

ANE - CHAPTER 23 PREVIEW.

Dust and sand crunches beneath the soles of your boots, you are inside a mold-reeking home surrounded by grey, bark walls from each side. An empty space the size of a living room barren of furniture and few belongings, save for the thin wooden pillars holding up the second floor - hand carved and cracked dry. There is just a set of old chairs arranged haphazardly around a small coffee table, dirty bowls and cutlery piled on top. You spot a darkened stain on the uneven planks that make out the floor, days old blood completely supped by the brittle wood.

Before you, a stocky duergar woman with her white hair cropped short, a scar makes a dent into her top lip and disappears into her nose, one of her nostrils gone. Her simple clothes seem to have been stitched back together again and again, whites long turned yellow, the buckles on her overalls don't match. She makes a wet noise with her mouth and hisses "*You just missed him. Your friends come pick him up already.*"

"What friends?"

Your "friends" are outside, both half-elf and vampire standing about cross-armed and bored. Those are the only two you got.

"Short drow with a whiny voice and his lanky guard dog. With the braids in his hair." Her throat rasps, hand floats up to pat her prickly scalp. The duergar's tone falters here, pale little eyes wandering away as irritation gives way to a speck of bitterness. "They killed my shitcunt husband. That's what I get for liking them stupid."

You are as indifferent to her loss. The woman herself seems to lament the absence of an extra pair of hands more than she does a lover. You're still half-distracted by that inconspicuous stain. "Did they take him alive?"

"He was still kicking on their way out the gates." She shrugs, "After that? I couldn't tell you."

"Where did they take him?"

"Why you think I know? *Drow* trot in and out of here all the time. I don't ever talk to the sods, unless I have to."

In the same way that she feels obligated to humour you, this instant. You realise that had you been anyone else at all - *anything* else - she wouldn't be so ready to entertain your questions. Perhaps she's a little afraid that you'll be reuniting her with her husband, if her answers prove unsatisfactory. You hiss a sigh through your teeth, the exhale dying out slowly to uncomfortable silence, you give her one more shot. "Is there anyone around here that might be of *more* help?"

The widow shrugs her shoulders again with feigned indifference. "*Any other of the murkers in here*, I guess. Try the old bellend up the road." She flicks the cleaning rag in her hand vaguely towards the east "Irennor's a big gossip - if you manage to get him in the sweet spot between stuck-up twat and blackout, that is."

You take her word for it, stepping outside to the plain exterior of the cabin, a grainy residue transfers from the door and onto your hands as you pull it shut behind you. From the corners of your eyes you catch the silent stares of your aforementioned friends - the duergar had never been inviting enough for Astarion to venture inside, and Shadowheart hung back of her own accord. "Well?" she asks, dusting off the shoulder of her jacket after pulling away from the porch wall. You grunt out Irrenor's name - It's only then that you realise how it rings somewhat familiar to you; she catches you in your pause.

Astarion is much less invested in your insight, he's standing off to the side, digits rubbing circles into his eyelids. Wherever you go next, he simply trudges after in silence.

When you shared your intentions of descending down here again, you never implied that you required company to do it - the girl jumped at the opportunity anyways, and at once, as if she had been struggling with some conflict of her own and been waiting for the excuse all along - Astarion had stood baffled in the boarding house's corridor, *ah*-ing and *uh*-ing as he shot his gaze between the two of you and gestured helplessly. When it came time for him to lend you the pink prism that would get you here, he protested, and you couldn't tell whether he did not want *you* to go, or rather feared parting from the stone. Either way, you gave him the opportunity to stay behind, which Astarion did not take.

"And who would that be?" Asked the half-elf.

"Another drow. Someone who sees a lot of the comings and goings."

"Is he nearby?"

"Yes. Lives here."

Shadowheart's eyes narrow. She repeats, "He lives **here**?"

