

Blood, as various poets and murderers have observed, behaves very differently from water. It is thicker, obviously, and does not flow quite so smoothly. Raindrops falling into it leave tiny pools that float for a moment before dissolving.

On wet cobblestones, blood spreads out in a pool, with edges that soften as it melts into the rain. Should it happen to encounter something - in this case, a broken crate, a wine-colored sleeve, and what appeared to be half an elderly turnip - blood will soak into them, blackening the wood, deepening the red of the fabric, and staining the turnip a rather fetching shade of pink. Astarion Ancunín was in a position to observe all this because he was lying in an alley with his right eye about six inches from the turnip in question. Also, it was *his* blood.

Good shade of pink, he thought absently. You wouldn't want too much of it in an outfit, of course, but it would make a splendid accent. Perhaps as the hidden color in a set of slashed sleeves? Black fabric overall, and then flickers of color as the wearer moved ... no, the pink would still be too much. Embroidery in a waistcoat, perhaps? Silver on black, and then a trace of pink here and there, just enough to provide a flicker of warmth... yes, that might work. He should probably write that down.

Astarion tried to reach for the narrow writing case at his belt. His right arm moved about half an inch before things began to grate together inside, bone against jagged bone, and pain like nothing he'd ever felt before ripped through him in a nauseating bolt.

He shrieked.

Tried to shriek.

His throat insisted he was screaming, but all his ears could pick up was a miserable whimper, like a dog dying in an alley.

Pain has a way of focusing the mind. *Oh, right*, Astarion thought, with remarkable clarity. *I've been beaten senseless. That's why I'm lying here.*

He must have taken a blow to the head at the end of the beating for things to be so foggy. He couldn't be sure, because now that the pain of his broken arm had receded, a number of other pains began fighting for his attention. His lower back was a solid mass of agony, and his left knee was throbbing with a sparkling, almost effervescent pain, as if someone were pouring champagne on the exposed nerve and then hitting it with a hammer.

He was also pretty sure he'd been kicked in the balls.

Right. I remember now.

He'd gone to the Helm & Cloak tavern for a drink after a miserable day on the magistrate's bench. The main case had been three hunters brought up for poaching deer from a noble estate. It was an open-and-shut case. The poachers had freely admitted it, saying that there were plenty of deer, and the nobles obviously weren't using them, so what was the harm? Their legal counsel had first tried frantically to shush them, then tried to argue that they were speaking in the abstract, then finally sat with her head in her hands, her shoulders slumped in despair.

The penalty for poaching was death. Specifically, hanging.

The men's families had crowded the room, their faces set and expressionless as they waited for the verdict. Astarion knew the law backward and forward, knew that they were guilty, but you had to temper justice with mercy occasionally or you got a reputation for following the letter of the law. Then people stopped trying to bribe you, and what was the good of that? He'd done his best. He'd ruled that since it was a first offense, the three poachers would spend a year in prison instead of facing execution.

It was a light sentence! Light! What did they want me to do, pat them on the head and say, "Good job, here's a copper, go buy some candy"?

The men had looked at him silently, and then they had all filed out of the courtroom and left Astarion alone with the bailiffs and a lawyer on the verge of tears.

He went over and put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up, startled, and said, "Your Honor?"

"Come on, my dear," he said. "Let's go get a drink."

Astarion wasn't going to seduce her. Sleeping with the defense was a dreadful breach of ethics, and while that might not have stopped him, it would certainly have stopped her. So he took her to the Helm & Cloak, which was extremely respectable, and let her pour out her sorrows, which were extremely dull. It wasn't the ideal way to spend an evening, but it was an investment in the future. It was always good to have lawyers who liked you. With sufficient time and careful nurturing, they would transform like a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly *who owed you a favor*.

He'd left her there after a few hours and began strolling home with the virtuous feeling of having done a difficult job as well as possible. Then he saw the men.

They were toughs, obviously, wearing the mismatched armor of street bravos. The sort who showed up in his court as boys for picking pockets, then later as men charged with beating someone to death in an alley. There was a little knot of them on the street corner, and they had the bored but expectant air of men waiting for something.

There were a great many street toughs in Baldur's Gate, obviously, and it might not mean anything, but Astarion crossed the street anyway. Young magistrates did not get to be old magistrates by being stupid.

When he looked back, one had crossed the street and was sauntering in his general direction.

Astarion stopped and pretended to examine something in a shop window. The tough also stopped, apparently fascinated by the texture of the stone wall in front of him. When Astarion started moving again, so did he.

This isn't good.

He quickened his pace. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw the tough had been joined by another one. He turned a corner, and there was a third, and by now it was abundantly obvious he was being followed.

Astarion had turned sharply and cut down the nearest alley, hoping to escape. For a moment, he almost thought he had shaken them, but then two shapes materialized at the far end, black cutouts against the dull orange lantern light.

He spun around and saw the three men behind him. They were carrying clubs.

Were they after his coin purse? It was possible, but attacking a magistrate was a good way to suddenly get the Watch very, very interested, an interest that usually involved the attacker ending up in a crow cage. Ordinary street thugs wouldn't risk it.

Families of those found guilty, though...

"It was a merciful ruling," he said, not because he expected that to matter, but because he expected that to matter, but because it *was* merciful, dammit; he'd done the best he could.

Did they *want* to be hanged?

One of the toughs spat on the ground. A voice behind him said, "Not real interested in your rulings, gov."

"Oh," Astarion said, then a club swung toward him, and he lifted his arm to defend himself, and...

Actually, there was no real point in dwelling on the bit after that. It was perhaps best described as an excruciating blur.

And now here he was.

It will be fine, Astarion told himself. Nothing a cleric can't fix. Or a healing potion.

His right arm was clearly no good. He tried his left, watching the wine-colored sleeve shudder, then lift a trembling inch. The lace at the cuff was dyed a brilliant red.

Good color, he thought. Clashes with the wine, though. Might look good with dark purple. He looked at his hand, then wished he hadn't. Two of his fingers were bent at a nauseating angle, but the arm itself seemed mostly intact.

It's fine. Two healing potions will put everything to rights.

He got his hand to the side of his head. His hair was soaked with something. He wished he could believe it was rain. He ran his good fingers gingerly over his skull.

The bone moved, with a crunching noise that he did not exactly hear but that briefly filled up his entire world.

That is... not fine. That is very bad.

I will bathe in healing potions, and everything will go back to normal.

He stopped touching his head. He was fairly certain that there was nothing good to be learned by continuing.

I have to get to a cleric. Or any healer, really. This was not the time to be picky. He'd even let a paladin lay on hands; normally, he insisted on a few drinks first.

To get to a healer, he was going to have to crawl out of the alley.

"Right," he whispered to himself, and tried to get to his knees.

Blinding agony erupted through his chest, and he collapsed back to the cobblestones. It was suddenly very hard to breathe. Or rather, he was breathing, but nothing seemed to be happening.

Oh, I've punctured a lung. I see. That's bad.

It occurred to Astarion that he was dying.

So this is it. After all I've done, after everything, my life is worth less than a dead deer.

He'd never given much thought to his eventual death. Elves didn't have to for at least the first two or three centuries. When you got to five or six hundred, really started getting up there, then you began to think about it. You prepared yourself for the inevitable, which usually meant making peace with your loved ones or doing a lot of research into how to become a lich.

He had never wanted to be a lich. Not one of them had decent hair, and as for their *skin*... oof.

Also, he didn't actually have any loved ones, now that he thought about it. He had friends. Some friends. People who were always glad to see him and then were enormously catty behind his back.

The gods help him, his favorite person in Baldur's Gate was probably Madam Saffron, who ran the best brothel in the city. Not that he had to pay for that sort of thing, but she hosted magnificent salons and was charming company, and then-this was the important bit -they would both go their separate ways and not think about each other again for at least a tenday. Oh, there were more than a few people who were madly in love with him, but that only showed good taste on their part. There hadn't been anything reciprocal since he came to Baldur's Gate.

He wondered if any of those conquests would spring for a revivification. It seemed unlikely. Two of them were poets, for Tymora's sake. They could barely afford wine, let alone dragging someone back from the dead.

Also, they'd have to find me first.

He tried to call for help, but there was hardly any air in his lungs, and what came out was barely a whisper.

"... help me ..."

He had been tasting blood for so long that it no longer really registered, but the coppery taste went suddenly bright and arterial. His mouth filled with it, and he swallowed, feeling it tear up something inside him.

"... please... someone... help me ..."

A long time passed, or not much time at all. Astarion could no longer tell if he was calling for help or simply thinking the words.

"... I don't want to die... please ..."

"Is that so?" someone asked.

His first thought was that it was one of the toughs, come back to finish the job but no, the accent was wrong. This voice was careful and formal and old. He blinked a few times, seeing a blurry man-shaped shadow, but when he tried to turn his head for a better look, he regretted it instantly. "Please," he said through the terrible clangor inside his head. "Please... a healer ..."

"I am a healer... of sorts."

Relief flooded Astarion, a cool wash that prickled against his skin. *Gods above and below, thank you*, he thought.

And then, the tiny nagging magistrate's voice that always made him check the paperwork twice, the one that always looked for the flaw in the witness testimony, whispered, *What does of sorts mean?*

"You're dying," the shadow observed dispassionately.

"... hadn't ... noticed..." It was perhaps not the wisest idea to use one's last breaths to be snide toward the person who could save you, but Astarion was what he was, and it was certainly too late to change now.

The shadow didn't laugh. It knelt in the pool of blood and leaned over him. Cold seemed to radiate from the figure, or perhaps the heat had simply bled out of Astarion and onto the stones of Baldur's Gate.

"I can save you," the shadow said. "For a price."

Astarion wanted to yell that he'd pay anything, he was dying, this was not the time to haggle, but the magistrate in him made him whisper, "... price ... ?"

White teeth flashed in the darkness. Slowly his rescuer swam into focus. White teeth and pale skin and red, red eyes.

"The price," the vampire said gently, "is immortality."

Oh.

It was a lovely evening in the Lower City of Baldur's Gate, which meant that it was foggy but not actually raining, the rats weren't swarming, and nothing untoward with tentacles was coming up from the sea. The ladies, gentlemen, and others of the evening were out in force, the drunks had not yet been turned out of the taverns, and Astarion was slinking through the shadows.

Slinking is a very specific sort of movement, not to be confused with skulking. Snakes slink, of course, as do cats and cat burglars and most assassins. Thugs and bruisers and most people who break heads for money skulk. (Wolves, interestingly enough, can do either.) The difference is in the fluidity of movement. If you see someone skulking, you wonder who's going to get their bones broken, whereas if you see someone slinking, you wonder if they've got any bones at all.

Astarion slunk past the open door of an inn, from which raucous laughter poured into the night. Too busy for his purposes, and too loud. The one on the next street was quieter, but he knew for a fact that it was where the Flaming Fists went to drink, and the mercenary troop tended to get very unhappy when their people went missing and had a habit of turning over rocks to see what was underneath.

As a dweller under metaphorical rocks— albeit a very handsome one, thank you- Astarion was not inclined to stir up trouble.

He kept moving, making a slow circuit past the various inns and taverns. Seven Sins was a tiefling bar, and he'd stand out like an orchid in an abattoir. The Hagstone was perfect- quiet, tastefully appointed, generally full of men hoping to meet other men for conversation and possibly more. It was so perfect, in fact, that he'd taken his last prey from there, and he figured he should give it a few more tendays before he tried again.

He paused thoughtfully across the street from the Toad's Ghost, which was holding what appeared to be a poetry night. That might be promising. You could almost always find someone in the back, watching with glazed politeness and absolutely desperate to leave. Of course, the downside was that you also had to listen to poetry. He made a mental note to come back in an hour if nothing else presented itself.

The fog was thickening, muffling the sounds of footsteps and drunken revelry. It barely stirred as he passed. A member of the Watch went by scarcely an arm's length away, but the light of his own lantern reflected off the mist blinded him to Astarion's presence.

Perhaps I should make use of this fog...

He generally disliked taking people off the street, since bystanders had an inconvenient habit of showing up at just the wrong moment. *Not that any bothered to show up for me when I was bleeding to death in an alley, the curs.* But with fog this thick, who would ever know? He turned south toward the docks and continued his slink.

By the time he reached the Seatower district and the seedy neighborhood surrounding the docks, the fog was so thick that you could no longer cut it with a knife. You'd need an axe at the very least. The lamps that marked the doorways of taverns shone like lighthouses above the street. Voices echoed strangely off buildings, the words stretched and distorted, so that it was nearly impossible to tell where the speakers were or what exactly they were saying.

He paused across the street from the Rat's Run. In many ways, it was a marvelous place, full of drunken sailors no one would miss. Perfect for picking up a stranger and luring them back to Cazador's palace. The owner was a very ... *interesting* lady who owed him a favor and wasn't above indicating when she would like someone killed.

He took out his glasses and put them on his nose, and the mist immediately turned them opaque.

"I am foiled at every turn, it seems," he muttered to himself. The glasses were exceedingly flattering, or so he had been told by numerous people, some of whom had even gone on to live out their natural lifespans. Unable to check in a mirror himself, he had been more than a little worried. But the glasses were also host to a very minor illusion, so small and harmless that anyone who sensed it would chalk it up to vanity. Many people wore such charms - necklaces that magically disguised a double chin, earrings that smoothed a pocked complexion, that sort of thing. (In one memorable case, it was underwear that corrected the spelling of a lower back tattoo, a fact Astarion learned when the underwear came off and he found himself gripping hips marked with the elven characters for bladder infection.

Fortunately, the human man underneath him had taken his shout of laughter for passion, and Astarion had excused himself afterward to go and laugh hysterically in private.)

In Astarion's case, his glasses turned his eyes blue. It was all well and good to have red eyes when the lights were off, but when he went hunting somewhere well lit, the glasses made life rather easier.

He put the glasses away. The Rat's Run would be there tomorrow and the next day and probably for the next hundred years after that. Tonight, he would find a victim in the fog.

Astarion made his way along the waterfront, keeping the buildings tightly to his left. The fog was even thicker here, draped over the docks like a funeral shroud, and the last thing he needed was to misjudge a distance and stumble over the wall. The bay here didn't count as running water, but it was cold and full of all sorts of dreadful things. Fish pissed in it. So did sailors. Astarion really did not want to have to squelch home smelling like an estuary. He passed another spill of light, this time from a bar where a halfling was playing an accordion in front of an audience that did not seem to be made up of accordion aficionados. *I could probably get more applause by walking in, grabbing that bard by the throat, and dragging them out.*

A large piece of dock equipment loomed before him. It looked like a crane, but being nautical, it was probably called a larboard mizzenpoop or something like that. Astarion did not feel the need to clutter up his mind learning names for things on boats. They all sounded like tawdry sex acts, possibly performed with a dead fish.

He leaned against the mizzenpoop for a few moments, letting his eyes adjust to the fog. Small red lanterns gleamed along the street, appearing and disappearing as the breeze off the ocean twisted the fog into strange shapes. *Prostitutes, most likely. Hard to do business if the sailors can't find you.*

Astarion did not hunt prostitutes, even though they *seemed* like they would be easy prey. Not because he was a good man - that was a laugh - but because the ladies of negotiable affection watched out for one another, and they would have rapidly noticed that those who went off with a certain pale elven client did not come back. Immortality was all well and good, but being tossed into the River Chionthar would mean a quick, brutal death by running water. Petras, who had all the brains of an orange tabaxi, *had* attempted to hunt prostitutes when he was newly made. Astarion didn't know what had happened, just that Aurelia had found him in an alley, bloody and shaking and stinking of sewage. It had taken a fair amount of blood to get him healed up and coherent, and he wouldn't talk about it even now.

Truth be told, Astarion had a certain fellow feeling for prostitutes. The number of times he'd used his body to lure a victim into Cazador's clutches probably qualified him for membership in their guild.

As if summoned by the thought, the fog around him flickered red and a voice said, "Hey. You there."

Astarion swung around and saw a red lantern approaching him, held by a slender figure in clothes that might have been revealing if he could see anything but an outline in the mist. He sighed internally.

"Madam, I'm flattered, but I'm afraid that I'm not looking for company this evening."

The prostitute came closer, lifting her lantern. "No. I'm looking for you."

"Me?"

She nodded. She was small and waiflike, and Astarion guessed she had at least three knives on her person. "I've seen you here before. With your red eyes."

"They aren't red," Astarion said reflexively. "It's a reflection."

She stepped close enough that he could see her skeptical expression. Her own eyes were big and brown and could probably look liquid and adoring. At the moment, they looked like frozen agate.

"Ugh. Fine, you've caught me. My grandmother was a drow. A dear woman. Had a remarkable way with a snake-headed whip." Astarion let a faraway look cross his face.

"Grandfather always said that's what attracted him to her in the first place."

The woman snorted. "Save it for the marks." Her accent was pure Waterdeep, and her ears proclaimed some elven ancestry. "I've seen you sometimes with a client I know." She lowered the lantern a little. "Then I don't see them ever again. Funny, isn't it?"

Astarion tensed. He could probably overpower her, and no one would notice in the fog, but all the reasons he didn't hunt prostitutes still held. *I could dump her body in the bay. She'd wash up, and it would look like she just fell off the dock in the fog. Gods, what a waste of effort, though. All that work, and I still wouldn't have anything to bring back to the old man.*

He could practically smell her blood, but he knew better than to dwell on it. Cazador's proscription was clear: *Thou shalt not drink the blood of intelligent beings*. Astarion's victims belonged to the master vampire alone.

He didn't let any of that show in his voice when he drawled, "You make me sound like a dangerous man, Madam. I like it, but wouldn't that make approaching me ... unwise?"

The woman cocked her head. "Three people know I've been looking for you. I don't come back, they know why."

A chill sank into Astarion's gut. "And why, exactly, have you been looking for me? Other than my superb good looks."

"Need your help."

"My help?" Astarion smiled at her, letting just a little too much canine show. "My help doesn't come cheap, my darling."

