. He cuddled against me, slowly relaxing.

“Took back my powers,” he said as Gale approached. “They’re gone. I’m empty. There’s nothing there. I’m so cold. Inside.”

I swore. That’s what devils had been doing here. A plant from Mizora to ensure she could take her power back in the most dramatic and inconvenient way possible. “What an arsehole,” I said. “Come on, love. Let’s get you someplace warm, and a little more homely.”

Upstairs, I encouraged Wyll to strip and get into bed. He obeyed listlessly, and I watched him with a frown on my face. Was this just a side-effect of the loss of his powers? Or had Mizora added a special little kick to it, like barbs on an arrow, so the infernal powers she’d gifted him hurt more coming out? “I’ll be back in a moment, sweetheart,” I said, and left for the group’s common rooms.

“Just tell me, Gale,” I said. “Is this normal, for a warlock losing their powers?”

“For an infernal warlock?” Gale asked. “Probably fairly normal, I’d say. Losing one’s powers is...” his eyes turned distant and melancholy. “Like wrenching out a piece of one’s soul. I can’t imagine Mizora easing the process any.”

“Alright. Thanks,” I said, a little reassured. I went downstairs, asked for hot bricks to be added to our bed.

I returned to Wyll, climbing onto the bed and under the covers with him. A diminutive maid, looking too young to be working this early, crept in behind me to slide cloth-wrapped bricks between the sheets.

“Thanks,” I said, handing her a coin, watching as she crept out again, her movements furtive.

Wyll reached out to me with one arm, and I went to him, slipping off the robe. If ever there was a time for skin healing, it seemed like now.

“Just had to talk to Gale quickly,” I said, snuggling close, feeling his skin cool against mine. “How can I help, love?”

“Hold me. Talk to me,” he said. “Remind me of... who I am. It hurts. I can’t explain how, it just... it *hurts*.”

That last came out almost as a wail, and I blinked back sympathetic tears. I had no idea what exactly he was feeling, but I could tell it was horrible. I slid my leg over his, put my head on his shoulder, feeling him relax a little underneath me, as though the weight was helping. I cast about for something to distract him with, to give him something positive to focus on. When all else failed, I thought, get him thinking about us.

“When I first saw you,” I said softly, stroking his chest, “That line you shouted out. *Provoke the Blade; suffer its sting*. It’s haunted me ever since. I need to start provoking the blade a little more often, I think. I rather like suffering its sting.”

Wyll's chest moved in a weak chuckle.

"It's funny, you know," I said, kissing his chest. "Every time I touched you, I felt it. That attraction. The connection. And I refused to see it for so long. I didn't want to fall for you."

"Why not?"

I sighed, realising I might not have chosen the best topic after all.

"Don't get mad at me?" I asked. "But I think I found it an impossible idea, that someone like you would ever look at me and think *yes, that's the body I want to cuddle up to at night*. So I tried not to put myself in a position where I might care about you thinking that way."

Wyll snorted.

"But then I'd innocently touch you, and feel as though lightning sparked through me every time," I said softly. "I love being around you. The look on your face when you open a chest or box, with no idea what might be inside. Your face alight with the joy of discovery. How you react to the beauties of nature and city alike. That you're equally happy with me giving you a flower I picked from the side of the road, or a rare gem cut from a faraway mine. The way your soul resonates to beauty wherever you find it. That you go looking for it everywhere. I think you'd find beauty in the sewers themselves."

"If you're there," he said, his voice still tight with pain. "Always."

I smiled, but drew back to watch him, an elbow under me, concerned. "Can I get you a tea, love? You're hurting."

His arms tightened around me, clinging. "Not that sort of pain," he said, the words dragging out of him. "Come back?"

"Of course, Schatzi," I said. I snuggled back against him, head on his shoulder, leg and arm over him, pulling another blanket over us. "You know, you bring me so much joy. You do that for everyone, don't you? There's a certain wonder and positivity in the way you approach the world around you. It brightens the hearts of those you love, and I'm not even sure we notice you doing it, most of the time. We just notice that we feel better when you're around."

He sighed, relaxing slightly.

"Trust Mizora to make it as hard as possible," I said, stretching up to kiss his neck. "I love you, sweetheart. Shall I keep talking?"

"Please."

What would ground him in himself; make him feel loved and protected? I remembered, suddenly, answering a question for a nymph in a circus. That to cheer himself, Wyll would think about our first kiss.

"I'm remembering kissing you for the first time," I said, letting the memories of that night return and play out in my head. "Seeing your silhouette against the night sky, and the tingle

that I felt at the sight. Despite my best intentions, just wanting to be with you. The smell of that little offshoot of the Chionthar. A touch of brine, a little stagnant. The scratch of the rough sand under my soles. The warmth of your hand in mine, as we stared out over the water together, united in a gentle melancholy. Gods, do you have any idea of the thrill that went through me when you flirted with me? I was in heaven. And then you knelt for me – do you realise how rare that is? That someone simply comes down to meet me at my own level, not tower over me, looming? You just... knelt in front of me and kissed me, and... gods. I was even more desperate not to fall for you, even though part of me knew it was too late.”

“The horns?” he asked.

“Never,” I said, rubbing my cheek against him. “The reputation. The height. The fact I valued myself so little. All of those, but never your horns, love. Badges of honour, utterly fierce and wonderful on their own. I know you feel ambivalent towards them at best, love, but to me, they're so beautiful.”