The small village is a decrepit, sorry little island floating over chasms. Dull coloured rock and dust with little cabins scattered about, similar in hue and nearly blending into the environment - there *are* drow around, you see them peeking out of large purple tents set up a respectable distance from the gnomes and dark dwarves who peruse the slim dirt road that cuts across the one-to-two bedroom homes. They are here on business; high-level staff at the nearby postal office, the owners of slaves who work in it, or perhaps raiders on their way somewhere else. You look over the girl's head, east of the main and only road. "Somewhere up there, she said to look for a home with a yard."

Shadowheart followed your gaze with suspicion. She expects to see a structure out of place among the poverty-stricken homes - a small manor or more lavish building that had gone unnoticed somehow. Instead, she sees more of the same. You take off after the duergar's vague advice, every little grey head in your way turning as you do, some even pausing their duties to stare. An impressively small gnome child climbs over a palette of water barrels, eager to take a better look at you and your companions. It raises a little pointing finger in Astarion's direction and mumbles something unintelligible, you catch the gloved arm of the child's mother sticking out of a broken window to shush and urge it inside right as you walk around the shed.

It seems that at sound point, there had been a rock-slide that rendered part of the village unlivable. Broken stone and mud-turned-clay lies in a pile that grows in size as it reaches the cavernous walls - many dozen metres above there is a darkened hole from where it all originated, you can't tell whether its occurrence was natural, monstrous, or man-made. Either way, whatever wasn't swallowed by the debris laid abandoned, save for one house that sat fortunate atop a small elevation. You see something moving in front of it - a red, wet blob across a short fence made out of stakes and wire, trembling in place as a squelching sound grows louder the further you step up the gravelled incline.

Previously unseen due to its stature was an elderly gnome standing in the middle of what one could generously call a front-yard. You see the sweat-soaked back of his thick overalls as he hacks away at raw flesh: a creature skinned and mutilated beyond any recognition, the corpse hanging from a rope that had been stretched taut - one end connects to the rock-face to the left of the structure, wrapped tightly around a hook that's been hammered in place, the other is attached to a wooden beam supporting the roof, it trembles ever so slightly every time the small man yanks a piece off of the carcass and dumps it into a tarp that's been stretched over the floor by his feet.

He hears you coming through grunts of exertion and the grinding of a blade past its prime. The gnome turns, small droplets of blood and oil speckled over his short, white beard. He sucks in air to berate you - then stops.

"You found me" He seems shocked, big blue eyes standing in stark contrast to a dark face dragged down by labour and time. A subtle nod follows - it looks like relief. *"That's good."*

You hold still by the outer fence with your hands hanging idly by your sides, taken aback by his familiarity before recognition dawns - for the first time since you can remember, you can tell one gnome apart from the others. This is the bold little man who had approached you on your way back from the compound - the pattern made by the wrinkles around his mouth, the puffy bags under his eyes and droopy earlobes, and as you will soon recall his penchant for asking a lot of questions. *"I'm looking for an 'Irrenor'."*

"What?"

His expression tenses into a much less disarming scowl.

"What for?"

You exhale *"It's none of your concern."*

The gnome scoffs. His temperament quietly rises to indignance before he finally relents. Speaking cold, speaking distant, but you can spot that feeling of defeat. *"He's out."* Either in business or drink, I never know for sure. He won't be back for a bit, either way.

"How long would 'a bit' be?"

He dumps the rusty paring knife by his side, wipes his gloves off on his garments. *"Thirty minutes? Few hours? Can't tell you for sure."*

Your head tilts, eyes wander off. Faced with the prospect of standing around for hours waiting on a blind lead quickly drains your determination; you are beginning to wonder why you care so much about this. You are about to defer to your companions when the gnome adds, a little louder and clearer than he had spoken thus far. "You can come wait inside, if you like."