She gestured over her shoulder with her free hand. "There's a human named Boris who drinks at the Green Eel. He fancies himself a sailor, but he's the son of a merchant captain. Won't have him on the ships anymore. He's a drunk and a bastard."

"Sounds delightful."

The woman's eyes bored into his; she was clearly unconcerned about their red sheen. "He doesn't pay enough to be as rough as he is, and he's getting rougher. He broke Sheena's arm last tenday, and the magistrates won't even hear the case."

"They wouldn't," Astarion said. *He* wouldn't have, when he was a magistrate. If a rich brothel owner had brought a suit, that would be another matter entirely, but a street prostitute's word against a merchant's son? You'd need a signed eyewitness statement from the head of the Temple of Tyr to even get in the courtroom door. "What do you want me to do about it?"

The woman from Waterdeep smiled beatifically at him. "I want you to make him disappear, too."

Astarion loitered outside the Green Eel, feeling a mix of annoyance and admiration. The woman had sewn him up neatly, that was for certain. For over a hundred and fifty years, if anyone had actually paid attention, they'd have been bound to notice a pale, red-eyed, very well-dressed elf whose company seemed curiously fatal. He'd relied on the fact that nobody ever paid attention. It was extremely irritating to discover that someone actually had.

And how many other annoyances am I going to have to dispose of, now that the local streetwalkers have my description? They didn't necessarily know he was a vampire spawn, but they certainly knew he was a predator.

Nine Hells, I might actually have to tell the old bastard I've been spotted and need to lie low. A shudder went up Astarion's spine at the thought. Cazador kept his spawn confined to Szarr Palace unless they were out hunting. When you were kept on a leash like a dog, even a few extra inches felt like freedom.

The door of the Eel swung open, and two men staggered out, laughing. Astarion, crouched just outside the circle of light, swept his gaze across them. Neither matched the description the woman had given him. *Big, dark hair to his shoulders, patchy beard. Has a gold earring in the shape of a dolphin and a strawberry birthmark on his right wrist. Stinks of beer and onions.*

That last probably applied to everyone in the Green Eel. Astarion settled back down on his haunches to wait.

Three more people came out and two went in before Astarion laid eyes on his quarry. Boris came stumbling out, turned, and shouted something incoherent into the bar. The light briefly caught on a gold earring in the shape of a dolphin. He was probably six inches taller than Astarion and a foot wider in the shoulders, and his clothes were a crime against nature.

None of these things - except possibly the clothes - was a problem. All men were the same height when they were face down on the pavement. But as tempting as coshing him over the head was, Astarion would have to drag the bastard back to one of the collection points - in this case, the small park with the passage behind the unicorn statue - and that was a long way to drag a limp body without being spotted, even in the fog.

Ideally, Boris would follow him on his own two feet.

Astarion stepped out of the fog and raked his eyes over the merchant's son. "Well," he said. "Hello."

Although women were Boris's usual choice, he had no objection to having a pretty boy suck his cock. He told Astarion so, several times.

"Yes," Astarion said, holding on to his patience with great effort, "but not in the middle of the street."

"Why not? Anybody wants to watch, let 'em." Boris leered and made a grab for him. The man was drunk enough that Astarion barely had to step aside, and Boris ran shoulder-first into a wall.

He grunted, though it was unlikely that any pain could get through the haze of alcohol clouding his system. After a moment, he refocused on Astarion. "Why ... why've you got red eyes?"

"Allergies. It happens every year about this time, I'm afraid. Something blooming, the healers tell me." Astarion forced a delicate cough. "But enough about me." He trailed his fingers down the man's arm. Under the thick coat of hair, Boris's skin was clammy with sweat.

"Come now," the vampire spawn purred, "let's find somewhere a little more private, shall we?"

Boris allowed himself to be steered for another block or so before he started to get stubborn.

"Want it *now*," he said like a frustrated toddler, and grabbed for Astarion again.

This time, he caught a handful of white hair and pulled. Astarion clamped down on a hiss of pain and said, "Oh, so you like it rough?"

Boris's leer turned into a yelp as Astarion dug a thumbnail into his wrist and forced his fingers open. Before he could swing, the vampire spawn hooked a foot behind his knee and spilled him to the ground.

"Would you prefer I was on top?" Astarion asked, one knee on the drunken man's chest.

"Hmm?"

Boris stared up at him, utterly flummoxed.

Astarion ran his hand over the man's groin and clucked his tongue. "I'm afraid you'll have to do better than *that*. Poor little fellow's as limp as a banana skin."

He sprang up and waited as his prey staggered to his feet. It took two tries.

"Oh no," Astarion said, dancing backward. "I'm getting away, look."

With a roar of rage and baffled lust, Boris charged at him. Astarion took to his heels, letting the mist swallow him, and waited. After a moment, the pursuing footsteps slowed. He slipped silently behind his quarry, stood on tiptoes, and murmured, "Catch me if you can," into the ear with the gold dolphin.

The ensuing chase kept Astarion mildly entertained. The most difficult part was making sure that Boris didn't lose him entirely. Both the lust and the alcohol were wearing off rapidly, and while the man didn't seem to have more than two thoughts to rub together, he'd probably lived in Baldur's Gate long enough to eventually realize that chasing a stranger down unfamiliar streets was a good way to die.

They were most of the way to the park when Boris stopped, looking around him. The fog hadn't lifted, but it had thinned as they went uphill. Astarion heard the man swear under his breath.

Astarion stepped out of an alley and smiled fetchingly. "Tired so soon?"

Boris huffed. "D'you think I'm stupid?"

"Darling, I think I've met smarter fried eggs."

The man took a step forward, then caught himself. "Enough," he said, turning around and stomping back in the direction of the dock.

Damnation. I suppose I'll have to do this the crude way, then.

He slithered into the shadows. A few yards down the street, Boris looked back over his shoulder.

When he turned back, Astarion stepped out of the mist, wrapped his fingers around the gold dolphin, and yanked. Hard.

Boris's scream bounced off the fog and returned in distorted echoes. Astarion was already running, the bloody trinket clutched in one hand.

He had to slow a little as they reached the narrow street that ran along the park. The cobblestones were smaller and rounder, and the tree that overhung the fence had dropped rotting leaves everywhere, leaving the ground slicker than a politician's palm.

Boris had no such qualms. The brute slipped and slid but somehow kept his footing, gaining with every stride. Astarion felt a hot onion-scented breath on the back of his neck.

"I'll kill you," Boris snarled. Astarion ducked sideways and felt something tug at his jacket.

Fabric parted with a whisper of sound.

Curses, now I'll have to sew it. And it's the embroidered one, too, so I'll have to make sure all the little roses line up properly.

He dove through the entrance to the park and sprinted across the grass toward the back side of a statue of Mielikki, goddess of the wilderness. The choice had been remarkably optimistic on the part of the designer, but Astarion was more concerned with the chip missing from the stone unicorn's left hind hoof.

He jabbed a finger into it. Boris had lost him briefly but spotted him again and charged.

Blood stained the side of his face, and he was waving a knife that looked able to gut both fish and vampire spawn with equal ease.

A patch of brick at the base of the statue slid soundlessly out of the way.

"This fellow is very eager to meet the master," Astarion announced, jumping into the concealed stair with both feet.

Bones creaked along the walls behind him. Boris slid to a stop at the top of the stairs, peering into the darkness, like a cat at a mouse hole. He took a single cautious step down. The skeletons who had been waiting in the dark reached up and seized him.

"Right," Astarion said, brushing himself off and examining the tear in his jacket with distaste.

"I'll leave you gentlemen to it, then."

He strode off down the underground hallway toward Szarr Palace, listening to Boris screaming behind him.

Astarion had grown up in the Silver Marches, with parents who were deeply devoted to the land. His mother had a minor druidic talent, and his father had tended a vineyard for nearly three hundred years.

As a child, Astarion was neither particularly good nor particularly bad. "*Strange* is what he is," his father muttered. "Strange and lazy. You tell him to do something, and he sits and thinks about whether he wants to do it."

"He's thoughtful, that's all," said his mother, who spent a great deal of time in wild shape and had perhaps a more malleable outlook as a result. "Thoughtful's not bad."

"When my father told me to do something, I jumped up and did it. I didn't look for loopholes. I told him to go pull weeds in the south field this morning, and when I went out at lunch, he had pulled five dandelions and was taking a nap. And do you know what he said?"

Astarion's mother wondered silently which wild shape would get her out of this conversation.

"What did he say, dear?"

"He said that he'd pulled weeds, like I told him, but I never said to pull all the weeds. Can you believe it? And he looked at me like he'd- Don't you turn into a snake at me! I know that snakes are deaf!"

"Sssorry, dear. Thought I sssaw a mousssse."

In the year 1236, Astarion's parents took him to the city of Silverymoon for Shieldmeet. He was seven years old and had never been inside city walls or seen a town larger than a few dozen houses. His world was defined by greens and browns-the green of leaves and grapes on the vine, the brown of oak wood and rich earth-accented by white snow, white clouds, and pale sky.

The city was a revelation.

There were people - hundreds, thousands, more than he could meet in even an elven lifetime. And the colors they wore! Reds that weren't merely rusty shades of brown but brilliant scarlet and crimson, blues even richer than the sky, violet and orange and fuchsia, colors he didn't even know the names of, like carmine and vermilion. He'd spent his young life dressed in gray and brown homespun because it didn't show the dirt, and here in Silverymoon, there were people walking down the street wearing black-and-white doublets with canary-yellow hose, as if they might not have to get on their knees in the dirt to pull weeds.

It wasn't just the colors. They stayed the night at a cousin's, and the fabrics in the house came in *textures* - a gauzy scarf that shimmered when it caught the light, a worn velvet pillow that nevertheless felt softer than anything Astarion had ever imagined, lace edging along a curtain with its curious repeating bumps and hollows. He spent the night on the couch, barely sleeping, rubbing his cheek against the velvet pillow and remembering the

parade that had wound through the streets, edged by cheering crowds. He had been too short to see the Lady of Silverymoon as anything but a distant dot of white and gold, but the human burgher next to him had worn acres of some impossibly smooth burgundy fabric, and every time the man moved, it brushed against Astarion's skin.

"Excuse me, sir," Astarion said, touching the man's sleeve, which was slick as ice beneath his small fingers.

"Eh?" The burgher looked down, spotted Astarion, and frowned as if he expected to have his pocket picked. "What?"

"Please, sir, can you tell me what this fabric is called?"

The burgher clearly was not expecting that question, but his frown faded, probably because of the sheer admiration in the child's voice. "It's silk, my young friend. Comes from the South."

"Thank you for telling me," said Astarion gravely, which made the burgher laugh. Then his mother had noticed and told him not to bother the man, and Astarion didn't even protest because his mind and his fingertips were full of the memory of *silk, silk, silk*.

They went back to the vineyard the next day, but from that moment on, Astarion's entire goal in life was to get the hell out of the Silver Marches, get as far from nature as possible, and go south to a city full of colored silk.

Szarr Palace was, as always, a dark and gloomy place. The lack of light was no impediment for a vampire spawn, but it made mending clothing difficult. With everything washed out into shades of gray, Astarion could never be quite sure he wasn't accidentally stitching up a tear in a white shirt with bright pink thread.

The one reliably well-lit room was Dalyria's laboratory, where she compounded reagents and spell components for the vampire lord. Wizards had apprentices to grind up leeches and whatnot; Cazador had Dalyria. She was a recent spawn, barely three decades dead, but she rarely went out hunting.

Just as well, really. Her personality just isn't cut out for seduction. Dalyria had been a doctor in her mortal life, but Astarion suspected she was the kind who poured medicine down her patients' throats and then informed them that they felt better now. Still, he rather liked her, at least compared to the other spawn. She was sharp, intelligent, and utterly devoid of sentiment. Talking to some of the others was like talking to an animated bag of misery. Yousen had been turned barely three decades ago - practically *yesterday*, for Mystra's sake - and if you so much as passed him in the hall, you could feel the angst rolling off him like mist.

Dalyria did not seem miserable. Granted, she didn't seem happy, either, but who was? Once or twice, usually while Cazador was doing something appalling, Astarion had met her eyes and seen the calm slip, revealing a core of rage like molten iron. He respected that, even though he knew it wouldn't last. Another few decades, another century, and the rage would be buried so deep under horror that it would be almost impossible to find again.

But if nothing else, she didn't complain if he came into her workroom to mend clothes with the *proper* colors of thread.

She was crushing green beetle shells with a mortar and pestle when he walked in. Astarion wiggled his fingers at her through the rent in his shirt where the dagger had missed him.

"I take it tonight's prey didn't go quietly?" she said.

"Tonight's prey thought having a big knife made him dangerous."

"More the fool he." Dalyria went back to her beetle shells. Astarion settled on a stool in the corner and began fixing the tear with small, even stitches.

"Anything new in the palace tonight?"

Dalyria shrugged. "Violet and Petras are at each other's throats, as usual. Aurelia's brought in four already this tenday."

"*Four?* The old man needs to feed, not bathe in the stuff." He didn't particularly care about occupying the chambers where Cazador kept his favored spawn, but if Aurelia kept bringing in twice as much prey as anyone else, the vampire lord was likely to decide that the other spawn were shirking. "Someone should tell her to take a night off."

"As long as young bravos think beating up a tiefling in a dark alley is good sport, Aurelia will have all the prey she desires."

Astarion grimaced, thinking of his own beating in a dark alley. After the better part of two centuries, the memory should have lost the power to affect him, but it still had a bite to it. Possibly because it had been his last few moments as a mortal, or because it had sent him on the road into endless night.

Possibly because you never stop picking at it. You know what your mother used to say about picking at scabs.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I miss the old days," he said. "When I was turned, the old man only expected two or three a month. You had time to plan things properly. Now it's two a tenday or back to the kennel to reflect on your failures. I'm surprised he's not swelled up like a tick from that much blood."

Dalyria made a noise of acknowledgment without treading over the line into actual agreement. Astarion felt a brief glow of something not entirely unlike pride. She was finally learning not to say anything that one of the family could run and repeat to Cazador. Granted, that was a lesson that Astarion had learned within a tenday, but Dalyria was not a political animal. It was one of the reasons that he had continued to cultivate her. They were not friends - none of the spawn could afford to be *friends* - but Astarion felt about her much as he'd felt about promising junior solicitors during his days as a magistrate.

Besides, he already knew her secret. Dalyria believed that vampirism was a disease, and by all the Hells, she was going to find a cure. Astarion was pretty sure that she was wrong on both counts, but it cost him nothing to keep her secret and, occasionally, to assist her with small experiments.

"So, what fascinating horror are you working on now?" he asked.

The doctor stopped, looking down at the mortar full of beetle shells as if she didn't know where it had come from. "Making a reagent," she said.

"For you, or for him?"

"Him, of course. Nothing I wish to do requires *beetles*." Her nose wrinkled slightly. "What I require ..."

Astarion held up a hand to stop her. There hadn't been anything so indelicate as a sound, but the quality of the silence outside the workroom door had changed almost imperceptibly, a velvet quiet instead of the cold silk of absence.

"You require the same thing we all do, I'm sure," he said, slitting a thread on the side of his breeches with a fingernail. "Decent food, moderate luxury, the occasional live pig to drain to the dregs..."

There was a thin wire hidden in the seam along his thigh. Just flexible enough that a cursory search wouldn't find it, just stiff enough that it could be bent into a crude but useful lockpick. Astarion drew it out and held it like a miniature rapier.

"... a good book and a good fuck now and again also, to be made into a vampire at some point."

Making less sound than the shadow he no longer cast, Astarion moved across the floor toward the door, carefully staying out of the line of sight of the keyhole. Dalyria was pretending to crush her beetles, but her eyes kept flicking toward him. *Some of us were not made for intrigue, and it shows.*

He stopped just beside the door and measured the distances. Still no sound from the hallway.

In a single savage motion, Astarion stabbed the wire through the keyhole. Someone on the other side shrieked.

Astarion yanked the wire out and flung the door open.

"Why, Violet, my pet," he drawled. "Whatever is the matter?"

Bent nearly double, with her hand clapped over her ear, his sister spawn glared at him.

"Bastard," she hissed.

"Dear me. Did you hurt yourself?" He was honestly a bit disappointed. He'd been hoping to get her in the eye. *And while stabbing a wire directly into her brain would have been entertaining while it lasted, the old bastard would probably have something to say about it.* Cazador enjoyed a little recreational maiming among the spawn but objected to severe injuries unless he could watch. It appeared that all he had managed was to give Violet an impromptu piercing. *Ah, well.*

Astarion folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Is there something I can help you with, *dear* sister?"

She tucked a pale strand of hair behind one delicately pointed and somewhat bloody ear. Her hair had gone gray when she was turned, not the brilliant white of Astarion's, a fact that filled him with secret glee.

Being Violet, she didn't bother to pretend that she hadn't been spying. That would have required a sense of shame, which Astarion was fairly certain she'd been born without. She bared her teeth at him and flounced away. Astarion resisted the urge to make a crude gesture at her backside.

When he was certain that she had gone, he closed the door and stuffed his handkerchief into the keyhole, shaking his head. "Spying on each other all the time, trying to glean a shred more favor with the old man ... It's a wonder we don't all go mad."

"I'm not entirely sure we can," Dalyria said, frowning down at the beetle shells.

"Beg pardon?"

"Well, think about it. Madness - this type of madness - is an injury done to your mind, is it not?"

"I... suppose ... ?"

Dalyria set down the mortar so that she could gesture with her hands. "Do you remember a few years ago when Yousen crushed your feet?"

Astarion fought back a shudder. He remembered it extremely vividly. Yousen had been newly made, and Cazador was still enjoying forcing him to torment his siblings. Yousen kept whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," as, with a board and a sledgehammer, he systematically turned all the bones in Astarion's feet to powder while Cazador read a light novel and offered occasional suggestions. Astarion knew perfectly well that Yousen had no choice in the matter, but the apologies had annoyed him, at least up until he lost consciousness.