Wyll sighed.

“Worthy of a ballad or two,” I continued. “The Ballad of Two Devils. It practically writes itself. The dauntless hero. The fierce warrior. They clash in a shower of sparks. Misunderstandings. Miscommunications. When the smoke clears, they're firm friends, united against the evil creatures who thrust them together, trying to spell their mutual doom, never understanding the force they were about to raise against themselves. If I had any talent in songwriting, I'd try to write it myself. A guaranteed hit. Although I still want to hear the one your father commissioned.”

Wyll's chest moved in a chuckle under my cheek, and I craned my neck to see a slight smile on his face.

I continued to talk, reminiscences of our travels, the times he'd held me in comforting arms through the shadow curse and Lathander's grief. Memories of stolen kisses and quiet caresses. Watching him train, fencing against an imaginary opponent, the elegance and grace in the classic forms he used. Knowing that the elegance and grace translated equally well to the dance floor, where he far surpassed me in sophistication. Pouring him a glass of wine after battle, his blood cooling as I rubbed balm into his muscles, sipping my own share of whatever rough and ready throat-stripper we'd managed to plunder from enemies.

“I love when you dance with me,” I said, reaching for his hand, pulling it across his body to lightly kiss his fingertips. “I thought it was impossible. I thought we'd be ridiculous together. That you'd be tall and graceful and beautiful, and I'd be a blundering fool, stumbling about, trying to catch up, never succeeding.”

Wyll grumbled, and I smiled, stretching to kiss his cheek, stroking his fingers.

“You make it look so simple,” I said. “You adjust yourself to me. You help me adjust to you. And somehow, when we come together, so different, such disparate styles... it feels exactly right. As though we fit together perfectly. I think that's your skill at work. You're not just a dancer. You're a dancing partner, a leader. I think... it took me a while to understand the

difference. That you work best *with* someone. That your best work, your best leadership, is hidden away from a casual glance.”

As I talked, my throat growing dry, Wyll relaxed under me, his breathing slowing, until a quiet snore escaped. I stopped talking, watching him, his face quiet, but with a hint of pain still twisting his mouth and furrowing his brow. What had Mizora done to him, in that final moment of abnegation? Had she ripped out his powers like tearing a burrowing parasite from its host's flesh, talons pulling and slicing and rupturing as it left, leaving destruction and chaos behind? Had she slid a sliver of eternal ice into his chest, a constant reminder of the heat of the hells that he'd given up?

We spent a restless morning, Wyll waking frequently to cry out, or shake uncontrollably, sobbing. Through it all, I held him close, sharing my warmth and my love as best I could, feeling hopelessly inadequate against a pain I could barely understand, let alone assuage. I was a healer... but this was a problem I currently had no idea how to heal.

I woke to Wyll moving beside me, sun streaming in the window, and reached out to him, barely conscious, just aware that I needed to be touching him.

“My darling,” he said, leaning over me. “Hells. My nighttime of the soul, and again, you're with me in every moment. Through every torment. I love you.”

I rolled onto my back, looking up at him, my heart lifting to see a smile on his face. “My stars,” I said softly. “I love you. Do you feel better?”

“Oddly empty, but better,” he said, bending to kiss my neck. I relaxed and moved to give him as much access as possible, enjoying the caress of his lips over my skin. “And my darling is still here. Still delectable.”

I grinned. “Are you seducing me?”

“Depends. Is it working?”

I laughed, despite my concern for him. “Always,” I said, letting my fingers slide down his side to his hip, my thumb stroking over his hip bone, so temptingly close to his loins. “Your mere presence inflames me, love.”

“Then yes,” he answered. “I’m definitely seducing you.”

I reached up to hold his face, kiss his mouth, biting his lower lip a little until his breath caught and he slid more firmly on top of me. I felt my own breathing quicken as adrenaline and arousal danced through me, pressing up against him, feeling the hard lines of muscle tensing above me.

“Oh, hells,” he murmured. “Darling, I—”

“Fuck me?” I asked, pulling him hard against me, desire crashing over me, overwhelming me.

He breathed hard, staring at me with wild eyes, then bent to kiss me, his mouth hungry, teeth and lips and tongue all demanding my attention, my surrender. I gave it happily, thrilling to the feel of him on top of me, taking his pleasure in me, one hand sliding down to stroke my cock as I pushed up against him.

Wyll moved downwards, kissing over my chest and belly. His mouth closed around my cock, tongue stroking, teeth scraping very gently over the skin, making me convulse underneath him, pleasure exploding within me. I made inarticulate noises for him as he caressed me with his mouth, my capacity to form words draining away as the sensations took me over.

He teased me to the edge of climax and drew back, watching me, stroking oil over himself.

“Sweetheart...” I said, my voice pleading, pulling him back down to kiss him, craving his body against mine, *inside* mine.

His fingers rubbed against me, exploring, as I kissed him, a hand at the back of his neck. He slid slowly into me, and I convulsed, unprepared for the wave of bliss coursing through me, my cries quietened by his mouth on mine as he moved inside me.

Euphoric, I moved against him, pulling his hips, making his thrusts harder, faster, as pleasure pulsed through me, nerves sparking and spreading bliss as we moved together. I heard him gasp, looked up to see his eyes glaze, but was lost in a climax, pleasure crashing through me in waves, seed escaping from me, my arse clutching his cock hard within me, making him groan.

