

You are both sitting on her second-floor balcony, the one connected to her lavish bedroom with the lace curtains and wooden blinders on double-doors. You, outstretched on a lounging chair made for sunbathing but never used as such; Nathanya leaning against the stone rails of her estate, overlooking her backyard, ate the half-dismantled pergola in the patio. Grodderick's gone home an hour ago - he left just as you arrived, letting you take over in keeping the woman's desperate company, listening to her embellished stories, laughing at her jokes, drinking her "wine".

She's telling you of things that happened centuries ago, but that she somehow recalls in minute detail. You smile politely, taping your fingernails on the stem of your glass, adjusting the seat's velvety cushion behind your neck. Truth is, her stories do enthrall you, they feel like experiences had by a third, long-gone friend whom she at times belittles, at times deifies. Most puzzling is it to wonder how she feels about herself right this moment; all you see are smiles and grand displays of wealth, her makeup is always done when you visit - and yet she doesn't like you in *that* way - she wants you around for some second, secret reason.

Nathanya's finished telling you about a man who used to slip blood-stained love letters through a crack in the window of her home (not this one, of course; she speaks of far more modest days), recounting how she fell in love with the attention, the romanticism of the act, but how bored she grew after a short few months. She locked the man in his basement, ransacked the home and eventually left, realizing she planned on living long enough to find plenty more like him.

And then she pauses for a little too long, something she often does after finishing a long-winded anecdote - leaves it hanging, stares, a smirk on her face like there was a punchline you didn't get. You return it, you laugh, and change the subject..

"Tanya, do you know what I can't stop thinking about?"

She leans away from the balustrade and peers back with over-performed curiosity. You shake your head, somber.

"Those poor souls at the compound."

"*The what?*"

"The blood house, the drow's vampire farm, all of the poor spawn."

"Oh, that's right."

"My guts just *tangle up* imagining it. To think the drow will profit off their suffering this way - and they got *you* to back them - *unbeknownst to yourself*, of course."

Nathanya has these thin painted lips that stretch and contort against a grayish face so starkly, so clearly, you are always looking out for a twitch; but her expressions just transition from one to the next, smoothly and without hiccup. A small, soft little smile, wandering doll-like eyes. "Hardly my first foray into bad business. I wouldn't lose any sleep about it."

She's been finished with her drink for over half an hour, and yet holds onto the glass between her fingertips as she parades around the balcony like the glamorous star of a play. She is so- "Unless your indignant speech is actually leading into something tangible, Astarion."

Two days ago you returned from yet another brief expedition into the Underdark. Your lover gave strong and yet little reason as to why it was in his interest to track down the young, stuck-up drow who led you into Dalyria's house-of-horrors in the first place. You tagged along not because you agreed, but because the thought of him being out of your sight for so long, whilst so far, made your heart feel a few ounces heavier. Your little rag-tag crew of scoundrels returned with a pet-gnome in your backpack, a small collection of goods to trade and the occasional zaps still shooting through your nerves - better loot than a boy-drow, actually - you can't fit those in a bag or pawn them off for gold. Not easily, anyways.

You had sex again that night, the passionate and yet lazy kind that begins and ends on the same corner of the bed, and didn't tire either of you enough to be followed by sleep. While the moon was still up in the sky, the drow sat on the windowsill and sheepishly inquired about your distant childhood memories - you humored him, it was sweet to see how thinly he veiled his own concerns - still shaken by the little the let the gnome speak about his own, forgotten origins. You were tempted to tease him about it, but your mind was elsewhere.

You recounted memories of getting fit for frilly dresses and tiny leather shoes as a young elf, woolen ear-mitten in winter and knots getting combed out of your hair in summer - as well as nasty things your mother used to say to your father after she had had her drink, words that stuck with you through centuries while so much more of importance had been lost. She always spoke coherently, it was her eyes that gave the inebriation away; Irennor was no different.

And much like it had been with your mother, the drunk's words had stuck with you with shocking clarity. You went over them again and again; *Menzoberranzan*. *Lothanna*. Contractual obligations and noses that had been turned, something about manpower and sources of labour. You could start to put a picture together, and much like the child you once were, you now felt the call of mischief.

It had been a night much like this one, a blue wash over everything, crickets playing their instruments, you interrupted your whimsical tales of toddlerhood and parental *sadsongs* to crawl out of bed, kneel by your lover's lap, grabbing and shaking him by the arm - this wide grin cut through your face as you gasped with delight "*I've just had the funniest of ideas*" you had said, followed by a proposition that had you both cackling by the end - mostly sincere, with intentions slightly concealed and details brushed over.

Nathanya received a different version of the same pitch, much more pragmatic, and yet vague - she wouldn't need to be present at all, only to lend you one of her tricks - and all it took was

some doe-eyeing and *pretty-pleases* before her stern look melted back into a grin. “*Oh, fine, what’s the harm*” was all that she said about it. You called her a doll and finished up your drink.