His injuries had proved to be a challenge even for the healing powers of vampire spawn. As fragments of bone rejoined and tried to assume their proper place, they became tiny sharp-edged knives, slicing through nerves and barely healed flesh. Astarion spent two days

in a ragged delirium, and when he came to, he was in the favorite's quarters. Cazador bathed his skin with cool water, stroked his hair, and said, "My boy, my poor beautiful boy," while holding cups of warm cow's blood to his lips. It only took a few days for the novelty of playing healer to wear off, but the cow's blood did its work, and when the vampire lord tired of him, Astarion was able to walk out of the room on his own newly healed feet.

"Of course I remember," he told Dalyria. "It fixed my fallen arches."

"And are there scars?"

"No, of course not." The only scars on Astarion's body were Cazador's bite marks and the faint mark on his left cheek from when he'd fallen off a horse when he was fifteen. "Nothing leaves scars now."

"Precisely. I have wondered sometimes if that includes our minds." She made a sweeping gesture that took in the wall of the laboratory and, by extension, all of Szarr Palace. "We suffer torments year after year, and we grow strange, perhaps but our minds do not break."

"Pity," said Astarion. "I was hoping to keep madness as an option."

Dalyria's eyes met his, cool and crimson. "If you did not go mad in that mausoleum, I do not believe that you will."

Astarion did not flinch. He so obviously did not flinch that he suspected Dalyria could read it as clearly as if he had. The mausoleum was the worst thing that had happened to him - worse than pain, worse than Cazador's mind games. His mind *had* broken there in the darkness, day after day, clawing at the door with nails that cracked and broke, leaving trails of blood across the stone. Wondering if he would be there forever, wondering how long it would take him to starve to death, until hunger eventually overcame even terror and he became nothing but starving skin and bone.

He wouldn't say that the experience had left him unscarred. But Dalyria wasn't entirely wrong. Once the door had finally opened and he had fallen out onto his knees in the cool night air, once that terrible hunger was sated, his mind had begun knitting itself back together. He had been making sardonic remarks before his fingers had even healed. It had been more than a hundred years ago. He wondered how she'd heard about it.

"Ah, the mausoleum," he drawled. "Quite restful. I finally caught up on my sleep."

Dalyria, who had seen him not-flinching, said nothing. After a moment, Astarion bent his head back over his work, and his sister spawn went back to crushing beetles for their master.

When he had finished sewing up his jacket to his satisfaction, he pulled it back on and rolled his shoulders a few times. He hadn't had the right color to match the embroidery perfectly, but it was close enough that no one would notice unless they had their nose mashed against his hip. Which, life - or, in this case, death - being what it was, he couldn't rule out, but at least it would be unusual.

He slipped out of the laboratory and made his way toward the great hall. It was not quite midnight; while the spawn were expected to present themselves there for the master's pleasure, there was always a chance that Cazador would have retired to his bedchamber early. Failing that, the old man might be tormenting someone else, and Astarion could slip into the hall and take up a position in one of the various nooks. If you kept the proper expression of servile interest on your face, Cazador's gaze sometimes slid right over you. If Astarion was lucky, Cazador wouldn't notice him at all.

His luck was out. His luck was always out. He was starting to think that he'd somehow offended the goddess Tymora. Cazador was in the corridor that led to the great hall, wearing

an abstracted expression and a truly fine pair of boots. Astarion weighed the options. A compliment *might* sweeten the vampire lord's mood, or it might simply draw his attention. Though even that might be worthwhile if it meant that he was bored of tormenting Astarion early and focused on someone else for the later part of the evening. Cazador was rarely *truly* inventive until well after midnight.

"Those are the most excellent boots, Father," Astarion said, letting genuine admiration color his voice. Cazador looked up and smiled.

"Are they not?" He extended one foot, showing where the black leather of the calf had been cut as delicately as lace, revealing gray suede underneath. A hundred and fifty years earlier, Astarion would have been wild to know the name of the maker. Now he was careful not to ask, for fear that Cazador would display one of his peculiar fits of jealousy and send Astarion out to collect them.

And to sacrifice an artisan of that skill to sate a temporary hunger would be very nearly criminal.

Cazador admired his footwear for a moment, then said, "You may polish them, if you like." Astarion suppressed a sigh. He had thrown the dice, and as usual, it had come up snake eyes. "Of course, Father," he said, going to his knees.

The slick leather was sour on his tongue. It was tanned in the new fashion, thank all the gods, soaked with oak leaves and bark until the tannins penetrated the leather. Cheap leather was still done the old way, with salt and urine and treated with fish oil. Licking those boots had been an experience that Astarion wasn't eager to repeat.

The problem, of course, was that if you refused or even didn't seem sufficiently enthusiastic, Cazador's will would tighten around you like a gloved fist. And then you would want to do it. You'd be eager. You'd beg him for the privilege and weep with gratitude when he granted it, even as the taste of rancid fish and old piss made you gag.

And meanwhile, somewhere deep inside, the real you would scream and scream and scream...

Astarion had learned long ago not to give his master an excuse to break his will. All you could do was avoid pain and feel as little as possible.

The irony, of course, is that the boots are a lot less polished by the time we're done slobbering on them. Not that he cares. He may live in a mansion, but he's only pretending to have good taste. Someone else must have suggested the boots.

Astarion's mouth was as dry as sandpaper by the time he'd dragged his tongue thoroughly across both boots. He sat back with an appropriately servile expression on his face, wishing for water or wine, anything to wash the taste out. Not blood, though. It would be a crime to taint good blood with that aftertaste.

"Very good, Astarion," Cazador said, leaning on his staff. "What an obedient child you are becoming."

The words made him angry, as they were supposed to. Astarion throttled the feeling ruthlessly, his eyes heavy-lidded to hide any spark of defiance. *Go somewhere else for your entertainment, old man. I won't play into your hands tonight.*

After a moment, Cazador smiled and turned away. Astarion fell into step behind him, the taste of leather burning on his tongue.

A glass of wine cleared the taste of boot leather, if not the anger. Really, it was a shame to waste a good Lathander's Red that way. Astarion knew that it should be rich and full-bodied, with a hint of black currant and clove, but he couldn't really enjoy it until the sourness had left his tongue.

I wonder if there's a wine that goes well with boot leather. Perhaps I could convince the old man to lay in stock of it.

The usual array of foods were laid out on the banquet table - meat and cheese and whatever fruits were in season. There were plums today, but also strawberries, which probably meant that the old man had had a craving. The strawberries were perfectly ripe but had the almost infinitesimal stiffness that indicated they'd been in stasis. Food wasn't actually essential to vampires or vampire spawn, but it was something of a habit by now. Astarion liked to dip the strawberries in blood occasionally.

Astarion ate quickly, then took up position on a couch in one of the nooks, partly hidden behind a decorative column. Cazador took it into his head to redecorate the hall every thirty or forty years, and while the current incarnation was as tastelessly overdone as all the rest - all faux sandstone and lapis velvet, in a cheap imitation of the Mulhorand style - it at least had a number of ornamental columns that provided cover. Even if they were painted with giant lotuses.

Strahd probably doesn't have giant lotuses everywhere. I was clearly born on the wrong plane of existence. Then again, all anyone ever heard about the legendary vampire lord were increasingly tall tales, so he might not even exist. *Or if he does, for all I know, he loves lotuses.*

The trick was to find a spot where it didn't *look* like you were trying to hide. Anything that looked like stealth would draw the old man's attention like a hawk spotting a mouse. You sat somewhere that just happened to be slightly out of his line of sight, and you did something boring to watch, like reading a book, and didn't make any large gestures. You spoke quietly but didn't whisper. If you got up to fetch more wine, you didn't skulk, and you moved deliberately, not quickly. And you never, ever laughed out loud.

Astarion found a novel on a shelf carved with what were either vultures done well or hawks done badly, and he settled in. He'd enjoyed reading when he was alive. As a child, his mother had been proud of how precocious his reading skills were, and his father had been irritated that he was reading instead of working. When he began studying the law, he'd been buried in books on legal theory and had stopped reading for pleasure. Being immortal had finally allowed him to catch up on the backlog. It was just a shame that Cazador's taste in fiction was as terrible as his taste in décor.

It was, thankfully, a fairly dull night. Cazador was reading a book of his own, winding a dark lock of hair around his finger. Petras sat on the floor beside the throne, receiving the occasional pat, as if he were a favored hunting dog. Dalyria was still in her laboratory, presumably continuing to crush beetles. Yousen sat on a couch opposite Astarion, head in his hands, looking either exhausted or bereaved or both. Aurelia occupied a corner, drawing in a sketchbook, and simply ignored Violet's attempts to goad her.

By the time the pillar candles had burned down an inch, Violet had had enough. She stalked over to Cazador, draped herself over the arm of the throne, and said, in a childish whine, "Father, I'm *bored*."

As a tactic, it was revolting but effective. Cazador claimed to think of his spawn as his children, and he could often be cajoled by Violet's little-girl act. Tonight, however, his book was clearly holding his interest, so all he said was, "Only boring people are bored, dear." She pouted. "Astarion stabbed me earlier."

"Did he, now?" Cazador turned a page. "I'm sure you deserved it."

She stuck out her lower lip. Astarion rolled his eyes. Cazador didn't glance up. "Petras, play with your sister."

Petras looked at Violet with distaste. "Yes, sir."

Violet clapped her hands together with girlish glee. "Let's see how much flesh I can carve off you before you faint from blood loss!"

"Or we could play dragonchess."

"Dragonchess is *boring*. Father-"

"Yes, yes," said Petras hastily. "Why don't we play dragonchess, and if you win, you get to stab me?"

Violet paused, clearly torn. "What if you win?"

"I get to stab you."

Violet scowled. "If I win, I want to stab you *and* Yousen."

The gnome looked up, hearing his name. "What?"

"Fine by me," Petras said. He extracted a board and pieces from a nearby bookcase.

"You can't just decide that Violet gets to stab me!"

"Don't worry your little gnome head," Petras said, shuffling. "I don't plan to lose."

Aurelia turned slightly so that she could sketch the players. Astarion abandoned his book and drifted closer to watch the game. Violet was arguably cleverer than Petras - not a difficult feat - but she was also impulsive. The human was an arrogant sod, but he was good at dragonchess.

I suppose everyone's good at something. The gods know that it isn't sex. Astarion had bedded Petras once, not long after he'd been turned, and once had been more than enough. He'd been one of those sorts who assumed that he was doing you a favor by allowing you to warm his bed. Astarion had been mildly surprised Petras hadn't shouted his own name when he came.

"When I win, I think I'll put out one of your eyes," Violet said cheerfully.

"When I win, I think I'll cut your hair."

Violet's eyes narrowed to ruby slits. "Don't even think about it."

"Then I suggest you pay closer attention to the board."

Halfway through the game, Cazador abruptly got to his feet, book still in hand, and left the room. The spawn stared after him, then at one another. Astarion could practically hear his siblings thinking - *Is that it? Is he gone for the night?*

Two or three minutes dragged by during which no one spoke. Then Aurelia got to her feet and said, to no one in particular, "I'll check."

She left the hall. Yousen drummed his fingers nervously on the edge of the couch until Astarion wanted to stab the gnome himself.

When Aurelia returned, Dalyria was with her. The elf went straight for the meal laid out on the table. "He's gone to his ritual room," she said around bites of cheese.

"He has," Aurelia confirmed from the doorway.

The tension visibly went out of the room. Cazador never spent less than six hours in his ritual room, and by that time, it would be dawn. Yousen and Astarion both headed for the door. Petras shoved the chess board away and got to his feet.

"Hey!" Violet said. "You can't stop now."

"Watch me."

She folded her arms and pouted. "If you're forfeiting, I get to stab you."

"Father's not watching," Petras said. "You can stop pretending to be twelve." He joined the general exodus, and Astarion didn't bother to hide his snicker.

The halls of Szarr Palace were cool and dim in midafternoon. No shaft of sunlight penetrated the thick stone walls, but air currents shifted, ever so slightly, when one of the mortal servants opened or closed a door.

Astarion woke and stretched. As an elf, he needed only four hours of trance a day. Sometimes he stayed tranced longer, seeking relief from his waking life. Other times, it twisted and grew out of his control, his memories becoming a dreamlike horror of dark, wet earth under his fingernails, choking his throat, as he clawed his way through the dirt with only the broken board of his own coffin lid as a tool.

Sometimes, in the trance, he reached the surface and Cazador was waiting. Sometimes he never reached the surface and could only dig and dig and dig for miles, until his arms gave out and he was reduced to teeth, gnawing at the soil like a fanged worm, forever...

And then again, other times, he was in the magistrate's court without his pants on. Whatever god oversaw dreams had a bizarre sense of humor.

He sat up. His rooms were small and hung with burgundy velvet. Someone who knew Astarion well - and there weren't any anymore, if there ever had been - might have observed that the room was both opulent and oddly spartan. A wardrobe for clothes, a basin for washing, a bed with linen sheets worn to softness, and a half dozen pillows. No truly personal belongings, no knickknacks, no paintings on the wall, not even any books.

In his living days, Astarion's home had been crowded with artwork, the doors flanked by ornate statues or vases glazed in all the colors of sunset. But he had learned, as all the spawn had learned, that anything you treasured could be taken from you. He had once watched Aurelia gaze into the fire, stone-faced, as Cazador tore pages from her sketchbooks and tossed them onto the flames.

In fact, it was from Aurelia, oldest of the spawn, that he had learned the secret to keeping something safe. She had not been kind to him, exactly - kindness was not in her nature - but having a second spawn in the palace meant that Cazador's sadism was divided between two targets. In the first few tendays, when Astarion was still stumbling and weeping and half mad with a hunger that never faded, she would sometimes pause beside him and utter a few words. Never many, but always useful.

Start screaming early. It's what he wants, and he'll stop sooner.

Never try to run.

He gets bored easily. Make yourself boring.

It was that last one that had caught his attention. He looked up, aware that his face was streaked with tears, and met the tiefling's red, red eyes. "Darling," he said, "I'm never boring."

One corner of her mouth crooked up. "You'd better learn."

It was easier between them after that. She taught him the things that Cazador didn't bother with - how to keep his fangs hidden and where to bite a rat to extract the most blood with the least mess. How to move around lights so that his lack of shadow didn't show.

Eventually, how to pick out a victim and hunt them through the streets.

Cazador had been in one of his family moods then and described Aurelia as "a perfect older sister." They had played the part because it was so much easier than the alternative.

One day, he'd woken to find Aurelia outside his door. "Come on," she said. "I have something secret to show you."

"But Cazador -"

"Asleep."

That was how he learned that the old vampire tranced for eight or ten hours a day. For an elf or a tiefling, that meant there were hours during the day when your mind was almost completely your own. If you'd been given leave to hunt, you could even leave the palace,

provided you kept to the Undercity, where sunlight rarely penetrated. In those early days, though, you were expected to hunt only once or twice a month.

But Szarr Palace was very large, and not even Cazador knew every single stone within it. Aurelia had taken him to the wine cellars and showed him a dusty stone half hidden behind an ancient barrel. It opened a passage in the floor, so low that she had to twist her head sideways to keep her horns from scraping on the ceiling. A dozen feet along the passage was a bricked-up wall, and against it lay a stack of pages.

He'd picked one up, the edges rough where they had been torn from a sketchbook, and saw an unfamiliar tiefling woman looking back. When he handed it over, Aurelia carefully gathered the rest and took them with her. Astarion knew without being told that she did not trust him not to reveal the hiding place to Cazador.

That was probably wise.

"There are plenty of secret places here," she told him. "They raised and lowered the ceilings every time it became fashionable. But never go to one when Cazador's awake. Inside the palace, he can find you with a thought."

And there she left him, in the dusty passage under the cellar, and maybe he cried again a little, out of gratitude, but he would never, ever admit it.

Astarion's hiding place was in an unused bedroom that had become a storage area for unwanted furniture. There was a chest shoved into one corner, halfway underneath a tilted bed frame. It had a lock that even a paladin could have picked, though only if they really wanted some sheets that had been folded for so long that they crunched when you tried to unfold them.

Under the sheets, however, was a false bottom, and inside that was a rather clever combination lock keyed to a date that had no significance to anyone but Astarion and a young man more than a century dead. He unlocked it, wiped his dusty hands on the sheets, and reached down into a recess carved into the floor itself.

His fingers touched silk.

He drew the fabric out. was a silk scarf of the most exquisite material, cool and slick, like woven ice. There was a velvet coat in the hiding place as well, heavy with brocade, and a spidersilk cloak lined with satin. He let the textures flow over his fingers like liquid, eyes closed. Darkvision could not show him the colors anyway, but that didn't matter. The important thing was that Cazador had never seen them at all.

More than a century in the vampire's service had turned sex into a tiresome chore. Food was an empty shadow of its former self, on the days when he wasn't choking down decaying rat. Trance was nightmare-tainted, and he certainly did not have the luxury of losing himself in drugs. Blood was the only thing he truly enjoyed, and Cazador knew it all too well and withheld it at his whim.

But Cazador did not know about this. A single sensual pleasure still belonged to Astarion: that silk was still a cool whisper and velvet a warm glide against his fingertips. This solitary thing remained untainted ... as long as the old man never found out.

That was why Astarion's rooms were so spartan. Even the velvet curtains were the same type that were hung all over the palace. He was careful never to even run a hand over them when Cazador was present.

Sometimes, when he had leave to hunt and the old man was busy tormenting someone else, he smuggled clothes out in a bundle and changed into them outside the palace. They made

him feel, however briefly, like himself again. He had chosen these for himself, and Cazador had never touched them.

He knew, with hard certainty, that if the vampire ever learned of it, his last pleasure would be taken from him. The old man would strangle him with silk, or entomb him, wrapped in velvet, for a tenday or a month or a year, until the touch was a horror that haunted his nightmares. So he was careful never to let the secret slip, and because Cazador sought luxury for the trappings of wealth and not inherent longing, the vampire never cared or even noticed.