Wyll withdrew, spilling his seed over my stomach, clutching me to himself, his cock shoving against my abs in its final convulsions, warm juices sliding in a gentle rivulet down my side.

I frowned slightly, something seeming different – not wrong, just... unusual. But I couldn't place the issue, so instead I took his face in my hands and kissed him thoroughly.

“You're alright?” he asked, drawing back to watch me, his eyes soft.

I nodded, smiling. “Better,” I admitted honestly. “Sweetheart, that was... perfect.”

“Mmm. You remind me of all the joys life has in store for me.”

“You know I'll do my damndest to bring you all the joy you deserve,” I said, stroking his cheek with my thumb. “My sweet love.” I watched his face, wishing I could heal whatever was hurting him so deep inside. *Maybe a cleric*, I thought, and remembered with a start that I was, indeed, a cleric. Could I heal something like this with Lathander's light?

After a very late breakfast and a bath, we collapsed back into bed. My legs were shaky from the fight with the devils, and I imagined Wyll was in even worse shape.

“How are you feeling, love?” I asked. “I don't want to keep asking, but I worry.”

Wyll pulled me close, sighing. “I don't feel terrible. Still oddly empty. I feel as though I'm hollow within. But that cold, painful sensation has eased.”

“Would you like me to try energy healing? It might help a little.”

“You’re not too tired?”

“I’ve had food and rest; I’ve been recharged a bit,” I said, sitting up to lean against the wall, legs apart, holding out my hands. “Come here, love.”

Wyll sat up a little to rest side-on against me, head on my shoulder. I placed one hand on his chest, over his heart, and the other on his back, in the corresponding spot. I inhaled, letting my focus change, move inward, concentrate in my core. Then move down my arms to my hands, through to see what I could sense in him. I slid one hand up to the crown of his head, letting my fingers guide my awareness as I moved them over his gates. Each lit up weakly as I stroked his skin... until I got back to his heart gate. It was utterly dark, refusing to do so much as glimmer when my energy-laden hands hovered over it. The gates further down flickered intermittently. I’d only ever seen that in patients who were badly injured, or who had serious organ troubles. Wyll, on the other hand, was reasonably healthy, walking and talking without effort.

Shit. She burnt out his heart gate. No wonder he was feeling so empty; it wasn’t just the loss of the infernal powers that had warmed and energised him.

“Fucking asshole,” I muttered. If I could just get the energy moving through that gate, it would slowly heal itself. *If* I had no idea what would happen if I couldn’t. Maybe I could try the magical side of healing power. Maybe we’d find someone to help. I concentrated, loading my hands with light. “Energy alert, sweetheart.” I pushed the light in my hands out slowly, into Wyll’s heart gate, from each side.

He gasped, his back arching. “Ah! Shit, that hurt.”

I took my hands away, worried.

“It’s alright,” he said, sitting upright to shake his head. “Have you ever had a leg go numb, then start to prickle and hurt when you start moving again? It’s like that.”

I watched him, concerned, but a little less worried. “I don’t know if it was deliberate – probably, knowing her – but I think Mizora burnt out your heart gate when she took the power back.”

He frowned.

“It disrupted the energy moving through your body,” I explained. “When your heart gate is blocked, you’ll feel alone, lost, depressed. If it’s burnt out... shit. I have no idea, but I know it would be orders of magnitude worse. That must have been hell. I’m surprised you could even... well. Want me.” I felt my cheeks warm.

He snorted, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Talk about *damned if you do; damned if you don’t*. But of course I still wanted you, dearest. I think I could be at death’s door and still want you.”

“Let’s not test that, shall we? I’ve had enough frights to keep my heart racing for years. Can I check again?” I asked.

He relaxed against me, head on my shoulder, in perfect trust. “Of course, darling.”

I put my hands back on him, focusing back on the energy moving through him. His heart gate was glimmering, dim, but at least functioning. The lower gates had stopped flickering. I felt a wave of relief. This was better. *Much* better.

“We’ll have to do some serious energy meditation work,” I said. “But that’s a start. You should feel better soon.” I dropped my hands, letting one caress his leg gently.

“Mmm...” he said, head still on my shoulder. “Thank you. I felt you do that, at least. I was worried I’d lost all my sensitivity to it with the powers.”

I winced. That hadn’t even occurred to me. It must have felt like losing multiple senses all at once. Exhaustion washed over me, and I yawned widely. “Ugh. That was tiring. I think we can declare this day a holiday.”

“Mmm. Can we get someone to send a message to Father?” Wyll asked.

“Let me up, and I’ll write something,” I said, kissing his forehead.

Wyll moved away from me, lying down, his eyes closing. I watched him for a moment, still worried. He’d been through so much lately, and we were about to take on more work, extra challenges.

I wrote a quick note to Ulder, with a very vague explanation of the day’s happenings, just in case it was intercepted. Robe on, I went looking for someone in the communal rooms. Gale looked deep in thought again... but Halsin was reclining on a cushion, reading a book.

“May I bother you for a favour?” I asked.

“Anything,” he rumbled, smiling at me. “I owe you a debt, you know.”

“Pffft,” I said, waving the notion away. “We’re all in debt to each other. I think it cancels out.”

“Ha! Regardless. Tell me of this favour I can do for you.”

I handed Halsin the note. “I need this to get to Wyll’s father. Preferably without anyone else seeing it. It’s not earth-shatteringly important, but I’d rather it not get out yet.”