Your heel turns in the gravel and eyes dart up towards the drow's home - the two-floor abode is smaller than the duergar's hostel, but slightly larger than the barely-pieced together cabins you had walked past on your way here; and no more inviting than either. Made of the same crumbling materials and shaped into an uninspired box, taller than it is wide. You think back to Shadowheart's early suspicion - it does indeed lack all of the dignity most drow feel so entitled to. You aren't sure what to make of it, or of Irrenor, for that matter.

You tell him you'll pass. That it doesn't matter. You hear Astarion let out a sigh of relief at the same time that the gnome begins to plead - as gruff as he may sound as he does it. "*Hang on a second*, for fuck's sake-

"Gimme the decency of a brief chat, at least."

Behind you, the cleric stammers out a few uncertain syllables before she is able to string a sentence together, stepping forth and leaning into you with her neck, whispering, "I'm sorry, do you know each other?"

You look back at her with a sincere look of confusion that mirrors her own. The gnome continues. "Just let me ask you a couple more questions - I know you hate those, but just humour me, will you?"

You mumble back to her. "*I don't remember.*" The half-elf purses her lips and says nothing else. From your peripheral you catch Astarion's grouchy stare softened into curiosity.

The gnome has pulled his butchering gloves off and walked up to the fence, having to look so far up at you that you feel like he may fall backwards. "You're here already, aren't you? So might as well. I can put a kettle on."

The girl murmurs again, a little closer, now asking if you'd like to leave. You are pulled in two directions for a moment too long, and Astarion speaks up, impatient.

"You dragged us all the way down here." He pauses, making sure he's gotten your attention only to then turn away, nonchalant. "*Might as well.*"

Now, you are stepping over the fence one leg at a time while your companions walk the couple of steps around to the opening into the yard - Shadowheart reluctantly making it in last, her brows twisted into a stern look of concern while the pale elf saunters through. You pass the stinking carcass hanging from rope, the gnome covers up the cutlet pile with a corner of the tarp, then skips ahead through the flimsy front door, inviting you in. He asks if you want anything to drink, you turn down the offer.

The base of the home moans. An old, ornate set of table and chairs sits centre of a cramped room - it's curves carved with precision but now scratched and dull, foils of gold accents flaking

off, missing it's former luster. A row of similarly tarnished cabinets surrounds lines one of the wall, formerly pristine and tall feats of carpentry now lowly and corroded, housing artefacts of odd shapes, colours and sizes behind yellowing glass doors. They grab your attention for a moment, have you wondering how anything valuable could survive in a place like this for long before being snatched away by thieves and desperates, but at a quick glance you find that none of it actually retains much of the shine or significance it might have had a long time ago. It's dusty, untouched, yet deified by whoever keeps it in confinement alongside old books and scrolls. The only purpose it serves is making this small room feel even smaller, saved only by the wide pathway in the back, leading into an open kitchen that appears comparatively empty. The gnome disappears into it.

"What's your name again?" you ask.

"*Tourmaline*." He shouts over rattling dishes, the splashing of water, rough hands scrubbing into one another in a tin basin. "You still don't have one?"

You click your tongue "No."

"*Your...*" Tourmaline hesitates "*These folk with you*, do they got names?"

The vampire announces himself as he peruses the trinkets within the cabinet shelves, Shadowheart waits for an uncertain moment before offering a far more modest introduction. You hear the gnome repeat her name under his breath, remark it's peculiar sound, before returning and crawling up onto a chair. He gestures to the one across and begrudgingly sit on it's flat, moldy cushion. Without need for a similar invitation, Astarion joins to your left. For whatever reason, the cleric chooses to stand by, instead.

You're facing each other, elbows over the table as you loom over the gnome with a placid look on your face - he seems expectant, a curled hand held up as he waits for you to do anything else but stare. Eventually, he gives up. "Where did you... What've you been up to? Where did you settle?"

Such benign questions. "Nothing in particular. And we're often on the move."

"But you must be staying someplace right now."

"*Pran*. For the time being."

"Pran?" His face scrunches up. "I don't know Pran."