One of the many innovations brought by the Lady of Silverymoon was the institution of village schools throughout the region. Astarion's schooling had previously been conducted in a haphazard fashion by a crotchety old druid who showed up for a tenday or so at a time, usually arriving in the form of an ox carrying baskets full of books, slates, and chalk. Astarion had learned to read, write, and do basic sums, but not with any great enthusiasm. It was possible he had learned to count only so that he could tally up the number of warts and moles that sprouted from the old druid's skin like mushrooms.

Then the school opened. The schoolmistress was a lovely young human woman who always smelled of lavender and had a smile like dawn breaking. Astarion, who had just turned eight, was instantly and profoundly smitten, and he drove himself to new heights of scholarship to please the object of his affections. He didn't even try to find loopholes in the rules she laid down, which for Astarion was a declaration of devotion on par with slaying dragons.

"Now, write me an essay, class," she said one day. "Tell me what you want to do when you grow up, and why. It should be at least six lines long."

His classmates groaned. Six lines? That was an impossible length - longer than most books of magic, surely! But Astarion was not the only one smitten by the schoolmistress, so the single room filled with the squeak of chalk on slates and the mumbling of students engaged in the ancient practice of padding out sentences with extra verbiage.

Astarion, meanwhile, stared at the blank surface, his mind a whirl of silk and velvet and southern cities and the smell of lavender, and thought that six lines wasn't nearly enough to cover it.

Astarion was twelve years old when the messenger arrived.

She was tall and lithe and human, dressed in leather that had been cut to show diamonds and half-moons of brilliant violet suede underneath. Her hair was dark and curly, and her skin was the color of oak bark. Astarion, who was lurking behind the stone wall that led to the house, watched her beating the dust from her boots, her lips pursed in distaste. Then she straightened her clothes, retrieved an envelope from her pack, and knocked on the door. His mother answered. Astarion could hear her gasp of dismay, then a swallow came shooting out of the doorway, leaving the messenger standing on the front step and the door hanging open.

He watched his mother's wild-shaped form arrow across the sky, then slipped out from behind the wall and approached the messenger.

"Are you from Silverymoon?" he asked, that being the grandest place he could think of.

The human woman turned, her eyebrows rising. Her eyes were tawny, a shade lighter than her skin, and full of secret amusement. "You must be young Astarion."

That someone so grand knew his name was so astonishing that he forgot she hadn't answered his question. "Yes, ma'am." He bowed as well as he could, aware that he wasn't

good at it. When he straightened up, the woman was looking past him to his father, who was coming up the long pathway from the vineyard.

"Lady Erikinia sent me," she said.

"Who?"

She looked back to Astarion, clearly surprised. "The Lady Erikinia? Your great- great you really don't know? Hells, the old lady won't like that one bit."

"My great-great *what*?"

But he didn't get an answer, because by then his father was in earshot. "So it's time, is it?" his father said, as if continuing a conversation he and the messenger had already begun.

"It is," she said, inclining her head.

"Miriana doesn't like it." Miriana was Astarion's mother's name.

"I am afraid that my lady is not concerned with that."

"No," his father said, "she wouldn't be." His eyes found Astarion and dismissed him. "Well, not as if any *less* work will get done around here."

"Don't say that!" his mother cried, suddenly dropping out of wild shape to land on the path. Astarion, who was used to his mother's erratic comings and goings, didn't flinch. The messenger did, then caught herself and rolled her eyes.

Astarion looked from his parents, in their shabby homespun, to the messenger, in her black-and-violet suede. "What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Miriana put herself between the messenger and her son. "You, whoever you are, just go back and tell her we're all very happy and we're not coming."

Astarion craned his neck to see over her shoulder. The messenger tapped her foot. "I am afraid, Lady Miriana, that is not an option. The terms of your arrangement are very clear."

"But it's too soon!"

The messenger met Astarion's eyes where he peeked out from behind his mother. "How old are you, lad?"

"Twelve," Astarion said, at the same time his mother said, "Nine!"

There was an exquisitely awkward moment while the lie hung in the air, and then his father said, "Astarion, go inside and pack for a trip."

His mother let out a cry and turned into a swallow again, zipping frantically back and forth along the eaves. Astarion said, "But what -"

"Go," his father said, in a voice that would have made a hardened veteran cower.

Astarion went.

The journey to lady Erikinia's home took four days, during which Astarion peppered the messenger, whose name was Bajia, with endless questions, and Astarion's mother either fretted or flew, as the mood took her.

They were the best four days of Astarion's life to date. The air was crisp, and the innkeepers were friendly, and he was on an adventure. He fell even more madly in love with Bajia than he had with his teacher back home. The teacher had been kind and beautiful and good, but Bajia carried a sword, and goodness simply could not compete. Granted, she was a good bit older than he was, but he was an elf, and she was a human, which meant that in twenty years or so, he would have caught up.

From Bajia, Astarion learned that the Lady Erikinia was his some-number-of-greats-grandmother, that she had an estate on the far side of Silvermoon and a townhouse in the city, and that she was a great lady, a high elf noble of the Ancunín family.

"Does that make me an Ancunín, too?"

"Possibly," Bajia said.

Astarion considered this at great length. His surname had always been Ra'tchashar, the same as his father, which meant *vine-keeper* in some obscure Elvish dialect. Children at school occasionally called him "Rat Catcher," but usually not for very long. He did not fight - was quick as a weasel at wriggling out of them, in fact - but he had an amazing natural gift for picking pockets. Where respect might have failed, bullies quickly learned that if they would like to keep their coppers, their chalk, and their homework, it was better not to get on Astarion's bad side.

He liked Ancunin better than Rat Catcher.

What Bajia never said to him, but which he learned from what she said to his mother, was that there had been some kind of bargain. A bargain that involved Astarion.

When he tried asking her about it outright, Bajia clammed up. "It's not for me to say." Nor would any amount of wheedling pry it out of her. Eventually Astarion gave up - or, rather, filed it away to go after from another angle - and went back to asking her about the city. This, at least, she was happy to talk about. In fact, she had been to more than one city, to Neverwinter and Baldur's Gate and even Waterdeep, and she told him about the soaring temples and palaces of marble and the dark alleys and the docks where waves slapped endlessly against the pilings. He soaked up every word, building images in his head that were impossibly bright and colorful, full of people in silk moving among buildings that rose to touch the clouds.

On the last night before they reached the estate, they stayed at an inn. The innkeeper looked strangely at the regal messenger and the little blond boy in rough clothes but did not comment. They ate a meal that was better than anything Astarion could ever remember eating: fish coated in a sauce that held flavors he didn't even have words to describe. He felt as if his tongue had suddenly learned to see in color. "This is amazing. This is the best thing I've ever eaten in my life."

Bajia grinned and reached over to ruffle his hair. "Wait until you try dessert."

When he went to his small room under the eaves, something rapped on the shutters.

Astarion opened them, and his mother came flying through his window. She turned elven in midair, dropped onto the bed, and grabbed his shoulders. "Astarion, my dear, my love, you must listen to me. This is incredibly important."

Astarion had never seen her in such a state. She was always flighty, always quicksilver swift, but it took the form of distraction, not terror. "I'm listening," he assured her.

"When we meet your grandmother, she will ask you what you want to do. You must tell her that you want to work the vineyard like your father."

He looked at her blankly. "But that's not what I want."

His mother made a noise then, a ragged sound like a word that didn't exist, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders like the talons of a hawk. "Of course it is."

"But I don't - "

"I know, I know. You and your father don't always get along. I know." This was an understatement for the ages, but she hurried on. "You *know* your father loves you."

It was an old refrain, and Astarion knew his part well. "I know he does." Which was ... oh, not a lie, exactly. His father did love him, with the baffled but determined love of a bird for a cuckoo's egg. He loved Astarion, not because he thought Astarion was lovable, but because loving your children was what you did, and it would have tarnished his image of himself not to love his son.

His mother's eyes were fever bright. "You *have* to tell her that you want to work in the vineyard, or she'll take you away from me."

Astarion blinked. "What?"

"The bargain - the stupid bargain - oh, it doesn't matter now!" She took a deep breath. "What are you going to tell her?"

"That I want to work in the vineyard," he lied dutifully.

"Yes. All right." She released him and put her hands to her cheeks, breathing deeply. "That horrible woman. Who would have thought she'd find out?"

"Find out what?" Astarion asked, but she was already shifting, an owl this time, lunging out the window into the dark sky beyond.

It was all so strange, he thought as he climbed into bed. Strange to see his mother so panicked, strange to sleep in an inn. The sheets were linen, softer than the ones on his bed at home. He could still remember the taste of the sauce on his tongue, like nothing he'd ever experienced before.

It came to him that he could be happy traveling like this forever, hearing stories of cities and eating food with exotic spices and sleeping on soft sheets - and never, ever going home again.

Astarion went out to hunt that night already knowing that he would fail. That was fine. Most hunting nights ended in failure. One or two victims a tenday was perfectly acceptable. It was when you went a fortnight without dragging something home to the old man that he began to think your heart wasn't sufficiently in it.

A few days in the kennels under the businesslike care of the skeleton Godey was generally enough to make one a very keen predator indeed.

But Boris's blood was probably still coating Cazador's throat, so Astarion had the freedom of the city, and a single errand that he needed to run.

The fog was not so thick tonight. It lay over Baldur's Gate like a veil, not a smothering blanket. Once he reached the docks, Astarion climbed up to the rooftops to search for his target.

The woman from Waterdeep wasn't easy to locate from above, even with the lighter fog. He scanned from red lantern to red lantern until he finally spotted her. She had put her back to a stack of crates, which made things easier. Astarion dropped soundlessly from the roof onto the uppermost crate and crept downward until he was crouched directly above her.

The gold dolphin pinged off the cobblestones at her feet. She frowned and reached down to scoop it up. He saw the moment she realized what it was, and she whirled around, searching the fog, and finally saw him.

She was a cool one, he'd give her that. Her eyes narrowed, and if he hadn't been able to hear her blood thrumming under her skin, he would have thought she was annoyed, not frightened. Good. The woman deserved a scare if she thought to blackmail him.

"The job is done," he said.

"Boris is dead?"

"As dead as a priest's love." Astarion's smile had too much tooth in it. "Now, let me be very clear, my darling. That man was a dreadful ass, and I quite see why you wanted him gone. But if you think to continue to use me as your personal enforcer, think again."

The woman's eyes flickered. Clearly, she *had* been thinking that, at least on some level.

"This is a large city. Large enough for me to hunt elsewhere for a long, long time." He leaned forward, one hand on the edge of the crate between his feet, using the extra height to loom over her. "But it is not large enough that I can't find you again, if I hear that you've been... indiscreet."

She tried to rally. "My friends know -"

"I'm sure they do, darling. Will that be much comfort to you in the grave?"

Her lips pressed together in a thin line.

"I give you Boris's death as a gift," Astarion said, beginning to enjoy himself. "The world is undoubtedly better for it. I can even admire how you arranged it." He leaned forward until she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. "You were clever, and you were lucky. But darling ..." He smiled then, showing her the last half inch of fang. "You won't be lucky twice."

Astarion climbed down from the roof a few blocks away, feeling pleased with the night's work. He'd left the waif unharmed but unlikely to bother him again. If it turned out that she was unwise enough to do so... well, he could probably bribe a guard to lock her away long enough for her to see the error of her ways. If worse came to worst, he would kill her, but it would be a dreadful waste of effort, not to mention blood.

He was strolling down an alley when a door opened in front of him. He jerked back from the sudden wash of light. A heavily muscled arm emerged from the doorway, dangling a small form by the collar before dropping them unceremoniously into the alley. A moment later, an accordion came flying out of the doorway, hit the opposite wall, and collapsed to the ground with a gurgling of chords.

"Get your miserable caterwauling out of my bar!" roared the owner of the arm (and presumably the door).

The door slammed shut.

Slowly, with shaking hands, the halfling bard sat up and replaced their hat. The hat was very large and very purple and had three kinds of feathers on it, including pheasant and peacock. Astarion gazed at it in fascinated horror. It was so tacky that it had somehow transcended, or perhaps metastasized, into art.

The halfling stood up. They did not seem to be wearing the hat so much as steering it.

Halfling and hat began groping around for their accordion.

And then again, sometimes the gods do smile on you. Astarion picked up the damaged instrument. "Pray let me help," he said.

The halfling started with surprise, then drew themselves up with as much dignity as they could muster. "Some people," they said, "have no appreciation for music."

"Tragically, that is true." Astarion handed over the accordion. It made a sad *hwAAh* noise as the musician took it. "I beg you not to judge all of us by that lout, however."

The hat tilted back, revealing a small, hopeful face. "Are you, by chance, musician?"

Astarion had learned to play one song on the lute two hundred years ago, expressly for the purpose of getting into the pants of a beautiful young man, and had thrown the instrument out the window during their inevitably tempestuous breakup. "A lover of music only, I fear. I greatly admire those who can play, but I have no such talent myself." He paused then, just long enough for hope to swell in the bard's heart and then start to fall. "Forgive me for my presumption, but do you by chance play private parties?"

Deep brown eyes that would not have been out of place on a cocker spaniel went wide. "But of course," the halfling said, and swept a small bow. (The hat swept a rather larger one.)

"Buttercup, master of the musical arts, at your service."

Astarion put his hand over his heart. "Truly, fate has brought us together this night. For my friend is holding a dawn revel, and I fear that our musician has come down with a fever, leaving us woefully short of musical talent. It is too much to ask, I know, and you have already played tonight and are doubtless exhausted, but I can promise that we will pay very well indeed."

"In that case, I would be delighted," Buttercup said, tucking the accordion under their arm with another choked-off *hwAAh*. Their puppylike eyes searched his face. "Ah... do you know your eyes are bright red?"

"Part of my costume for the revel." Astarion struck a pose so overdramatically menacing that the bard laughed. "The eyes are a cantrip. I'm already regretting the hair dye, though. I was assured that it would wash out easily, but I have my doubts." He clapped his hand to his forehead. "Forgive me, I am keeping you here, talking instead of taking you to the palace."

"Palace?" Buttercup said. "Lead the way."

Astarion turned toward Szarr Palace. It appeared the night's hunting was not going to be a failure after all.

At midnight, Astarion was in a fine mood. He had delivered two warm bodies this tenday, which might not put him on par with Aurelia but was a perfectly respectable showing. He had sent a very strong message that he was not to be bent to another's will, present vampire lord excepting.

Also, he now had a gloriously atrocious hat.

He tossed the purple velvet monstrosity into the air and caught it. Could he convince Petras that it was the latest fashion? He studied the fan of feathers. Probably not. Petras was not the sharpest knife in the corpse, but there were limits.

He was just contemplating whether he could attach it to Violet's head with sovereign glue while she slept when there was a solicitous tap on the door.

Only servants ever tapped like that. Cazador just flung the door open, and the other spawn either knocked, like Aurelia, or didn't want to see him anyway, like Petras. (Violet had tried to pick the lock once. Her shriek when the silver needle had gone into her hand had been worth the hour he'd spent setting the damn thing with tweezers.)

Astarion opened the door. It was, indeed, a servant, one of Cazador's many thralls. He never bothered to learn their names. The ones who had simply been unlucky were one thing, but the ones hoping to be made into spawn ought to be embarrassed, and the fact that they weren't made it worse. He might detest some of his fellow spawn, but he didn't hold them in the bone-deep contempt that he held some of the thralls.

"Lord Cazador requests your presence for dinner," the servant said with downcast eyes.

Also, they were *timid*. He hated that. When he'd been a magistrate, his servants were never timid. He'd had a valet who threatened to leap from the window every time they disagreed about what waistcoat he should wear. The man had been an absolute jewel. Astarion hoped that he'd found work for someone else who appreciated his genius.

The bard's hat would have sent the valet hurtling from the tallest tower of the city. Astarion tossed it onto the bed, straightened his cuffs, and went to dinner.

He was deeply relieved when the servant led him to the dining hall. Dining alone with Cazador never went well.

The great hall had also been redone in fake sandstone. His lip curled slightly. The first time he had seen the hall, when he was so newly made that there was still grave dirt lingering under his fingernails, it had been hung with black velvet and lit by towering braziers in the shape of ram's heads. It had been far more to his taste.

Even more to his taste had been the naked revelers at the table, drunk and laughing, most of them three-quarters of the way to an orgy, some already there. Astarion had halted in the doorway, nostrils flaring, as he realized that he could smell something underneath the scent of wine and sex, something *delicious*, something *alive* ...

Cazador had given him blood to drink when he emerged from the grave, but he had been half mad with hunger and terror and had not fully appreciated it. But cleaned and cosseted, he could smell the blood, and it smelled like ecstasy.

"Go on," Cazador said into his ear. "Go on, my beloved child. This is what awaits you now."

Astarion had never suffered from an excess of modesty. He stripped off his clothes and stalked toward them, half predator, half supplicant, his cock hard and his mouth watering.

The revelers welcomed him. Wine-stained fingers stroked his skin, and a cup was thrust into his hand. He drank, and it was a spectacular vintage, as good as anything he'd ever tasted, but still there was a thirst in him and a longing that had nothing to do with wine.

Bodies pressed against him. He spilled the wine, and a human woman licked it off his neck. She turned her head to do so, and when he caught a glimpse of her throat, something stranger and darker than lust seized him. He caught her chin in one hand and her shoulder in the other, felt his new fangs hard and sharp inside his mouth, and bit down.

She didn't scream. In fact, she moaned in ecstasy, though Astarion could barely hear it over his own moans. Her blood struck through him like a thunderbolt, like an orgasm, and he drank it down, mouthful after mouthful, until she went limp in his arms.

The company roared their approval. He didn't realize he'd come until he felt a stickiness on his thighs that wasn't blood. There was another glass of wine in his hand, unasked for. He savored it this time, the taste a counterpoint to the metallic thickness of the blood.

The tiefling woman he would come to know as Aurelia walked across his line of sight, seized one of the revelers, and dragged him away. Her face was cool and remote, her eyes like topaz gemstones. Was she judging him? Let her. Astarion could not be bothered to care.

The man she had chosen writhed against her, arching his back. She held him at arm's length, then sank her fangs into his bared neck. Astarion heard the crunch of cartilage across the room.