“I’ll get it to the grand duke,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Never fear. How is Wyll?”

“Better,” I said, grateful that I didn’t have to explain the whole situation with the exhaustion of energy work dragging at me, pulling me down like a physical weight. “Mizora burnt out his heart gate. I need to sleep.”

“Hmm. You look like it. I’ll be back soon – I’m not rostered at the temple today. Call me if you need help.”

“Thanks,” I said, grasping his hand, looking up at him with sincere gratitude. “Love you. Talk later?”

He nodded and strode out the door.

Back in our room, Wyll was tossing restlessly.

“I’m back,” I said, throwing off the robe and climbing onto the bed.

Wyll rolled onto his side, held out an arm. “Come cuddle me, darling. I can’t get comfortable.”

We curled up in bed together, Wyll’s chest to my back, his arm over me.

“You don’t want to get the cuddles?” I asked, yawning again.

I felt him shake his head a little, then kiss my head. “I want you in my arms. The comfort of waking up with you against me like this. It feels... familiar, I suppose. How often did we sleep like this, out on the road?”

“On a soft mattress, with multiple blankets?” I asked, chuckling. “Clean?”

“Hmm. A few improvements, true. Though I like your scent. Even after a few days. You smell nice.”

He might have said more, but I faded out into sleep.

Go to hell

Next morning, I slipped out of bed to meditate, kissing Wyll's forehead as he grumbled sleepily, pulling the covers around himself. I went up to the roof to greet the dawn, feeling a sudden desire to get outside; get that little bit closer to the sun. I sat down and let my thoughts drift, pulling in the light, letting out the darkness. Impressions from the past few days came and went. Wyll on his knees, frozen and in pain. Gale, deep in research, desperate to finish his quest and save his own life. Halsin, finding purpose in the city despite feeling so out of place. Jaheira with her children. Minsc and Boo, happy to wander the streets, aimless to all eyes but their own.

I breathed in the light, sending up a wordless prayer for the city. Surely there was something the gods could do *now*. Now that the danger wasn't from renegade death gods and illithids, but simple starvation and terror. This was something the gods were allowed to assist with, right?

I opened my eyes and sighed. Whether or not the gods could – or would – help, we needed to get to work and assume we'd need to fend for ourselves. In that spirit, I slid down the ladder, then headed down to the kitchen for coffee, a kettle of boiling water, and a plate of pastries and cheese.

“Worked as a server?” the cook asked, watching me pick up and arrange the items in my arms.

I grinned at him. “Done lots of things in my time,” I said, not wanting to revisit my history in Baldur's Gate just now. That was best done on a full stomach. With friends.

When I opened the door of our bedroom, Wyll stirred, turning over to peek out of the blankets. “It's cold,” he said. “How are you dressed so lightly?”

I looked down at the light trousers and shirt I wore, confused for a moment. “Oh. The powers,” I said. “Still feeling the loss as cold?”

“Ugh. I suppose I am.”

“I have hot coffee, and I'll make you up a cup of tea, too,” I said, smiling at him. “Would you like me to do some energy healing after breakfast?”

“If you can spare the effort,” he said. “I know it takes a bit out of you.”

“And what could be more important to me than the wellbeing of my love?” I asked.

“Well, I'm not sure I'd get between you and your first mug of coffee in the morning,” he teased.

“Silly,” I said, grinning at him while I poured coffee and handed him one. “I'll take some of these pastries over to the others while they're still warm. Back in two shakes of a peacock's

tail.”

“Hmm. Still making sure we all get a decent breakfast,” he said as I walked out the door.

As I walked back into our room, a messenger trotted up the stairs. “Dash?” he asked.

I grimaced. “I’m distinctive, aren’t I?”

“Not where I came from,” he said, guffawing. “Message for ya. Here.” He handed me a note sealed with wax and ran back down the stairs before I could offer him payment.

I broke open the note as I closed the door, then sat down, swearing.

“What is it, darling? What’s happened? What’s wrong?”

“Sorry. It’s good news, actually. Just bad timing. Zanner and Dammon and the rest... they finished Karlach’s heart. They just need her here to test it now.”

“Shit. I see what you mean about timing.”

“Mmm. I think we’ll need to put off moving to the new place. Let’s hope Gale has that locator spell organised.”

“Damn. But are you sure you still want me with you? I’m near useless like this.”

I nodded. “You’d never be useless to me, sweetheart. But also – I’ve never travelled through the hells. Well – not willingly, anyway. Even if you had no other skills, that experience would be invaluable. If you’re feeling up to it, that is.”

“I feel fine, apart from freezing half to death in this benighted place. Ugh. Is it an aftereffect, or is this just how regular folk feel all the time?”

“Well, you always did run hotter than most people, so probably the latter,” I said, abandoning the pastries to climb up onto the bed with him. “I suppose Avernus might be a nice change in that regard, at least.”

“A summer holiday, just the two of us?”

“Exactly. Must remember to pack my swimming trunks and a nice book to read on the beach.”

He snorted and pulled me into a cuddle. “You’re a very silly gnome. Do we need to go see Zanner?”

“No, I don’t think so. We know he needs Karlach for this next bit. We just have to go find her, and bring her back.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Yup. Simple snatch and grab job. Should be done by lunchtime,” I said, grinning, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Ha! You seem very relaxed about this.”