You tell him that he's right underneath it. Tourmaline lets out another of his befuddled grunts. "You been on the upperlands?"

"I always have."

The gnome lowers his head, small face remaining twisted in sombre confusion. Whatever eludes him, he eventually moves past. "The elves with you - they're friends of yours?"

"What else would they be?"

"Dowries. Labour. Bed-slaves. Fuck if I know."

Astarion lets out a snort, you just shake your head. "No. No...Besides, they'd make for awful slaves."

"How'd you" his shoulders shake, jaw hangs, he looks around as if looking for answers scribbled mid-air. "end up *up* there? *Who* took you?"

Your insides pull away from your skin. A phantom headache undulates in your skull. "*I don't know.*" Irritation. "I don't know *you*, either."

The gnomes stares. You relent.

"I don't remember very much. Save for this year, It is all gone."

"You're serious?"

"He is. Very much so." Shadowheart's voice brims, you feel her hanging over your shoulder and see the gnome's glare shoot up, burning through his wrinkling brow.

Then his eyes fall, locked to the scuffed surface of the table underneath his bushy chin.

"Huh.

"Must've hit your head pretty bad."

You don't reply. He continues, a little more solemn than before. "You doing better now?"

"'Better'? In relation to what?"

Behind his stern look, Tourmaline seems to strain. The sweat on his bald head reflects a dim, icy light coming from the outside as his face sinks, eyes ridden with broken blood vessels being swallowed up by his saggy lids. Astarion intrudes into the silence just as the gnome's morose expression had started to get under your skin. "He's doing just fine." The vampire allays, almost cheerful. Underneath the table, you feel his foot brush against your shin. "Few loose screws aside, he's been well taken care of."

The gnome acknowledges him with little more than a reluctant grunt, the grace and familiarity he seems to extend to you completely lacking towards either of your companions. He falls silent again, small hands joined atop the table by the fingertips.

His dry lips smack together, mulling over each word

"I found you years ago. Underneath a honeybell cap."

You say nothing-

"Well - my misses did. You were half her size back then."

And you stare him down. Nothing you do dissuades Tourmaline's words from continuing to pour.

“And then one day you was gone. Thought you died. Or worse.

“I just wanted to know what happened.”

But I guess I can't, now. You scoff, watching from your peripheral as a grin cracks in Astarion's face, he coos quietly, amused.

The overwhelming gap in your memory left plenty of room for the most outrageous of possibilities - all of those who could have offered to fill them had been felled by no one else's hand but your own. You lack curiosity, no, you *abhor it*. Whatever they could have told you would have done you no good, as proven by the little they *did*. You aren't burdened by the actions of your past, you tell yourself. They weren't your own - but someone else's facsimile that may or may not stare back within every mirror. You don't know. You can't tell. You just see yourself, not that you know much about him either.

And the further back in time you go, the darker it gets. You hadn't even considered you didn't simply snap into existence casting a shadow as large as the one you do now. Fully capable of speech. Fully capable of thought.

And to imagine yourself small - smaller than a gnome - seems like pure, unadulterated fantasy. This man is desperate for a closure that you can't offer him.

“Whatever you found - whoever you found - it wasn't me.”

“Yes *It was*.” He raises his voice and snaps a finger in your direction “I *know* it was. I brought up enough kids to know - seen the shitty little lumps fill out into men over and over again. Your nose is the same and - Your eyes, never seen drow with eyes like that. *You was a big baby* - skinny, but your bones were big - you had these bony shoulders that jutted out, I remember -”

“Well, I don't.” Your dismissiveness only emboldens the gnome, he slams a fist down, juts his body out as if he's moments from jumping down your throat.

“You don't remember jackshit. So listen to me.”

Then, he deflates, slowly slumping back into his chair.

You pause, take in the sight of the half-man before you, disarmed by the moment into letting go of the reins of your mind - there is a remnant of something that happens when you look at him, but you don't know what it is. If it's real. If you're tricking yourself into feeling it because you like it, telling yourself that you shouldn't.