Hells, he thought, *are we killing them?*

If they were, it seemed that the revelers wanted it desperately. Before he could pursue that thought any further, there was a man sliding against him, boneless as an eel, kissing him.

The man's mouth tasted like wine, and his pulse beat wildly under Astarion's fingertips. His tongue stroked the points of Astarion's fangs, then pressed hard enough to draw blood, and the taste exploded, thick and hot, like no kiss Astarion had ever known, like nothing he had ever dreamed of.

He lost himself utterly to pleasure. He chased wine with blood and blood with wine. The revelers gave up their throats and the secret places of their bodies. Astarion had never felt so alive, so full, so powerful. He was a god of sex and darkness. The ram heads on the braziers gazed down silently, and the flames licked gold and orange across his lovers, his worshippers, his victims.

And then Cazador had snapped his fingers and dispelled the illusion.

The squeal of pleasure from his latest partner turned into a real squeal, high and shrill, and Astarion opened his eyes to find that he had his teeth buried in a pig's throat and was dry humping the tablecloth.

He flung himself backward, aghast. The room was littered with the drained bodies of young pigs, the tablecloth stained with their blood. The ones that were still alive lay in a slowly squirming heap, eyes glazed with magicked docility. Perhaps they even believed that they were humans.

He jerked his head up and met Aurelia's gaze. There was a dead hog at her feet, and in her cold ruby eyes gleamed the faintest hint of sympathy.

It was then that Cazador had told him the rules. There would be no human blood for him, nor blood from any thinking being. The truth was, Astarion barely heard. All he could think of was finding a bath and scrubbing himself until the uncleanness was washed away.

He was sure ... almost sure ... he hadn't actually fucked a pig. Petras didn't, when Cazador pulled the same trick on him. Just a lot of writhing and squirming and rubbing up against a sow bigger than he was, which had sent Cazador into gales of laughter. But he'd definitely had one's tongue in his mouth, and that was enough to make him want to rip his own tongue out and wash it with lye.

The elder vampire hadn't lied. This was what awaited him now - brief pleasures that gave way to humiliation and disgust. And a little fear in the back of his mind that anything he was experiencing might be an illusion. He could see that shadow in the back of Petras's eyes, too. *Is this all truly happening? Can I ever really be sure?*

Later, Aurelia explained the grim truth behind the prohibition against drinking intelligent blood. The spawn were not allowed to drink Cazador's blood, either, thus becoming true vampires. They were under his control until he chose to offer his blood and turn them fully. They couldn't even band together to kill him and drain his corpse.

On second thought, maybe it was just as well the old man had changed the décor in the dining room. If Astarion was wading through memories like this just from looking at fake sandstone and badly carved vultures, the gods only knew what the sight of all that black velvet would have done to him.

There was still a long table, though it was made of a pale slab of stone. Most of the other spawn were already standing beside it, though none of them had sat down. Identical covered dishes sat in front of each chair, along with two goblets. One of wine, and one ...

The smell of blood filled his nostrils. Not rat blood this time. Not pig. Something better. Sheep, perhaps? Cow? *Still warm.*

He could feel himself starting to salivate.

"We must wait for the rest of the family," Cazador said from the head of the table. He lounged on his throne, sipping idly at his own goblet. Astarion suspected that the contents belonged to a certain bard, but since he had never been allowed to taste the blood of a thinking being, his palate for blood was as unrefined as a kobold's for wine.

Dalyria drifted over to him and cast a glance in his direction. On another person, it would have been a look of mild concern, but in the doctor's case, it might as well have been a shout. She was worried.

And rightly so. The old bastard doesn't usually get the entire family together formally like this unless he has something planned. The last time, he released venomous snakes and told us we could only eat what we could catch, and that was a good day compared to the time before, with the steel wires.

The last straggler - Aurelia - came in. She was still wearing torn leathers stained with someone else's blood. "Forgive me, Father," she said in her cool, passionless voice. "The hunt went long."

"My dutiful daughter," Cazador said, extending a hand. She kissed it and took her place with the others.

"Choose any place you like," the vampire lord said, waving to the seats.

Astarion chose a middle seat, where there would be someone on either side to buffer him from Cazador's attention. Dalyria took the place next to him, on the far side from Cazador, and Petras sat down across the table. Aurelia paused a moment, then sat down beside Astarion, at Cazador's right hand.

"A toast," Cazador said, lifting his goblet. "To our family."

"To our family," the spawn echoed, then drank.

Even now, long after being turned, the warm blood still slid down Astarion's throat like silk, like velvet, like a mouth on his cock, like a hundred pleasures magnified and twisted back on themselves. *Oh gods, it's bull's blood. They must have dragged the animal into the stables and butchered it not twenty minutes ago.*

Astarion swallowed it down, his fangs biting helplessly at the rim of the cup, and suppressed a moan.

It took all his willpower not to drain the goblet at once. *Wait for it, he told himself, wait. A second drink will be just as good. You're not a teenage boy frantically wanking himself in the privy. You know how to wait.*

He set the goblet down, half full, and licked blood off his teeth. Across the table, Petras had blood running down his chin, and his eyes rolled back in ecstasy. Typical.

Cazador waited until everyone had set their goblets down and recovered themselves. "And now, my children ... enjoy your dinner."

The servants stepped forward and pulled the covers from their plates.

Maggots squirmed in the eye socket of a dead rat carefully arranged on Astarion's plate. He groaned internally. Petras stared down at his own rat, his lip curling in disgust. Yousen retched.

Aurelia gazed at a piece of salmon identical to what Cazador was eating. She looked at it for a moment, then shrugged and picked up her fork. *Typical. One of us is lucky, and the rest suffer.* Violet was gazing at Aurelia with dislike, but Astarion didn't bother to expend any emotion on it. There were so many grudges to hold without involving random chance as well. He could have chosen to sit closer to Cazador and had not.

"Well?" Cazador said. "Eat up, my children."

"You must admit," Astarion said, stabbing the carved radish that decorated the rat's tail, "the plating is superb. My compliments to the chef."

Dalyria snorted. Violet rolled her eyes the way she did when she wished she'd thought of something first.

"I hate radishes," Petras muttered unwisely. By the gleam in the old man's eye, he was going to eat a lot more of them in the near future.

This was not the first dead rat that Astarion had eaten at Cazador's command. It probably wasn't even the hundredth. He kept his face as neutral as possible, picked up knife and fork - which fork is for the dead rat course, again? - and began carefully scraping the wet spikes of fur off the animal's ribs. Beside him, Dalyria was dissecting her rat with the dispassionate intensity of an autopsy.

The trick was to hold your breath and think very hard about something else, then wash it down immediately with wine. The entrails were the easiest because you didn't have to keep chewing. Astarion cut a small section of too-soft guts and took a breath, then popped it into his mouth while staring across the room at a carving that was meant to look like dancing serpents. It wasn't a very good carving. His mouth was full of squishing gunk that stuck to his teeth, but he swallowed, then gulped down half a glass of wine. *Thank the gods I saved the blood.* It would purge the taste from his tongue as nothing else could.

Not even Violet could pretend to enjoy this meal. She attacked her rat with suppressed fury, snapping the ribs with her hands. Cazador made a tsking sound and shook his head.

"Remember your table manners, my children," Cazador said. "We will have a guest tomorrow night, you see. The hunt is suspended, and I expect you all to be on

your ... best behavior." He lifted his own glass and drank, watching them over the rim with heavy-lidded eyes. The smell of fresh blood was a cloying counterpoint to the thick stench of decay.

"Will our guest be getting dead rat, too?" Astarion asked dryly, extracting the rat's heart with the end of his fork. It had turned black and slightly gelatinous. When he bit into it, something sprayed unpleasantly inside his mouth, and he pressed his lips tightly together to keep from gagging, then drained the rest of his wine in a single gulp.

"Oh, no," Cazador said, smiling, as Yousen lost his battle with his stomach and was violently ill on the floor. "I have something much more delectable in mind."

The manor house of Lady Erikinia was built in the old high elven style, the pillars worked into the shape of fantastical trees and the windows framed with artfully carved branches. But these trees had leaves of beaten silver, and the door they framed was set with stained glass, and the man who opened the door wore black and violet silk.

"So you found them," he said to Bajia.

"Was there any doubt?"

The man smiled, then turned to Astarion's mother and bowed deeply, very deeply, as if she were someone important and not just a minor druid who spent most of her time as a bird.

"Lady Miriana."

"Hello, Wendin," she said almost absently, fussing with Astarion's collar. He squirmed away, far more interested in the house than in whether his collar was straight. *For that matter, why does she care? She's never worried about my collar before.*

"Lady Erikinia wishes you to be conveyed to her presence immediately," the man said.

Miriana's hands stilled on Astarion's collar. "We've been traveling for some days now. A chance to rest ..."

"I understand, milady, but she was most insistent upon the matter."

Her fingers twitched against Astarion's skin, rippling slightly as if they longed to become wings, but she stepped back and said only, "I suppose we must get this over with, then."

Inside, the ceiling soared upward, at least three stories, and the roof was made of glass. A live tree grew in the center of the foyer, ringed by blue tiles, and an immense staircase rose up behind it, the railings so deeply carved that they looked in danger of falling apart at a touch.

"If you will follow me," the man named Wendin said with another bow.

"I know the way," Astarion's mother muttered, but she turned to follow him, reaching for Astarion's hand. He avoided it. *I'm not a baby*, he thought resentfully, even if the size of the house made him feel very small.

Wendin led them through a series of halls and doorways. The first hallway was light and airy, the windows open to the breeze. The second hallway, though, was wallpapered in deep red, and the tile floor gave way to carpet so thick that their footsteps were swallowed up without a sound. The air smelled of incense, though not one he recognized from the little chapel in the village.

Astarion glanced over his shoulder and saw Bajia bringing up the rear. She winked at him, and the flicker of alarm he'd been feeling died away.

The third doorway opened into a long room, lit by lamps on chains hung from the ceiling. The windows were tightly shuttered, and the smell of incense was thicker here. Despite the

lamps, he had the impression of an underground lair, the sort of place where a dragon might curl up and dream of treasure.

At the far end, on a chair that wasn't quite a throne but also wasn't not a throne, a figure waited.

Wendin closed the door behind them. Astarion's mother took a deep breath and struck out across the expanse of carpet toward the figure. Bajia tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and Astarion started, then followed her.

As he grew closer, he saw the figure more clearly. Lady Erikinia - it had to be her - was the oldest elf he had ever seen in his life, her skin sagging from her skull into jowls and a deeply furrowed neck. She wore some kind of headdress with fluttering black scarves hanging from it, and gems gleamed in her pointed ears. She was wrapped in a dressing gown made of rich scarlet brocade that gleamed in the lamplight, and her long, spidery fingers were wrapped around a steaming mug.

"Granddaughter," she said.

Her voice was a revelation. Someone that old should have a thin, frail voice, either high and whispery or cracking when she spoke. But Lady Erikinia's voice was rich and buttery, and it wrapped around the listener like a comforting hug.

Astarion's mother squared her shoulders, looking not at all comforted. "Grandmother," she said grimly.

"You certainly did not make yourself easy to find. Bajia spent months figuring out where you ended up."

His mother said nothing.

"And this must be young Astarion. Come here, young man, and let an old woman look at you."

He took a few steps forward and made his clumsy bow. "It's nice to meet you, Great-Grandmother."

Lady Erikinia smiled like a skull. "And you, Great-Grandson. Though something must be done about that accent... and those clothes! Dear me, Miriana, if you were in such straits, you should have written. I know that we have not always seen eye to eye, but I would not have begrudged a copper of it, if I had known."

"I did not want your money then, and I do not want it now," Astarion's mother said through her teeth.

"For yourself, perhaps not, but for your son ... Here, young man, no need to stand. Come sit here." She gestured to a small table beside her that was adorned with a silver jug. "Do you like chocolate?"

Astarion had never heard of it before, but Wendin pulled out one of the chairs, and Astarion sat. The man poured a mug of something brown and steaming that smelled like heaven and passed it to him.

He missed the next few minutes of conversation as he discovered that he liked chocolate very much indeed. He could not believe that it had existed all this time and no one had ever thought to mention it. It was as if someone had taken the smell of freshly turned earth and mixed it with butter and dipped it in honey, only this was better and richer and utterly divine. He surfaced from the chocolate only because his mother shouted, and she never shouted. He looked up, startled, in time to hear his great-grandmother say, "You've had over a decade to ruin the boy. That was the bargain."

"He belongs with his family!"

"I am also his family," Lady Erikinia said, tapping one long finger on the arm of her chair. Rings winked in the lamplight.

His mother drew breath for another impassioned defense, but the old woman cut her off. "Enough of this. Let the boy answer for himself." She turned toward Astarion. "Has your mother explained the bargain to you, then?"

"Errr... no?" He set the empty chocolate mug down, not without some reluctance. "What bargain?"

"Miriana, really?" She clucked her tongue. "Well, I suppose you always did prefer to ignore anything unpleasant if you had the chance to fly away from it."

This was such a staggering insight that Astarion felt as if the world had shifted around him. He would have liked a moment to consider it, but his great-grandmother had turned to speak to him. "Your mother did not enjoy the life of an elvish noblewoman and chose to remove herself from it. She had every right to do so, but as head of the family, I did not feel that she had the right to remove her children without consulting them first." Lady Erikinia gestured in his direction, as if there were any doubt about whom she was referring to. "So, she agreed that her children would be given a choice as to whether they wished to explore their noble heritage or continue as... ah... common folk."

Astarion had the feeling that she had meant to use another word there and changed it out of politeness. His mother was standing on the toes of one foot, the way she did when she was about to launch herself into bird shape.

"I always meant to tell you," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I just ... well, you were so happy at the vineyard, and I didn't want to take that away."

Happy? She'd thought he was *happy*? Astarion stared at her and had the sudden realization that occurs to all children sooner or later: that their parents are merely people, not gods, not all-knowing, not able to read minds. He'd been bored to death and sick of everything, dreaming of the city, and butting heads with his father nearly daily ... and his mother had no idea.

It was freeing. It was terrifying. He had no idea how to feel about it.

"Since you haven't held to your end of the bargain, there's no reason to hold to mine," Lady Erikinia said. "But let's ask the boy, shall we?" She turned back to him. "Well, Astarion, you have a choice. You can turn around and go back where you came from, or you can stay here and learn what it is to be an Ancunín." She smiled her death's-head smile. "Which you may love or hate. I make no promises."

Astarion looked to his mother. She was mouthing words at him, the same words from the inn last night. *Say you want to work at the vineyard like your father.*

His great-grandmother said nothing, simply watching him. She was very old and a little frightening, but she lived in a manor house like nothing he'd ever seen, and even her servants wore silk.

Astarion licked his lips, tasting chocolate, and looked for the loophole. "If I hate it, can I go home again?"

His mother covered her face. Lady Erikinia's smile grew to a sharp-toothed grin. "Certainly, you may. Though I ask you to give it a little time to adjust first. Say, one year?"

"Then I'd like to stay."

He would have apologized to his mother, but she cried out, her voice turning into a falcon's scream, and then she was a bird, beating her wings against the shuttered window.

Wendin unlocked the shutters, letting a spill of light into the room, and the falcon shot out the window and was gone, leaving only echoes behind.

The spawn gathered in Cazador's chambers, a place of pleasure and horror - but mostly horror. Astarion eyed the decorations: more cheap sandstone columns and winged sun disks, painted by artisans who had clearly never seen wings and were possibly a little unclear on the sun as well. Those flight feathers are wrong, he thought absently. He knew that only because he'd watched his mother fly often enough and had registered the shape of her wings without even realizing it.

Huh. He hadn't thought of that in years. Decades, perhaps. It had been far longer since he'd thought of her husband. There was now only one man who came to mind when he heard the word *father*.

"Such a lovely idea, a masked ball," that man murmured. "I attended the most fascinating one last tenday at the Eomane House, for ... well, never mind." He gestured to six boxes tied with ribbon, sitting on a side table. "Gifts for you, my children."

There was a half-second pause while the spawn weighed the word *gifts*. A gift was a dangerous thing in Cazador's hands. It might be an object of surpassing beauty, a necklace wrought in platinum or a coat embroidered in gold. It might just as easily be a dead rat or gloves of silver wire that burned lines into the wearer's skin.

When Cazador opened the first box and revealed a tooled leather mask, the spawn were silent, but the air in the room moved from six exhaled breaths like an unheard sigh of relief. Cazador lifted the mask and turned it in his hands. It was the face of a white fox with a long narrow muzzle and metallic gold markings around the eyes, tied with black ribbon. "Astarion, my dear child, come here."

Astarion went to one knee in front of the elder vampire. Cazador slid the mask onto his face and smiled. Sharp nails slid through Astarion's hair, leaving an erotic tingle along his scalp. In other days, Astarion had enjoyed it when lovers played with his hair. Now he looked at his body's response dispassionately, from somewhere outside, and was glad when Cazador finished tying the ribbon and let him rise.

"How it suits you, my child," the vampire murmured, eyes heavy-lidded.

"Your taste is impeccable, Father," Astarion lied. *With my white hair and skin? No, you want contrast, you old bastard, and it should match my clothes. A black fox, or even a red one, that would work. As it is, my head is going to be a white blob completely unrelated to the rest of me. Ugh, I'll simply have to hope the gold echoes the gold embroidery on this jacket.*

He had been no stranger to masquerade balls in his living days, and he had even worn a fox mask once, but it had been a fantastical orange made of dozens of autumn leaves. The craftsmanship had been better, too.

"Oh, oh, me next!" Violet squealed, clapping her hands together. Cazador smiled indulgently and presented her with a wolf mask in her namesake violet. Astarion leaned over to Dalyria and murmured, "I suppose the shop was out of weasels." Her lips twitched, but she didn't comment.

Petras was presented with a hound mask, which undoubtedly galled him. Yousen's almiraj was too large for his head, and his wire whiskers stuck out absurdly to either side. Dalyria received an owl with delicate golden feathers around a white face mask. Astarion had to admit that it suited her rather well. "For my wise girl," Cazador said, smiling.