“We knew it was coming. We’ve prepared as much as we could. We have the water distillation equipment. All we need is some supplies from the cook and that locator spell. Oh! And maybe visit Vicar Humbletoes. I’d been meaning to pop in and ask if he has any suggestions about fighting infernals.”

“He doesn’t seem the martial type.”

“That’s more your side, love. No, I meant the cleric side of things. I have the ingredients to make up some of those holy water grenades we were talking about, but he might have some other suggestions.”

Gale was at the desk by the window, his back to us, hunched over a pile of books. He muttered something as we watched, wrote in his notebook, and opened another book.

I frowned, feeling a stir of concern. I hadn’t checked in on him properly for a while, as though his struggles had magically disappeared with the death of the nether brain. Bad idea. *Bad*. When we got back from Avernus, I had to make time in my schedule for sitting down with Gale and talking him through whatever was happening. For now, though... hells. So many competing responsibilities, all beating at me, demanding my attention. I put down my pens, ink, and paper.

“Should we disturb him?” Wyll asked, his voice quiet. “I feel bad, interrupting him when he’s concentrating so heavily.”

I thought back to when I was a kid, and my mother was concentrating on an invention. “Hang on. I have an idea.” I went downstairs, pondering the possibility of not having to do this all the time when we moved into our own house – we could have a kettle on the stove! Warm water from the tap! Bliss. But that was a joy to ponder another day. Right now... tea.

Kettle of hot water obtained and a simple concentration-assisting tea brewed, I slipped a mug of tea and a couple of biscuits next to Gale, prompting a muttered thanks as he pored over his tomes.

“What now?” Wyll asked, watching Gale with fascination, as if he was an exotic zoo exhibit.

“Now we wait, and make another list or two,” I said, sitting down at the low table. “Who do we need to talk to before we leave?”

“Well, obviously, Gale,” Wyll said, counting off on his fingers. “Jaheira and Halsin,” as the big elf himself walked into the rooms.

“Do I hear my name?” he said, a good-natured smile spreading over his face. “Am I in trouble?”

“Tsk,” I said, standing to offer a hug as he knelt to accept it. “Those druids must have been hell to deal with, the way you assume we’re mad at you. No, we were just talking about who we need to tell that we’re off to Avernus. We have a prototype for Karlach.”

“That’s wonderful!” he exclaimed, and I saw his shoulders relax as he drew away from me. “Silvanus’s silver branch, I needed some good news.”

“Rough day at the temple?” I asked.

“And getting rougher,” he said, nodding, his face relaxing into sombre lines. “And often, healers can’t help as much as we’d like. So you’re going to the hells? What do you plan to do with the shop?”

“Close it for the time being,” I said with a shrug, though my heart gave a pang at the thought. “I don’t like the idea, but they coped without me before. I can’t be everywhere for everyone.”

“Would you... consider letting me take over for you, in the meantime?” Halsin asked, his voice hesitant. “I wouldn’t ask, but you don’t seem to want it closed...”

“That would be perfect,” I said with a rush of gratitude. “You’re sure the temple can spare you?”

He nodded. “The rush has slowed,” he said. “We’ve been treating minor injuries and malnutrition more than anything life-threatening. Their priests and clerics can handle those cases. I can do more, and be more effective, from your shop.”

“Thank you. I’ll write up a notice to let people know to expect you,” I said. “And I’ll leave the key on your bunk when we go. I need to stop by there first. Anything you need? There’s a stash of gold in one of the pot plants if you run low.”

Gale slammed a book shut. “By Mystra’s garter, may your spine break and your pages all be dog-eared! Wretched thing!” He picked up the mug of tea and drained it, then slammed it down too.

“Did Gale just curse a *book*?” Wyll whispered, as Halsin beat a strategic retreat. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“An ill omen,” I said. “Gale, can we help?”

“Not unless you’re an expert in modulating Zakharan strings with Pluma harmonics,” he snapped, turning around, his expression turning sheepish as he saw our faces. “Oh. My apologies. I don’t mean to be abrupt.”

“We understand you’re under pressure,” Wyll said. “And we’re sorry to add to it. Is there anyone who could help you with this?”

Gale shook his head, his mouth turning down. “No one I’d trust, bar Elminster perhaps, even if they had the education and skill,” he said. “We wizards are an ambitious lot. If I put the word out that I’m recovering the Crown of Karsus – well. Let’s just say, the whole Absolute mess would look like a minor kerfuffle in comparison.”

“Alright,” I said, thinking about it. “Anything we can do to help with other things when we get back? Make sure you can focus where you need to without worrying about other problems?”

“Hmm. Could be. I’ll consider it. Wait. When you get back? Where are you going?”

I took a deep breath. Gale had some traits in common with my mother. Like taking a few moments to catch up with a conversation when his head was stuck in a puzzle. “Avernus,” I said. “Remember? Karlach? Shadowheart? Heart go boom?”

“Hmm. I relate to *that*,” he said. “You’re leaving soon? You’ll want that spell you asked for?”

My heart sank. “You haven’t had time to make it?”

“No, no,” he said, turning back to the desk and shuffling through a drawer. “Now where on Toril... ah!” He held out a small golden disc, with two stones in the centre: one red, one black. “The stones stand for Karlach and Shadowheart. Attuning those without their spirits in the room was a tricky business, let me tell you! You wouldn’t have had a hope without a preeminent wizard at your disposal.”

“And we’re fulsomely grateful,” Wyll cut in. “We know you have urgent work to do.”