“I just wanna know what became of you. Then you can disappear for another twenty years for all I care.”

You have the answer, but it's not the one that he wants. For the first time in months, you are tempted to give him the truth that you hold so close to your chest - the horror of your bloody ancestry would stomp out his fire for good, and leave the gnome with nothing to reminisce upon

besides the mistake he made in not squishing your soft little skull under his foot when could. *Perhaps it would be a kindness*, to reassure him he had nothing to mourn.

His fondness for whatever it is you used to be puts your guts in a tangle. You begin to resent him for putting the very idea in your head: the picture of a bony-shouldered babe that had to be coddled and fed.

"He is the unsung hero of the sword coast. Hopefully that's impressive enough for you." Astarion boasts, you freeze. "I was there too, of course - if I may extend myself a little of that credit."

You watch the complacency in his face with near mesmer. While what he says may be true, it feels like a joke when it hits your eardrums. He acknowledges your silent pleas to stop with a look, and pointedly ignores them. You can't puzzle together his intentions at all in this moment

Tourmaline asks the vampire what he means and Astarion begins to casually catalogue a list of lunacies while rolling his wrist. "The mindflyer upheaval, the absolutist debacle, *the giant hovering brain trying to take over the world* - I supposed you missed the show, but certainly you've heard about it."

"He killed it. No, he *trouced it*. You **must** have heard of what happened, did you not?"

"I did."

"Well, then there you have it."

And he crosses his arms, sporting a deflated pout. Tourmaline squints at him like a suspicious parent.

"I don't buy it."

"Fine. Then say he's grown into a murderer, a rapist, and a maniac, if that's more your speed."

You look to him again, feeling as if a point has flown over your head. Shadowheart interjects with a dry laugh, and an assertiveness to rival Astarion's flippancy. "He's telling the truth." she says. "He's"

And she staggers. "He's a good man."

She doesn't believe that part, you can tell. The gnome breaks out of his seeming stupor, he speaks at you, no, he interrogates you. "Is all that true?"

You hesitate. "Yes."

The house settles. The little grey man hunches forward, hand inching towards the empty centre of the table - reaching for the nothing in your general direction where it pauses, then retracts, pulling away from your sight like a spooked critter.

He says thank you, but when you ask him what-for a belligerent voice announces itself outside, turning all of the attention within the room towards the door. It yells out Tourmaline's name and

yet the gnome remains firmly planted in his seat until the rickety door swings open - a sharp funk wafts in just as a sluggish figure stands underneath the wooden frame, a heavy trench coat clinging to long, rail-thin limbs.

A drow of patchy complexion and a round, swollen face. His limp hair was pulled back into a thin braid and you note the short, unsightly white whiskers that sprout out of his chin - skin shone with an alcoholic's sweat, deep-set eyelids glazed with oil that pull his eyelashes into pointed shapes like the legs on a moth. He's stomping the gravel off the soles of his boots one moment, and he is staring aghast at all of you the next, mouth pulled into a silent snarl and lilac eyes wide, swelling with fury. They quickly scan your companions, pausing on you, then harp into the gnome's bald head as he lunges forward with an accusing finger stabbing his direction, screaming in a language you can't understand.

The gnome replies in an accented version of the same, some of the words don't flow as gracefully out of his mouth but he speaks confidently nonetheless, waving his master off with casual glib. As the scene unfolds, Shadowheart tries to lean in to whisper something into your side only for the man to snap at you both like a rabid dog. Tourmaline raises his voice, says something the same way twice until the drow had acknowledged him - he spits back something quick, the gnome replies, managing to bring down his volume one word at a time until the grating screeches arrive at something bearable.

The drow turns towards you again, stops, *watches you*, crazed eyes locked into your own unblinking glare. Then he sludges out a cackle, tonguing out common in a deep voice that doesn't suit his physique. *"We let them get away with far too much nowadays, don't we?"*