And of course the old bastard doesn't know that owls have brains smaller than their eyeballs. Mother used to complain about how her thoughts felt squished after she took owl form.

Gods, he was getting maudlin or nostalgic or something. He adjusted the ribbons against his pointed ears so that the fox fit better.

"And to match your horns, my dear," Cazador purred, sliding a black goat mask onto Aurelia's head. Her face was expressionless, and Astarion suspected, by the way she held

her eyes, that it remained expressionless underneath the mask. That was always the way. You could not tell if she was pleased or humiliated or anything else. It was as if some vital connection between her face and her feelings had been severed long ago.

She had been that way as long as he had known her. He wondered if it was how she had always been or if she had learned it under Cazador, retreating from her flesh like a soldier retreating from a burning keep. Occasionally, when Cazador took it into his head to torture her, she would react, but Astarion always suspected that it was an act, that she chose to scream and bare her teeth so that the old vampire would be satisfied at wringing a response from her and turn his attention elsewhere.

When Astarion had been very newly made and very much a fool, he'd wondered if Aurelia was jealous of him, angry at her new rival, and simply hiding it well. Cazador's delight in making them fight each other like dogs at his feet did not help. It was only later, after the next spawn was made, that Astarion understood the emotions Aurelia never showed - the pity, the grudging solidarity, the endless question: *Will I be able to trust you?* And above all else, the sheer relief that someone else had come to divert their sire's attention.

It was terrible to be a sadist's plaything. It was infinitely worse to be their *only* plaything.

The sadist clapped his hands and admired his toys. "Come, my children. Let us go and meet our guest for dinner."

The guest was a tall wizard wearing crimson robes, which might have meant that he was a Red Wizard of Thay or wanted people to think he was. Alternatively, of course, he could have been one of those wizards who styled himself "So-and-So the Red" or "the Scarlet" or whatever color hadn't already been taken. Most of the good colors had been. Astarion had met a wizard once who called himself "Arroz the Ecru," and he had nodded politely, asked him how he was enjoying the party, then excused himself, gone to the back room, and laughed like a werehyena on a bender.

Unlike the unfortunate ecru wizard, this one looked the part. He was lean and ascetic, head shaven, fingers folded inside his sleeves. His eyes were dark and flat as river stones. The candles on the table woke no reflection in them. If Astarion had encountered him on the street, he would have suddenly remembered a pressing errand on the other side of the city. The spawn took their places as Cazador directed. Five sat down to the table. Petras, in his pale hound mask, was to kneel beside Cazador's throne. This put his head below the level of the table, which Astarion found hilarious. "Perhaps the master will throw you some bones?" he murmured, just loud enough for the other man to hear.

"Don't start."

"Or what? You'll be a bad dog and widdle on my shoe?"

Whatever Petras would have done was lost as Cazador took Astarion's wrist in a grip that looked delicate but could easily have crushed bone. "And you, Astarion, my dear child ... you will wait on our guest particularly. See to his *every* need, won't you?"

Astarion knew full well what that would entail. The wizard was already watching, his air of asceticism marred by the expectant tongue against his lips. He turned his head to meet Astarion's gaze, and the flat gray stones of his eyes suddenly reflected a narrow flash of gold, pupil as vertical as a snake's.

Whatever the wizard was, they were only playing at being human.

Before Astarion could even speak, he felt Cazador's will close over his, just a taste of pressure, enough for him to know that even a hint of disobedience would cost him dearly.

Very well. It was just as it always was. *Avoid pain and feel as little as possible.* It was astonishing the things you would do of your own free will simply to avoid being forced to do them.

His lips curved into a smile honed by a century of practice. "Of course," he purred, stepping forward. "It would be my pleasure."

The red-robed wizard might have been a master of magic, but he had all the subtlety of a rutting boar. They had barely made it through the soup course before Astarion found himself bent over the table while Cazador made conversation over his head.

The cups and plates weren't silver, of course, but they had been polished to a mirror shine. He set his elbows on the table, watching the reflection of the white fox mask as the wizard thrust and grunted behind him. The mask's eyes were cool and aloof, and behind them was nothing, nothing at all.

After dinner, and a reviving cup of blood, Astarion was waved away with the rest of the spawn. The creature pretending to be a wizard lifted a cup in salute in Astarion's direction. He wondered if it was a demon or something more exotic.

If it was a demon - and one powerful enough that Cazador was willing to play host to it - was it a connection worth pursuing? It had enjoyed his body, and this would hardly be the first time Astarion had traded sex for something he wanted.

He thought about it, absently rubbing the spots on his hips where the creature had gripped him. Its touch had been cold, and the skin burned now, awakening memories of stamping his feet when he came in from the snow.

No, it probably wasn't worth it. Devils were dangerous, and their bargains were rarely straightforward. The last thing Astarion wanted was to be in thrall to two masters. Even if he could negotiate for something like "Force Cazador to make me a true vampire," would it be worth it if he was then chained somewhere in the Nine Hells, dancing to the whims of a *truly* immortal master?

He came to a corner in the hallway, still deep in thought, and heard Violet's voice saying, "But we could have so much to talk about."

Astarion immediately froze, then backed away. Judging by the footsteps, Violet was coming this way, along with ...

"And what would that be, my dear?" The thin, sinuous voice could have come only from the faux wizard.

Astarion lost Violet's reply as he slipped down the hall to an alcove with an ornamental urn. Ridiculous things, urns, but this one was large enough that a slim elf could slide down into the space between the urn and the wall and be largely hidden.

Of course, he'd look completely ridiculous if Violet happened to spot him, but he was betting that Violet was focused entirely on her quarry.

"Surely your ... father ... would have something to say? I am much older than you," came the thin voice. By the sudden increase in volume, they must have turned the corner.

"I'm over a hundred years old," Violet said. Even though he couldn't see her, Astarion would have bet diamonds to dog turds that she had just tossed her head.

"Ahh ..." purred the thin voice, like a snakeskin being dragged over gravel. "So young. I can no longer recall my first century. They pile up, you know. You forget things... places... people ..."

"I bet you'll *never* forget me."

Their footsteps were right on top of him. Astarion leaned to one side in time to see Violet with her hands on the faux wizard's arm. The creature turned slightly, looking over her head, and its gaze speared into the shadows of the alcove, directly into Astarion's face.

It winked at him, and then Violet, still prattling, led it past.

If it had been one of the other spawn, Astarion might have considered causing a distraction or at least warning them that they were playing an incredibly dangerous game. But it was Violet, and Violet, frankly, deserved everything she got.

There was a spring in his step as he found his way to Dalyria's laboratory. He saw a light on under the door, which meant that she, at least, was still awake and working.

She looked up when he entered and nodded. If she noticed that his hands were empty of the usual mending, she didn't comment. Instead, she handed him a bowl and said, "Watch this potato."

"Watch it do *what*, exactly?" Astarion tilted his head. He had never given a great deal of thought to raw potatoes, but the specimen in the bowl seemed bog-standard to him.

"That's the question, isn't it? I can't watch them both." She turned her attention back to another bowl, which appeared to contain a turnip.

"Are the root vegetables restless tonight, then?"

"They may be." She rested her chin in her hand, watching the turnip like a vulture waiting for something to die.

For lack of anything better to do, Astarion watched the potato.

It did nothing. His mind began to wander. "What were you saying you needed?" he asked after a while.

Dalyria didn't look away from the turnip. "What?"

"The other night, before we were interrupted by our charming sister Violet. You started to say that you required something."

"Ah." The thin line between her eyebrows deepened. "I doubt you can help me."

"You never know unless you ask." He waited until she glanced away from the turnip, then gave her a carefully curated smile, charming without being so charming that it would arouse suspicion.

"Why would you help me?"

"Because I'm bored senseless," he said, which was true. "You have your laboratory to occupy you during the long daylight hours, but I've read every book in the palace that the old man doesn't keep under lock and key, I've hand-embroidered three entire coats, and I am at risk of going to the archives and digging through old property deeds to see if I can swindle money out of widows and orphans. Or *for* widows and orphans. I haven't decided yet."

Dalyria's lips curled in a hint of a smile, but the line between her eyebrows didn't fade. She went back to watching the turnip. Eventually, she seemed to come to some conclusion.

"Unicorn's blood," she said.

Astarion choked, swallowed wrong, and started coughing. Dalyria picked up a beaker full of water and handed it to him without taking her eyes off her turnip. When he could breathe again, he said, "*Blood?*"

"Horn is easy enough to come by. I've experimented with it a fair amount already. But vampirism is blood-borne, and I am beginning to think that blood must be used to cure it. *Innocent* blood. Blood with healing properties. What better?"

"Unicorns can think," said Astarion. "You can't drink it."

"I don't plan to drink it. The sample I have in mind is too old to be potable anyway. By this point, it is likely nothing but a jar-shaped scab."

"How very appetizing."

Dalyria shrugged. "Blood doesn't keep if you don't renew the spells on it. You know that." Astarion did indeed know that. The goblets in Cazador's house all had minor charms on them to keep the blood from clotting up too quickly, but every one of the spawn had had the experience of being thrown a dead rat and having to practically chew the blood out of its veins. Most of them had also tried to get clever at some point early on and stash blood in their room, only to find that the enchantments on the goblets weren't terribly strong and the contents either dried up or separated into a putrid mess within hours.

He was about to ask where she'd learned about the unicorn blood in the first place, but his potato suddenly lurched. Astarion almost dropped the bowl in surprise, but he caught it before it crashed to the floor. "Your potato is doing something."

"Already?"

The potato had a dozen eyes, which slowly opened into a myriad of tiny mouths lined with infinitesimal teeth.

"... *mama*?" it said in a small, breathy voice.

"This is disturbing," Astarion said. "I am disturbed. What in the Nine Hells did you do to this vegetable?"

"I filled several pots of dirt with moss supposedly excavated from the body of the dead god Moander, watered them with an infusion of various unwholesome herbs, and fertilized them with composted otyugh dung."

"As one does."

"... *mama*!"

"Take your evil god-potato," Astarion said, holding out the bowl. "I am not babysitting it."

Dalyria took the potato, picking it up with tongs - the tiny mouths bit at it ineffectively - and dropped it into a jar of liquid. It settled slowly to the bottom, thrashing as well as a root vegetable could. She screwed the lid onto the jar and set it on a shelf, muttering to herself.

"Is your turnip going to do that?"

Dalyria sighed regretfully. "I don't think so. The potatoes are the only ones that change. The turnips don't do anything, and the carrot seeds didn't even germinate, although that might be faulty seed. Do not ask me about the kohlrabi."

"Darling, I assure you that I have never asked anyone about kohlrabi in my life, and I do not intend to start now." He shuddered theatrically. "Somehow, the unicorn scab is less disturbing. What do you plan to do with it?"

"I plan to place a drop of my blood in it and see what the results are." She abandoned her turnip to look at him. "Think of it. Innocence in concentrated form. If there is anything that could cure vampirism ..."

Astarion shook his head slowly. "You don't think small, I'll give you that. And where might one find your... err ... jar of scab?"

She told him.

There were two magic shops in town, and Gurgan's Magic Emporium was the other one. The original wizard Gurgan had died decades ago, and it was now run by a relative who clearly had not found joy in running a magic shop. Rumor had it that the building hadn't been cleaned since the Spellplague. The shop probably contained wonders, but you could never find anything in it, and that included the traps. And while shops were public spaces where a vampire could walk in without difficulty, and the new owner lived off-site, there was no telling what magical countermeasures had been put in place to keep out thieves. Well, he'd said that he was bored.

Astarion looked up the outside of the building and sighed heavily. It was four stories tall and built in that style of architecture common to the Lower City of Baldur's Gate, where any bits of previous buildings on the lot were slathered with mortar and incorporated into the structure. These bits included a squat brick guardhouse, a glassblower's chimney, and the remnants of a cathedral to some god no one remembered, full of complicated bits of buttress and a few broken gargoyles. It looked like a wedding cake made by drunken goblins. He traced a likely route up with his eyes, took off his socks and boots, tucked them away into the shadow of a drainpipe, and got to work.

He hated spider climbing. He just wasn't very good at it. Some people could calmly walk upside down on a ceiling as if gravity applied to others. Aurelia was good at it. So was Violet, to his chagrin. Astarion could really only do it on all fours, and only if he took off his shoes. His brain kept insisting that no, down was that way, and while he didn't fall off, he got extremely queasy and tended to stumble.

He looked around one more time to make sure no one was watching, then went up the side of the building, looking less like a spider and more like an anemic gecko with a fear of heights.

There were pigeons nesting under the eaves. They hadn't woken up. Astarion made sure his feet were properly braced on a stone gargoyle, reached out, and wrung one's neck before it even stirred. He sank his fangs into the plump body, past the layer of feathers, and there it was.

Blood ran down his throat, thin and hot, stronger than whiskey, smoother than wine. It pulsed over his tongue as the pigeon's heart beat frantically, the wings still trembling as the bird tried mindlessly to escape. Astarion gave himself over to a rush of sensation that made the best orgasm of his life seem banal by comparison.

When the pigeon's heart had stopped and the rush had finally faded, Astarion picked a feather out of his teeth and set the small corpse down on the roof. *Another? I do have work to do...*

Well, perhaps one more.

He reached for another bird, and it opened its eyes and yelled, "Get off, you bastard! What're you doing?"

Astarion groaned. The bliss of blood drinking was driven out by the weight of his annoyance. "Oh," he said. "It's *you*."

The bird cocked its head to one side, studying him out of one beady orange eye. "Do I know you?"

"We've met."

"Have we?" The bird thought for a minute. "Sorry. Memory's not what it was. Who're you again?"

"I'm named Petras," Astarion lied, "and you're Rooftop Henry."

"That I am," the bird said, settling down out of arm's reach. "That I am." He observed the roof with a proprietary air. "You robbin' the place?"

"That was the plan."

Rooftop Henry nodded. "Good choice, good choice."

Every burglar in Baldur's Gate knew who Rooftop Henry was, although nobody knew *what* he was. He definitely wasn't a bird, for all that he appeared to be a rather disreputable cross between a pigeon and a seagull. There were a number of theories, from a lost familiar to a wild-shaped druid who had somehow gotten stuck, to a polymorph spell gone horribly wrong.

Astarion's personal favorite was that Henry had been a smuggler who had acquired a load of magical items, been cornered by the Watch, and, in a desperate attempt to hide the evidence, had tried to swallow a wand of wonder.

Regardless of his origin, Rooftop Henry fell somewhere between an extremely clever parrot and an extremely dim person. His memory for most things wasn't good, though he knew down to the minute when the local inns put their trash out. On a good night, he was willing to act as sentry in return for a bite to eat. He was, in fact, a member in good standing of the Thieves' Guild, though it was rumored that the treasurer covered his dues herself after he had attempted to pay in regurgitated herring.

"Breaking in, are we?" the bird asked, gazing over Astarion's shoulder.

"That was also the plan." Astarion worked his way around to the other side of the gargoyle and leaned down to examine the nearest window. The latch was absurdly easy, which meant that there were almost certainly alarm spells in place. He unrolled the soft leather strip that held his tools - lockpicks, assorted instruments, and a diamond ring so gaudy that he would never dream of wearing it but which served admirably for cutting glass. Yet another thing that Cazador didn't know about. The Guild maintained several safe houses around the city with lockers where one could keep tools, a change of clothing, or even loot that had gotten too hot to handle. Astarion kept his equipment in one of them and made sure that his own dues were paid up regularly. Death was nothing compared to what the Guild would do if they found you working independently.

"Hey. Hey, mister."

Astarion selected a thin metal implement with a hook on the end, which he'd stolen from a healer who specialized in tooth extraction. It was also very good for catching hidden wires.

"Hey, you. Mister vampire."

Astarion sighed. He thought about denying it, but the drained corpse of the pigeon was literally six inches to Henry's left. Fortunately, the odds of Henry remembering this conversation in an hour were minimal. "Yes?"

"You don't want *that* window, mister."

"Don't I?"

"Nah." Rooftop Henry began preening under one wing and appeared to get distracted.

Astarion had reached out with the hook and was mere inches from the window frame when the bird remembered what he was saying. "There's spells on that one."

"There are spells on all of them, I imagine."

It was impossible for a bird to smirk without lips, but Henry tried. "You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

Astarion leaned back and gave the bird his full attention. "I assume that means there's a window that *isn't* spelled?"

"Might be, might be. I happen to know there's one built at just the wrong angle by that chimney over there." He gestured with a wing. "There's an owl sleeps there during the day."

"An owl." Astarion folded his arms. "So is this owl a wizard? Has he dispelled the alarms on a window?"

"Don't be daft." The bird spat on the shingles. Astarion had never seen a bird spit contemptuously before and decided that he didn't need to see it again. "It's a regular owl. Eats mice and rats. Then it does what owls do ..."

He looked expectantly at Astarion.

"Makes more owls?"

"No, you addlebrained bloodsucker!" Henry bounced up and down on clawed red feet, clearly irate. "Don't you know nothin' 'bout birds? It pukes up owl pellets. All the bits and bones and hair that it don't want cluttering up its guts."

"How unpleasantly biological."

"Yeah, well. Ashes to ashes, shit to shit." He spat again. "Point is, the pellets hit the window every time, which sets off the alarms, so after about two tendays, the apprentice who sets all the spells stopped doing that one."

Astarion sat up, suddenly very interested. "Have they, now?"

"Yep. Could even show you the window." Henry cocked his head to one side, purely birdlike.

"'Course, I'd expect a consideration in return, belike."

Astarion smiled, keeping his lips over his teeth. "Naturally. May I offer you a dead pigeon?"

"After you've had your mouth on it? Shove off. I may be a bird, but at least I'm not a bloodsucker."

"That is really not how vampirism works."

"Says the *vampire*."

Astarion rubbed his temples. He didn't even know if birds could become vampire spawn. It had never really come up. *I suppose I could ask Cazador, but... no, I don't want to have to explain any of this.* "Fine," he said. "What do you want?"