Gale nodded, looking mollified. “Now, if I’ve calculated correctly, when you get to Avernus, these stones will move to show you Karlach and Shadowheart’s location. Or locations, if they’ve been separated. I based the distance indicator on time, rather than geography, thanks to Wyll’s guidance on how things move around. This way, you have a rough estimate of how much time it might take you to move to their location, interruptions aside.”

“And if you haven’t calculated correctly?” I asked?

He shrugged. “Then you come back, and we try something else, I suppose. Do you need anything else of me?”

“No, this is wonderful. Gale... thank you,” I said, reaching out to him.

His face softened for the first time that day, and he knelt to gather me into a tight hug. “I’ve been lost in my own world. But I’ll miss you. Both of you,” he said, glancing up at Wyll. “Best of luck. Bring them home. Soon.” He stood to hug Wyll.

“Thanks – I think we might need the luck.”

“Next on the list?” Wyll asked when we got outside.

“You’re the duke incumbent,” I said, grinning up at him. “Shouldn’t you be giving the orders?”

“Ha! To you? I wouldn’t dare.”

I snorted.

“I did have an idea, though. There are a couple of furniture stores we could stop by after we talk to the vicar and Father. Maybe, if we can decide on a style to use, Father or Florrick could shop for us whilst we holiday in warmer climes.”

“You should write travel brochures for the hells. Mizora really missed an opportunity, using you as a monster hunter.”

Wyll poked me in the shoulder. “Meanie.”

“I’m uncomfortable with the idea of someone else shopping for me, but I also have no idea what I’m doing. Surely they’re too busy, though?”

“Too busy for his only son? No, I think Father will love the idea.”

I examined the unease curdling my stomach, and recognised an old pattern. Too much generosity equalled a debt waiting to be called in, and I wouldn’t get a choice in how I paid it. Except this was a family member, more or less. One who’d never shown signs of doing any such thing. And, if that wasn’t enough reassurance... who owed us his life anyway. As did Florrick. Maybe it wasn’t the healthiest rationale, but it was one I could accept here and now, without doing much work on myself.

“Then I think it’s a great idea,” I said. “As long as the person shopping agrees.”

A bright smile blossomed on Wyll’s face. “I thought you’d need convincing.”

“I’m trying to mend my ways.”

He pulled me into a quick sideways hug. “I appreciate the effort, darling. I know this is all strange to you, and you’ve been wonderful.”

“Hmm. I’m glad you think so.”

Vicar Humbletoes welcomed us into the Stormshore Tabernacle with tea and fruit.

“It’s good to see you,” I said, throwing my arms around him, sighing in happiness as he relaxed against my shoulder for a moment. “You know, I’ve been horribly remiss. What would you like me to call you? Your full title? Another name?”

“The role does tend to subsume the person,” he said. “Would you believe my given name was Glint?”

I tried to hide my giggle in a cough. “Named after Three-Eyes? And you became a – cleric? A guardian, I think you said?”

He eyed me, a smile breaking through his attempt at a stern look. “You remind me of my childhood,” he said. “Yes, my position is not quite a cleric as you’d understand it, although I

have been imbued with some of the same powers, so that I can carry out my work here. Serving many gods, all the gods... it's not a task many relish."

"I can imagine it becomes confusing at times."

He frowned, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "Not so much confusing as lonely, perhaps. I must give equally to all. Serve all without bias or neglect. I can't develop a relationship with a god, as you can with yours."

I snorted. "Apparently Lathander enjoys a relationship full of neglect and disrespect."

"Well, he does enjoy people who don't take life too seriously. Perhaps that *is* your appeal to him."

"Hmm. So, would you rather I call you Glint? I admit, it rather suits you, your infamous namesake notwithstanding. Those little glimmers of humour and warmth that come through even when you're trying to be chilly and formal."

"Hmmp. But yes."

"So. Glint. While it's lovely to see you for yourself..."

"... You came here because you need something?"

"Don't we always?" Wyll asked.

"Hmm. Fair. What is it?"

"Advice on fighting infernals in Avernus, if you have any to offer," I said.

He stared at me, eyes wide, mouth open.

"Uhh..."

"Fighting *in* the hells," he said weakly. "That's... that's what you're planning?"

"And soon," I said. "I have an idea for holy water mixed with lunar caustic. I thought it might hurt devils more than holy water or silver on their own. Especially if I get the lunar caustic blessed by a friendly cleric. Say, of Selune, or failing that, an oddly generalist guardian of a tabernacle?"

"In the *hells*."

"You seem perplexed by this."

He blinked. "I suppose I shouldn't be. I did meet you in the middle of you fighting the Dead Three's Chosen. I just assumed that was an eventful few months for you, though."

Wyll burst into laughter.

"So can you help?" I asked, trying to get back to my original request.

“Um. Right. Infernals. Blessed weapons, holy water, protection against evil spells. I assume you have all that under control?” He quirked an eyebrow at me, clearly trying to regain his composure.

“I have the morningstar you lent me, and the Blood of Lathander. And Halsin taught me protection spells.”

“The Sacred Star? That should be perfect. No one knows exactly which god sanctified the thing – personally, I suspect one of the trickster gods – but it really doesn’t like infernals.”

“Will it attract devils once we’re there?”

“Shouldn’t do. From what I’ve read in cleric diaries and reports, spells can absolutely set off some sort of alarm for devils in the hells. But magical and holy weapons usually slide through, unless you’re blasting Daylight spells out of them or something of the sort.”

“Oh. That’s good to hear,” Wyll said, sitting forward. “I thought the Blood of Lathander would probably attract them. Not that I’ve ever tried to take anything of the sort into the hells. My ex-patron,” his mouth twisted, “would have used my intestines for lingerie if I’d dared such an affront.”

“Oh,” Glint said, his eyes unfocusing as he looked at Wyll. “My. Your aura *has* changed, hasn’t it? How marvellous. Congratulations are in order, yes?”

“Most definitely.”

“Then you have mine, wholeheartedly.”

“My thanks.”

“As to your question: I’m not sure I have anything new to offer you. Your grenades sound like the most innovative thing to enter the hells in the last century. Usually people take the classics: holy water, blessed weapons, clerics. Not many even know about infernals and their dislike of silver. Though you do have an inside source, I’ll grant. Hmm. You could try silver blades, but they can be more trouble than they’re worth. They tarnish so fast in most of the hells.”

“Darn. Well, it was worth a try. Do you think the grenades will work, then?”

“They should! Lunar caustic on a devil? As long as you’re happy to make them mad, it’s perfect. I haven’t had any Selunite clerics visit the tabernacle recently, but if you bring the caustic by, we can make an offering to Selune and see if she’ll bless it for you.”

“Not for you?”

“Goodness, no. That way lies relationship and preferential treatment, you see.”

“Father,” Wyll said, walking into Ulder’s office.

“Wyll!” Ulder said, his face lighting up. He stood, walked around his desk to grab Wyll around the shoulders in a single-armed hug, clapping him on the back.

I suppressed a smile at the sight, and Wyll’s clear pleased shock. To see their reconciliation gaining ground... it gave me hope for our world, somehow.

“We come bearing news,” I said into the slightly awkward silence.

“Hmm. When do you not? You two have a knack for happenings.”

“Zanner did it. They have a prototype. We need to go to Avernus,” Wyll said.

I didn’t miss the infinitesimal shudder that ran through Ulder. “You can’t send someone?”

“This is our friend; our responsibility,” he said firmly. “We need to go. And soon.”

Ulder sighed. “I can’t argue with that, though I wish it weren’t so. I can hardly cavil when you prove yourself the man that I raised you to be, and more. Very well. What do you need? Supplies? Troops?”

Wyll shook his head. “We talked it through; we’re probably better going alone, just the two of us. We’ll attract less attention that way. You know how territorial devils can get. We won’t seem like an invasion force, just travellers.”

“And if you’re killed? What then for the Gate?”

“This city is larger than any of us,” I said. “Ulder, we’ll do our best. But this is a risk we think we need to take. Even if you’ve only just found your son again.”

His lips compressed in a thin line. Not in anger, I suspected – more an attempt to avoid showing emotion he considered unseemly.

“We do have a favour to ask, though, if you’re amenable,” Wyll said, his voice uncertain. I suspected he only saw the curtain draw across his father’s face, and failed to grasp the reason behind it. I took his hand in an attempt to silently communicate love and reassurance.

“What?” Ulder asked in clipped tones.

“If you or Florrick have the time and patience... we need to furnish our new house. If you could do that while we were gone, it would be so helpful.”

Ulder’s face softened, his eyes glistening. “It would be a great pleasure. Will you give me some suggestions on style to work with?”

Wyll squeezed my hand. “Our thanks. We’ll take a quick look through some stores later and take notes on anything we agree on.”

“Here’s the first one,” Wyll said, tugging on my hand. He led me toward an ordinary-looking townhouse, just a small brass plate outside indicating that it might be anything but another

patriar residence.

I suppressed the dread rising in the pit of my stomach and followed him. I wasn't a kid anymore, getting kicked out of shops for being too poorly dressed. I was a somewhat-respected member of the community, lover of the son of the ruler of the city. I could do this.

"Oh dear. Are you lost, darlings? There's a city guard post just down the road a ways, and a gate down to the lower city a few blocks further down. You might want to get a move on; dusk can fall quickly at this time of year, you know." The server's words were kind, but her demeanour was anything but. She wanted us out, and fast – before any of her *real* clientele caught sight of us.

"My mistake," Wyll said, his voice cool. "My father, the Grand Duke, recommended this store. At least I thought this was the name he gave. It must have been some other store, though, because he specifically said that the staff were lovely and very welcoming. Come on, darling. Let's go find that *good* shop." He turned, and we started walking toward the door.

"Wait – my most sincere apologies, Saer Ravengard! I haven't seen your father in here for a while; I didn't recognise you. You're correct, I was most uncouth to suggest you had simply lost your way."

Wyll nodded curtly. "You were. Do you have any associates who are a little more..." his eyes swept up and down her, assessing, his top lip lifting ever so slightly, "... discerning?"

The woman's chin came up and her lips pursed, but she nodded, deferential even as her jaw clenched. "Of course, saer. I'll get my colleague to assist you. Right away." She turned and strode away, her shoes clumping on the wooden floorboards.

"Oof," I whispered, leaning against Wyll. "Well handled, love."

"It's not my first experience in dealing with staff that got a little too feisty. I don't hold with all that *they should know their place* nonsense, but arseholes are arseholes, and they need to be treated accordingly."

"Well said."

"Saer Ravengard! So lovely to see you in our establishment! Rumour has it you've taken lodgings in the upper city?" A young man strode forward, offering a bow to Wyll and a shallower one to me. "My apologies, saer," he said, looking at me, "you have me at a loss, I fear."