Rooftop Henry told him. "You're serious?"

"Serious as the pox, mate."

As deals went, it was one of the easiest Astarion had ever made. "Very well. Assuming this window is useful to me, I'll get it for you."

"Shake on it?"

"How, exactly?"

Rooftop Henry stood on one leg and extended the other. Hoping that no one on the roofs of Baldur's Gate happened to be looking in their direction, Astarion carefully shook the little red claw.

"Right," Henry said. "C'mon, then. And go easy on the shingles, unless you want a quick trip to the ground."

The window was exactly as described, tucked at an awkward angle against the chimney that had once vented heat and gases and was now home to more bats than Szarr Palace. The stone walls were whitewashed with bird shit. Astarion tucked his cloak fastidiously around his shoulders to make certain that none of it got on his clothes.

If there was a spell on the window, it was too subtle for his senses to detect. There was a trip wire, but that was just common sense. He clamped it delicately into place and removed the windowpane under Henry's mad gaze. There was a desk under the window, but it left just enough of a gap that he could slide the glass pane down between it and the wall.

"I don't suppose you know what's waiting *inside*?"

"Oh, sure, mate, they invite me around for tea every holy day, regular." The bird spat again.

"Perhaps they would if you had better table manners."

"Don't start with me, bloodsucker. I saw what you did to that pigeon."

Astarion realized that he was on the losing end of a verbal battle with an enchanted seagull and decided to quit while he still retained some shred of dignity. The window wasn't large, but Astarion was nothing if not flexible, as a number of lovers knew to their delight. He put an arm through and moved it cautiously. No eldritch tingling sensations, no unexpected transformations, no difficulty crossing the threshold... *Excellent.*

"I'll just keep watch out here, shall I?" Rooftop Henry said, and he tucked himself into a neat gray-and-white loaf shape while Astarion went to rob someone blind.

The window let into a room that had probably been an office at some point but that now looked like the scene of a small, localized blizzard of paper. Astarion climbed in atop the desk and spent several minutes planning out where to put his feet. There were only a few bare spots. Everything else was practically designed to rustle, crunch, or fall over.

Eventually, he slid down and made his way to the door, walking on his toes. The only bad moment was when his cloak brushed against a small mountain of scrolls and they began to slide. He caught the top one before it could hit the ground and spent several minutes carefully resettling them so that he was not trapped under an avalanche of paper.

Ugh, this was probably the wrong cloak to wear. It was just a hair too long, but if he'd worn the good one, it would currently be covered in pigeon shit. And to launder it would require going all the way across town to the Guild washerwoman, who could be trusted not to raise a fuss about little things like fresh blood or garottes accidentally left in pockets, and it would have been more annoyance, and not the fun kind of annoyance where you got to pick locks and stab people. He was willing to do a favor for Dalyria, but there were limits.

He crouched down and slid a highly polished knife blade under the door. To the left, he saw only a dim hallway that ended in a staircase down to the third floor. To the right, more hallway, and a narrow door that might have been a broom closet but probably wasn't. For one thing, most broom closets didn't have a spell-lock that glowed blue.

"Gurgan kept his most valuable items in a safe room on the fourth floor," Dalyria had told him. "Unicorn blood among them, since he kept trying to sell it to me. Rumor has it that the current owner can't even get into the safe room, so it should still be there."

Astarion was just about to pull the knife back when he saw movement.

Something very large came padding down the hallway. It was pitch black, a dark silhouette against the gray shadows of the hall. Astarion caught a glimpse of a squared-off head and stifled a groan.

Where the hell did Gurgan get a shadow mastiff? The old bastard was far too cheap to pay for a whelp, surely. Astarion had known a widow long ago who attended salons with a shadow mastiff on a leash, but she'd been the sort who could drop two hundred gold on a canine monstrosity from the Shadowfell without even noticing.

Astarion tried to remember what he knew about shadow mastiffs, and all he could think of was that the widow's pet had been named Ruffles. *No, no, focus. Their vision's not good, is it? At least, that's what she said when Ruffles attacked that bard's lute. Of course, their hearing is excellent, which is presumably why it was attacking the bard in the first place ...*

He slowly pulled the knife back, breathing silently through his mouth. What about smell? He hadn't worn his signature scent - he never did on a job; you never knew who would take offense to rosemary, bergamot, and brandy. If anything, he probably smelled strongly of pigeon blood and pigeon shit.

Pigeon shit. Yes.

Moving as soundlessly as he could, he pulled the edge of his cloak forward. The streaks of white stood out brightly against the dark fabric. He pressed it against the gap under the doorway and waited.

Click ... click... click ... click...

The mastiff's claws clicked strangely on the wooden floor, as the sound were echoing in some distant room. Astarion listened to it approach, seized by the memory of hiding in the alcove, listening to Violet and the demon coming closer.

Why is this my life? More people ought to be hiding and listening to me walk by.

Click... click...

The mastiff stopped. Astarion was afraid to even blink for fear the beast could hear the scrape of his eyelids. *Go on, go on, keep moving...*

On the other side of the door, the shadow beast lowered its head and snuffled at the threshold. The sound of air being sucked into its nostrils seemed as loud as a dragon's wingbeats.

Then it made an explosive huffing noise and lifted its head.

Click... click... click ... click ...

Astarion reflected on the indignity of owing one's safety to pigeon shit. He waited until the sound of the mastiff's nails had faded before he slipped the blade out again. It showed a black smear of shadow retreating down the hall, then vanishing as it descended the staircase there.

If it's patrolling the whole building, I should have... let's see, about four minutes before it comes back this way. Plenty of time. Probably.

He oiled the hinges and the doorknob because he was pretty sure the owner didn't care if they squeaked. The knob turned easily beneath his hand, probably more easily than it had since the day it was installed. Astarion slipped out, closing the door behind him, and went to the spell-locked door.

A glance was sufficient to tell him that he couldn't pick it. That was fine. Wizards tended to trust far too much to magic, in his experience. Someone could fit the most incredible lock in the world and have it blessed by everyone from Mask to Mystra, but it wouldn't do a damn bit of good if you could just pry the hinges off.

In this case, you could not pry the hinges off. But there were doors on either side of this one with locks that were frankly insulting. Astarion laid a hand on the nearest one and felt the definite repulsion of a private space. *Hmm, the new owner might have an office here. Or a room where he takes naps.*

The far door, fortunately, had no such prohibition. Astarion popped the lock in the space of two breaths and scanned the room beyond.

Ah, I see I've found the dust and cobweb storage area.

There was magic there, making the hair on the back of his neck prickle, but it clearly hadn't been disturbed in ages. The last set of tracks in the dust were made by a style of sole that hadn't been popular for twenty years. Astarion shut the door behind him and made his way between old crates, chairs groaning under the weight of boxes, and what appeared to be a harp made out of dragonbone, carved into the shape of a wyrm. It was definitely magical, but he had his doubts that it would fit in his pocket.

The wall that the room shared with the one behind the locked door was beam and plaster, and on the fourth floor, the interior would almost certainly be filled with plaster, not stone. If noise hadn't been a problem, Astarion could have gone through it in thirty seconds. As it was, it took him more like twenty minutes, and he dulled a knife hacking at it. Every few minutes, he had to stop and wait as the shadow mastiff passed by, clicking.

Eventually, however, he had chopped a hole large enough to wriggle through. The plaster was old and brittle and should have been redone decades earlier.

And there it was, a small windowless room that probably *had* been a broom closet at one point. The blue glow of the spell-lock reflected off half a dozen objects arranged on shelves - vials, jewelry, and a folded cloth so covered in dust that it was impossible to make out its original color.

Once he'd wiped away the grime, he saw that the vials were labeled in spidery handwriting. The second one he took down read UNICORN BLOOD.

Astarion smiled down at the vial. "What a worthless thing you are... and what does that make me, taking so much trouble to obtain you?"

Still, since he was here, he might as well help himself. He pocketed two rings and a necklace and gave a wide berth to what looked like a tiara made of spider legs that had an attached label reading CURSED.

No, really? And it looks so friendly, too. The folded cloth felt like spidersilk and did not leap out and attempt to smother him. He pocketed it as well, decided he'd pushed his luck as far as it could go, and crawled back out through the hole in the plaster.

"And that is a good night's work," he murmured to himself. A good night's work for a skilled thief, if not a master. And with an endless life ahead of him, was mastery not within his grasp? Astarion grinned, did a triumphant pirouette, and turned to stroll toward the door. The edge of his too-long cloak flared out as he spun, and it brushed a string of the dragonbone harp.

A ripple of music filled the air, softly at first, then gaining volume. Green light crackled up the strings.

"Oh no," Astarion whispered.

The carved wyrm's head flexed, turned, and opened ivory jaws. An explosive glissando of notes erupted from the strings as the wyrm inhaled.

"Ohhhhhh, gather round, lads, and I'll tell you the tale -"

"Stop!" Astarion hissed. "Stop, stop! Cancel! End! *Neshanas!* Stop!"

"- of a dragonborn lass with a come-hither tail -"

"Shit, shit, shit!" He snatched a dustcloth off a chair and tried to cram it into the wyrm's mouth. It spat out the fabric and snapped at his hand, still singing.

"- mm-mm of diamond and a throat made of pearl -"

Astarion bolted for the door. The music swelled triumphantly behind him.

"- and did things with her tongue that would make your toes curl -"

Downstairs, the shadow mastiff began to bark.

He tore down the hallway, no longer bothering with stealth or anything like it. The barking was coming closer and turning into a bay as the mastiff took the stairs. The baying had a dark, discordant note to it that chilled the blood in Astarion's veins.

Behind him, the harp was belting out the chorus.

"Oh, I'm broke and I'm tired and I can't help but weep -"

Astarion groped for the knob of the office door and discovered that it had locked itself.

"- and I'll never get home to old Waterdeep -"

Gods and devils, when I oiled it, I must have unstuck the lock. Tymora, why do you hate me?

He yanked out a lockpick, missed the keyhole twice, and got it in on the third try, which would have woken unpleasant specters of losing his virginity if his mind hadn't been so intensely focused on a) the tumblers and b) whether vampire spawn could return from inside a dog.

"- so listen, my young lads, and learn from my tale -"

The bay rang off the walls. If it had been anything but an absolutely cut-rate lock, Astarion would have learned whether he could fight off a shadow mastiff with a dagger and his teeth. But it was the same model as the one on the storeroom door, and he had it open before the harp had finished the chorus.

"- for you can't trust a lass with a come-hither tail!"

Astarion hurtled through the door, looked up, saw black teeth coming at him, and slammed the door in the monster's face. He fumbled with the lock, wasting precious seconds, then wood splintered next to his head, and the mastiff's jaws came through the flimsy door.

Right. Fuck that lock. Astarion was across the room in an instant, papers flying up like startled birds in his wake. He heard crashing noises from the door as he leapt for the top of the desk, got his shoulders through the window, pushed off -

And stopped.

The mastiff was no longer baying, but unearthly growls leaked from the sides of its muzzle as it hung onto his trouser leg. Astarion slowly flexed his bare foot and felt his toes brush against coarse fur, drawn-back lips, and then wet gums and slick, dripping teeth.

Oh, this is bad.

They were at a dreadful stalemate. If the shadow mastiff let go of the leather, it could probably take most of his foot off in one bite. But if Astarion was faster than it was, he could yank his foot out of the window and be gone. Either way, it was the dog's decision.

"Good dog? Drop it?"

Foam dripped onto his ankle. He cautiously freed one hand, hoping to reach his dagger, but the dog twisted its muzzle, trying to pull him back. Astarion grabbed for the windowsill and hung on for dear life. "Bad dog! Errr... horrible, evil dog!"

In the distance, the harp twanged out a strained rhyme between *lost* and *lust* that Astarion would have had very strong opinions about under normal circumstances.

And then, like a thunderbolt, like a comet, like an extremely cheap gift from the gods, Rooftop Henry dove through the window and slammed his sharply curved beak into the shadow mastiff's nose.

The monster let go with a yelp. Astarion was out the window so fast that he had to slap both palms against the wall and think very hard about being a spider to avoid plummeting to his death.

He flung himself headfirst down the brickwork, hearing enraged barking and a few inventive avian curse words behind him. Then he was on the ground, the beautiful, glorious ground. Why had he left it in the first place? When he became a real vampire, he was never going to turn into a bat, and that was *final*.

The mastiff began to bay again. The sound echoed off the cobblestones and chilled the air. He looked up and saw a black muzzle jammed through the window as it barked. There was no sign of Rooftop Henry.

The trick to these things was to pretend that you weren't involved. Astarion reclaimed his shoes and socks and ducked into an alley to put himself to rights. The shadow mastiff let out a howl that curdled the fog around it.

He dressed hastily, wiped the worst of the bird shit off his cloak, got to the end of the alley, and broke into a very serious stroll. As the mastiff's barking began to fade, he made sure to look back over his shoulder with the pointedly concerned expression of an elf out late who had no idea what that noise was but didn't like it.

Two guardsmen passed him a block or two later, and he nodded coolly to them - *ha ha, no, Officer, this isn't my vial of unicorn blood, I'm just holding it for a friend*. He made sure he was several streets over and the baying had faded completely before he leaned against a wall and let the adrenaline wear off.

That had been *embarrassingly* close.

You got sloppy. You started gloating before the job was done. You know better. He did know better. But a good gloat was one of the few pleasures left to him, so he'd indulged, and, like any overindulgence, he'd paid the price.

He examined his trouser leg. The dark leather had clear tooth marks and had begun to tear along the seam. The wages of overconfidence were more repair work.

With a clap of wings, Rooftop Henry landed on a barrel next to him and said, "You owe me, bloodsucker."

Of course. The evening needed only that.

"Right," Astarion said. "What was it that you wanted, again?"

He considered simply ignoring Henry's request - after all, how long would the bird really remember? - but decided against it. There was always the chance that Henry wouldn't forget a grudge, and while most people would ignore anything he said about a vampire eating pigeons on the roof, Astarion wasn't inclined to take the chance. Not after the prostitute had put him on his guard.

Anyway, it was on the way to the Guild locker where he stored most of his things.

So, with as much dignity as he could muster, he went into Redfur's All-Night Fish and Chips on the dock and came out five minutes later with a large bottle of the house sauce.

Rooftop Henry landed next to him, small eyes bright with desire. "You got it? You got it?"

"Yes," said Astarion, "my skills do extend to going up to a counter and ordering." He set the bottle down on the sidewalk.

Henry pounced on it, jammed his beak into the cork like a living bottle opener, and popped it out. He pried the cork off his beak with one foot, then stuck most of his head inside the bottle. "Oh yeah," Astarion heard, muffled by sauce. "Oh yeah, that's the stuff."

Astarion rubbed his face and wondered how his unlife had come to this.

"Are we square, then?" he asked.

Henry emerged from the bottle, beak smeared with sauce. "Yeah, we're square." He recorked the bottle with practiced ease. "You wouldn't believe how this stuff goes with raw herring." The seagull studied Astarion for a moment. "What was your name again?"

"Petras."

"Right, right. And you're a ... thing. Tip of my tongue. Eats people, something like that?"

"Zombie," Astarion said. "Petras the zombie. Just remember that."

Dalyria was so grateful to get the vial of unicorn blood that for one horrible instant, Astarion thought she might hug him. Fortunately, the shutters slammed down behind her eyes, and her expression smoothed out before he was forced to make a hasty exit.

"Well, here is your bottle of unicorn scab," Astarion said. "You can't imagine the indignities I went through to acquire it. In fact, I would suggest against trying to imagine it. Harrowing is not too strong a word."

"Ah." Her eyes were riveted on the vial.

"Where did you even find out about this, anyway?"

"Eh? Oh. Gurgan was always trying to sell me the damn thing. Of course, I didn't need it *then*. By the time I did, he was dead, and his replacement couldn't get at it."

Astarion might have asked why a well-known and highly regarded physician was on speaking terms with a two-bit black-market mage, but it was clear that Dalyria had already relegated him to the least interesting thing in the room. She gazed into the small reddish-brown vial with an expression that Astarion had seen only once before. It had been on the face of a young man who had gazed at him with eyes that blazed with hope and fear and desire, as if Astarion might be the answer to the dreams he'd never even had.

The memory curdled his stomach. "Enjoy your scab," he said shortly, and let himself out. He was fairly sure that Dalyria didn't even register that he'd gone.

"Speech?" Astarion said. "Why do I need a class on speech? I can speak just fine." His instructor sighed. It was a small room, and the sigh of an operatically trained dwarf echoed off the walls like a flight of startled doves. "Because," she said, pulling at her sideburns, "speech is important. Your voice can change how people react to you. Think of Lady Erikinia. If she sounded frail and frightened, would you react the same way as you do now?"

Astarion had to admit he probably wouldn't.

"No, you wouldn't. No one would. Society would hardly allow -" She stopped, the last words lost on her tongue.

"Allow what?"

The dwarf woman shook her head dismissively. "An unimportant distraction. In *your* case," she said, putting her hands on her squat hips, "no matter how finely you are dressed, if you go into society speaking as you do, people will laugh behind their hands at the country bumpkin."

Astarion flushed. His clothes were indeed very fine - silk that slipped over his skin like mist, kidskin gloves that felt almost buttery against his fingers, embroidered cuffs in all the colors of a peacock's tail. They had all been rescued from the upper attics and cut down to fit him, but the castoffs of previous generations of Ancuníns were almost absurdly luxurious. Bajia and Astarion had been sent up to the attics the day after Astarion arrived, with instructions to "find something suitable for him to wear for now." Astarion had climbed up the ladder, itself a beautifully gnarled piece of druidic craftsmanship, and found himself gazing across a vast space the size of a ballroom. Dust motes danced in the light of dormer windows, which illuminated enough chests, trunks, old furniture, suits of armor, and moth-eaten taxidermy to provide a respectable horde for the more peculiar sort of dragon. Nearly a thousand years of Ancuníns had accumulated an unbelievable amount of stuff, most of which had eventually found its way to the attics.

"Right," Bajia said, cracking her knuckles. "Let's see what we've got."