"I'm Dash," I said, nodding, prepared to be friendly. "And you are?"

"Tom," he said, smiling and gesturing us to move deeper into the store. It was small and packed with a confusing array of furniture, from lounges and coffee tables to stools and dining chairs. But I couldn't see any bedroom furniture. "Parlour here. Outdoor in the back. Kitchen and dining over there. Bedroom and bathroom upstairs. What are you looking for today?"

“We’re on a scouting mission, just figuring out what we like,” Wyll said. “If we find any pieces we especially like, I’ll let Father know. Otherwise, we’ll just talk a lot and make notes.”

“Certainly! Do you have anything in mind?”

“Do you have anything gnomish? Or from Calimshan?” I asked. Calimshan’s traditional furniture tended to be set low to the ground to catch the breezes, making it better for my height than most of this city’s idea of hard furnishings.

“Oh,” he said, grimacing a little. “Gnomish, I’m afraid not. There’s not much call for it here. But Calimshan pieces... hmm. I think a shipment came in a few months ago that you might like.”

The slight crease in Wyll’s brow eased when he saw the low table and low-slung chairs. “Ahh! I’m starting to understand the appeal,” he said, amusement threading through his voice. “I’m not sure the orange woodgrain would work well with the basalt walls, though.”

“Mmm. Could we have things restrained? What might work?”

“You’ve taken the old Dlusker place, then?”

I nodded.

“Hmm... lighting is quite variable there. A very light stain might work well, perhaps even a lightener. With jewel tones to add depth to the dramatic contrast. Maybe the occasional piece in a very dark stain.”

I frowned slightly, trying to picture it. “I think I like it,” I said slowly. “Do you have any pieces like that? A very light colour with jewel tones? I’d like to see them. What do you think, love?”

“I love jewel tones,” he said, flashing me a quick smile. “That could work.”

Once we’d seen some examples of style and colour combinations, we headed for the exit.

“What do you think?” Wyll asked outside. “It hadn’t occurred to me that you’d want lower furniture, sorry. Do the Gondians make furniture, perhaps? Can we consult them?”

“For themselves, maybe,” I said with a shrug. “But engineers aren’t well-known for tending to their own comfort. I think I’d rather work with this shop. As long as we ensure that the commission goes to Tom, not that horrible woman who first spoke to us. Will you be alright with lower furniture, though? It feels a little selfish of me.”

“She’s going to be spitting snakes,” Wyll said, a hint of fierce satisfaction in his eyes. “And of course. My knees work just fine. We might need other solutions when I’m old and creaky, but hopefully that’s a while off yet.”

“I love you,” I said, taking his hand again, kissing it while we walked. “I feel you’re making a lot of concessions for me.”

“Says the man willing to take on ruling the entire city if he’s by my side,” Wyll said. “If I can make sure you’re comfortable and happy while we do this, then by all the hells, I will.”

“You leave me in no doubt of your love,” I said, my nose prickling. “Gods. You’re going to make me cry, you mawkish man.”

“Pfft. You started it.”

After lunch, we stood on the roof of the Elfsong, packs on our backs. Wyll wore his trusty rapier and a bandolier of my homemade grenades in small glass bottles; I wore the Sacred Star and Blood of Lathander.

“Come here,” I said, tugging on his hand.

Wyll knelt in front of me, his face solemn.

“I love you,” I said. “I don’t know what will happen there. I don’t know if the hells will twist us. But hold to that. I’ll always love you. To the depths of the hells, to the heights of the heavens. My heart is yours, Schatzi.”

Tears shone in his eye. “I’m yours, darling. I’ll be your stars in there. I promise.”

“No matter how dark it is, you’ll always be my stars.” I smiled and touched my fingers to his cheek, sliding them over the ridge that ran down his cheekbone.

He pulled me into a tight hug, and I relaxed against him, my arms around his shoulders, my cheek against his neck, his horn brushing against my hair. “You’re alright?” he asked softly as he let me go and stood.

I nodded. “We can do this.” My stomach was churning now that the reality was upon us. Every time we went to a new place, it seemed, I went down like a ship of bricks. We couldn’t afford that now. If I did, though... well, Wyll had been my strength before. Doubtless he would be again.

Wyll turned away to throw something to the ground, and a portal opened in the air in front of him. A wash of hot, dry air rushed out, with a strange buzzing sound. “Ready to go kick some devilish arse?” he asked with a grin.

I smiled back, pushing down the uncertainty and fear. Now was the time for confidence, and by the gods, that’s what I was going to give out. I checked the pouch at my waist for the locator. I had it. “Let’s go, sweetheart.” I held out a hand, and when he took it, we jumped through the portal together.

“Oh, *shit*,” Wyll said, staggering.

I drew closer and put an arm around his hips to steady him, staring at the alien landscape all around us. Black, jagged rocks underfoot, shards littering the surface, sharp as knives. The sky was a dark, sullen red, streaked with black. It reminded me uncomfortably of a time I’d been caught in a bushfire – it had seemed like the entire world had turned that same red

colour, with the black smoke invading everything. The air was harsh, hot, and sulphurous, burning my lungs just a little with every breath. Just enough to remind me where I was, and that it would only get worse.

“Are you alright, love?” I asked.

I felt Wyll sway, and turned just in time to ease him to the ground as he swooned.

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