The first trunk contained old linen sheets, the second trunk held letters between two long-dead lovers, and the third trunk proved to be locked.

Bajia reached into her pocket, pulled out two thin pieces of metal, inserted them into the lock, and popped it open in the space of a couple of breaths.

Astarion was immediately diverted from the stuffed bulette he'd been coveting. "Did you just *pick a lock*?"

"I did indeed," Bajia said, sitting back on her heels. "And I have uncovered a trove of ... old silverware." She held up a tarnished salad fork. "How nice."

"Can you do it again? And show me how?" Astarion had read books where dashing rogues picked locks, but the authors had never gone into detail. He'd been half convinced it was some sort of magic spell.

"Your great-grandmother probably wouldn't approve of me teaching you."

"*Pleeeeeease*? Please, please, please?"

Bajia sighed. "Fine, but if I find out you're using it to get into places you shouldn't, I'll have your great-grandmother put a geas on you. This is the pick, and this is the tension bar..."

It turned out that it wasn't as easy as Bajia made it look. You needed incredibly sensitive fingertips and a great deal of patience. She had probably expected him to give up in disgust within a few minutes. But he wanted to impress Bajia as much as he'd wanted to impress his

old teacher, and the single-minded focus of a child on something he genuinely cares about is the bane of parents everywhere.

When the lock actually clicked open, Astarion was so surprised that he fell over backward, then began giggling wildly. "I did it! I actually did it!"

"Well done," Bajia said. "And the chest contains ... oh, these are some rather nice velvets." She pulled them out and shook off the dust. They smelled of cedar, but when Astarion ran his hand over the fabric, it was like stroking the fur of some gloriously exotic beast.

"Looks like these were tunics." Bajia held one up to Astarion's shoulders and snorted when the fabric pooled on the floor at his feet. "Still, we can have them cut down to fit." She nodded to his lockpicks. "Now, let's see if you can find some silk to go with it, hmm?"

By the time they had assembled the makings of a suitable wardrobe, most of a tenday had passed, and Astarion could pick both a pin tumbler lock and a warded lock, which turned out not to be magically warded but to have a complicated system of metal walls to prevent keys from turning. Bajia gave him his very own skeleton key, which he treasured above all his other possessions.

It was a glorious tenday of luxury and illicit learning. Unfortunately, at the end of that tenday, the speech tutor arrived, and Astarion learned the downside of being a noble.

He wanted to be angry at the dwarven woman. He wanted to say that it didn't matter how he sounded.

Nevertheless, it was true that when he spoke, he could hear the broadness of his vowels compared to hers, Bajia's, and those of the other upper servants.

I sound like my father, he thought, and winced.

His instructor touched his shoulder. "Listen to me, Astarion. I am not here to make you feel badly about yourself. In many other places, your accent would be thought charming. But society is full of bullies who will turn on you if they perceive the slightest weakness. I am here to make certain that when you go about in society, there is nothing in your voice or your speech that they can use against you."

Astarion drew a breath and let it out. Part of him still wanted to be hurt, to nurse that hurt within himself and pick at the pain like a half-healed scab. But another, more adult part of him whispered, *Do you want to stay in this world of silks and chocolate and grand houses? Or do you want to sulk and refuse to learn and go back to spreading cow shit on the dirt under the grapes?*

He straightened to his full height, which was only a few inches taller than his instructor.

"Teach me," he said. "I'm ready to learn."

The dwarf smiled. "Let us begin with the proper terms of address for people of rank, starting at the top. Repeat after me: *Your Majesty*..."

It was not only speech and deportment that Astarion learned in that first year in his grandmother's house. She hired a tutor who said plainly that there was little they could teach Astarion of reading, but they taught him an elegant hand to go with the serviceable script he had learned in the schoolhouse. The stable master taught him to ride a horse, which he did not particularly enjoy, though arguably they had gotten off on the wrong foot. On the first day, the man had asked him if he'd ever ridden before, and Astarion said, without thinking, "Oh, yes. I've ridden my mother."

The stable master's face went absolutely blank, and he said, in an extremely careful voice, "I'm sorry, youngster, I think I misheard you."

"My mother," Astarion said. "Um ... she's a druid?" And as the man continued to stare at him: "She would turn into a bear sometimes?"

And a draft horse that time when we had to clear the south field?"

The stable master cleared his throat and said, "That's not quite the same thing. And ... son?" He leaned in and dropped his voice. "Don't tell people that. Or if you do, explain that you were a child. Otherwise, they're going to get the wrong impression."

Astarion agreed, bewildered. The stable master put him on a pony. The pony realized within seconds that its rider expected his steed to direct itself, then directed itself to the nearest patch of clover. The stable master took a flask out of his pocket and gazed at it longingly, then put it back without touching it.

The notion of bits and bridles and reins and whips struck Astarion as rude, bordering on monstrous, but he eventually learned to direct the pony in a manner that did not make the stable master want to drink. At that point, he graduated to a horse, which was a lot taller than a pony. It was even taller than his mother in bear shape, an observation that he kept to himself. And it went a *lot* faster, and when Astarion fell off, it did not stop to see if he was okay. It just kept running.

He limped into dinner with his great-grandmother that night. They dined together once a tenday and took tea irregularly, as her health permitted. When she saw him moving as if he'd fractured half his ribs and both his shoulders, she asked him what had happened, then burst out laughing at the answer.

"Oh, my poor boy," she said, putting a hand to her chest as she gasped. "Oh, sit down, and I'll tell you about when my father taught me to take fences. Wendin, fetch some brandy. The hundred year, I think."

Wendin bowed very slightly. "I fear that we are out of the hundred year, Madam."

Lady Erikinia made a soft tutting sound. "Anything over two hundred years should *never* be used medicinally."

"I believe we have a quite adequate fifty year, Madam."

She sighed. "The cellars have declined, as have we all. Very well, fetch this youthful brandy for our youthful relative."

Astarion's great-grandmother told him a rambling but hilarious story, which helped. The brandy burned his throat but also seemed to help.

It was odd, though - when Wendin poured, Astarion caught a glimpse of the label. While his education at the vineyard had been sorely lacking, one thing he *did* know was bottle labels, and this one was not fifty years old, nor even ten years.

He looked up at Wendin, who shook his head very slightly.

It was odd, but so many things were odd now that Astarion scarcely knew what to make of any of it.

When he was not dining with Lady Erikinia, he ate with his department teacher - who peppered the conversation with reminders about his elbows and the size of his bites - or with Bajia, or sometimes by himself. There were no boys his age at the manor house.

Perhaps he was lonely, but if so, he had been lonely all his life. And now, at least, he was lonely and comfortable and learning things, and even though he had to work hard, it was work he didn't mind doing, unlike his work in the vineyard.

Bajia taught him both dance and the rudiments of fighting with a rapier. They practiced in a little packed-earth yard off the stables that was no longer used and had weeds growing at the edges that put up small cheerful yellow flowers.

"Will I be able to fight duels?" he asked Bajia one day, after she had chased him around the yard until they were both out of breath.

"Fight them, yes. Win them ... probably not." She looked him frankly up and down, like a horse buyer with a questionable animal. "Not unless you get more muscle on you than I

expect you will. You've got speed, which is a damn sight better than nothing, but one wrong parry against a bigger sword will snap your blade."

Astarion, who had nurtured a secret fantasy of becoming a dashing swordsman, sighed.

"You'd probably make a decent knife fighter," Bajia said carelessly, gathering up their equipment.

Astarion's ears immediately perked up. "Knives?" His dreams of duels were rapidly replaced by dreams of daring midnight assassinations, leaping down from a rooftop to plant a knife in the kidney of some nefarious villain doing whatever it was that nefarious villains did.

Bajia groaned. "Don't get that look. It's not the sort of thing nobles are supposed to learn. It's dirty fighting, it's underhanded, and your great-grandmother probably wouldn't approve of me teaching you."

"That's what you said about the locks."

She rubbed the spot between her eyebrows. "Which I already regret."

"But you *can* teach me?"

The human woman looked around the yard as if expecting someone to come to her rescue. When no one did, she looked up at the sky, possibly hoping for an imminent dragon attack. When this also failed to materialize, her lips did a complicated dance and eventually settled on resignation. "I can. If only because sending you out into the world with a sword is asking for someone to gut you like a fish, and I'd hate for all those dancing lessons to go to waste." She reached out and ruffled his hair, which he hated from most people but rather enjoyed from Bajia. "Fine. I'll rummage up some blunted daggers and see what I can do."

Astarion took to knife fighting like a goose to mayhem. He loved that the strategy was to close in on your opponent and disarm them, and he loved even more that stabbing your opponent in the kidney was considered a perfectly valid path to victory. Furthermore, he was *good* at it. Even though Bajia beat him nineteen times out of twenty, she had to be quick to do it, and the rare occasions when he scored a touch on her left him radiant with pride. He felt *dangerous*, and as a twelve-year-old boy, he'd had precious few opportunities to feel that way.

It was just horribly awkward when his mother arrived on his thirteenth birthday, dropping down directly in front of him as he was attempting to slice a blunted dagger across Bajia's throat.

He hadn't been watching the sky, that was the problem. For his first twelve years of life, Astarion had known that if he could see the sky, his mother might be watching him, which had put something of a damper on his early experiments with masturbation. But over the last year, he'd fallen out of the habit, and he was watching Bajia's hands to see which way she was about to strike - and then he fainted, and she dodged, and he lunged forward, trying to come up inside her guard - when, quite suddenly, there was a shriek, and a hawk was sandwiched between them, and he hit her on the side of the head with the pommel of the dagger and knocked her unconscious.

Bajia fell back with a curse. Astarion fell on his ass with a yelp. His mother just fell straight down, shimmered briefly, and turned back into an elf.

Astarion knew how fragile bird bones could be, and he'd felt something crunch. "Oh, Hells, I've killed her."

He was really hoping that Bajia would say, "No, you haven't," but she didn't. Instead, the human woman knelt on the packed earth of the practice yard and felt for his mother's pulse. "She's still breathing," she said after a moment, and Astarion wiped away tears of relief. "Go get Wendin and tell him you need a healing potion."

Astarion ran for the butler and finally found him cleaning silver in the pantry. "Gotta ... gotta tell you .. Bajia ... need a... healing potion..."

Wendin was one of those fabulously competent individuals who can make other people feel less competent merely by standing in the same room. He set down a silver pie server, went to a cupboard, removed a vial, and said, "Now, lead the way, Master Astarion."

His mother hadn't moved. Astarion's heart was in his throat, but Bajia took the potion, rubbed a palmful into the knot on Miriana's head and another along her neck, then rolled her over and poured the rest between her lips.

Astarion's mother came awake with a choking sputter, coughed, and sat up. "What ...?" She looked around wildly. "Astarion!"

"Yes, Mother, I'm fi-oof!"

She flung herself into his arms, clutching at him. Astarion looked down at her, wondering, *When did she get so short?* He was as tall as she was now. She looked ... small. Small and shabby, her hair standing out like a dandelion puff, her clothes not merely rough but worn, frayed at the hems, the tears never mended and likely never even noticed.

"Why were you attacking him?" she demanded, turning to glare at Bajia.

"Mother, she wasn't attacking me. She was teaching me how to defend myself in case someone *tries* to attack me."

She pulled back, eyes narrowing, but kept her grip on his arms. "And why would you ever need to know that?"

"Because we live in an uncertain world," Lady Erikinia said. "We can't all just turn into a bird and fly away."

Mother and son turned. The ancient elven woman stood in the doorway, leaning partly on a tall staff and mostly on Wendin. She gazed at her granddaughter with an expression that Astarion had learned to read as exasperated fondness.

"It's been a year," Miriana said. "You said that he could come back after a year."

Lady Erikinia raised one eyebrow, her parchment-thin skin sliding over her skull. "I said that he could go back if he chose."

His mother turned on him, eyes wide and frantic. He took a step back involuntarily. "Astarion, listen to me. You can come home now."

"What?"

"It is your choice, Astarion," his great- grandmother said in her deep, rich voice. "Stay or leave."

"I don't want to leave," he said.

His mother stiffened. She searched his face as if he were a stranger. "Truly? You want to stay here?"

He knew that he was hurting her, but he also knew that he would never, ever go back.

"Truly."

He expected her to weep or to rail at him, but she surprised him. She drew herself up, and for a moment he could see the family resemblance to the lady of the manor. "Very well," she said. "My house is always open to you, my son. I love you, however far away your wings take you. Go well."

She turned to Lady Erikinia and bowed. The ancient elf inclined her head in return.

And then Astarion's mother was a falcon streaking across the sky, and Astarion never saw her again.

It was two days later that Astarion returned to Dalyria's lab, hoping to make use of the light. The embroidery on one of his sleeves had begun to fray, and there was no sense in holding a grudge against Dalyria for forgetting other people existed. You might as well blame the sun for coming up - which presumably it still did on a regular basis, at least for other people.

Besides, Astarion had so *many* grudges, lovingly polished and displayed to the best possible advantage, that he was loath to add any inferior specimens to his collection.

This led him down a pleasant avenue of thought wherein he dangled Violet by her ankles over running water, which proved so diverting that he did not pay close enough attention to the sound of voices from the lab. He opened the door just in time to hear Cazador say, "I *know* that it didn't work, my dear. I want to know where you *acquired* it."

Astarion froze, but it was too late. The master vampire swung toward him, and he caught a glimpse of Dalyria's face, impassive except for the pleading in her eyes.

He ran the mental calculations in an instant. If this was about the unicorn blood, then even if Dalyria tried to hide his involvement, Cazador would torture it out of her eventually. By then, the old man's blood would be up, and it would be very bad to attract his attention.

Best to defuse it now, before it starts. He feigned a yawn. "Dear me, is this about that little bottle of unicorn scab?"

Cazador's nostrils flared. "You knew about this?"

"Of course I did, Father. I'm the one who got it for her." Astarion sauntered into the room.

"Why, did it explode or something?"

The vampire narrowed his eyes. He was a high elf as much as Astarion was, but his face was thinner and sharper, all pale angles and dark hollows. "Why did you acquire it for her?"

Astarion's shrug was a masterpiece of nonchalance. "She said she wanted it for some experiment or other, and I felt like doing her a favor. And that ratty little magic shop - you know the one - was on the way to the night's hunting ground."

Cazador had clearly been deflected, but he wasn't put completely off the scent. "You know that my children are forbidden to drink the blood of thinking creatures."

"Father, if I may ..." Astarion leaned toward him and let a faintly patronizing smile play across his lips: two senior family members discussing the foibles of a young one. "Regardless of what my sister may have intended, *no one* could have drunk that blood. Chewed it, possibly, if you could chisel it out of the bottle. That unicorn has been dead since the Time of Troubles, at least. Its blood probably has more use as a paperweight."

Sometimes the best lies were true. There was a brief moment in which things could have gone either way, and Astarion waited, trying not to look like he was waiting. *Either he laughs and walks away or he tells me he's disappointed, and Dalyria and I spend a fortnight in the kennels with Godey dropping rats through the bars...*

Cazador laughed, and Astarion's guts unknotted. "You need a special enchantment to keep the blood fresh. It loses potency so quickly. A vial of *fresh* unicorn blood, now ..." He tapped one sharp nail against his lips. "Do you know, that gives me an idea? Dalyria, attend me." He swept from the room. Dalyria followed in his wake, flashing Astarion a grateful look as she passed.

That's two favors you owe me, sister. Astarion smiled to himself and sat down to mend his sleeve in the light of the empty lab.

The next evening, Astarion dressed carefully for the nightly hunt. He was in the rare good mood that came from having successfully pulled off a heist, coupled with the fact that Cazador had been closeted in his study all night and the spawn had been left to their own

devices. He smoothed his embroidered jacket over his hips, adjusted the cuffs, and ran a hand through his hair.

It was a damn shame that he couldn't see himself in a mirror. *When I am finally made a true vampire, I shall keep a tame doppelganger on staff to mimic me so that I know precisely how good I look.*

The unpleasant little voice in the back of his head pointed out that it was likely he'd never be made into a true vampire, but Astarion was in too good a mood and tuned it out.

Perhaps tonight he could even begin a hunt the old-fashioned way. A slow seduction, over the course of days or tendays. Like the early years, when Cazador expected only one or two victims a month, when a hunt involved *craftsmanship*, not simply leading drunken boors to their doom.

Like when he'd met -

Ah ah ah. He caught himself mentally before he could start down that road. It would spoil his pleasant mood. *Don't do that to yourself, darling. Focus on the hunting, and how good you'll look doing it.*

Astarion's good cheer lasted until he turned down the corridor that led to the outside world and ran into an invisible brick wall. Then it ran out of him like blood from a slashed artery. He knew immediately what had happened, but he tested the wall anyway. His hand went through the space in front of him just fine, but if he tried to walk forward, the air became as solid as stone.

Cazador had revoked his permission to leave the palace.

Dread rose up inside him as if some small, sharp-toothed creature were gnawing on the underside of his stomach. *It might be nothing*, he told himself. *It might be that he had something else he wants me to do.* It was just that the things he wanted Astarion to do almost always ended in screaming.

"It's not just you," Aurelia said, coming out of nowhere with a stealth that would have been alarming if he wasn't so distracted. "Seems to be everyone."

Astarion relaxed, but only slightly. Personalized attention was the worst, but there were only a few reasons that Cazador would want his spawn confined to the palace, and almost all of them were bad. He might be bored and want to amuse himself by having the spawn act out torturous tableaux. He might have found or manufactured some betrayal and wanted the others to watch the punishment he meted out. *Conceivably, he could have made a new spawn and wants to introduce us, but he only made Yousen a few years ago. And someone always winds up being humiliated for the new spawn's edification, so that's not the best scenario, either.*

Regardless of the reason, there were a dozen ways out of Szarr Palace, and all of them were closed until Cazador gave his children leave to hunt again.

"I suppose we should go see what the old man wants," he said, straightening his jacket.

"Since he's gone to so much trouble to keep us at home."

Aurelia undoubtedly knew that his bravado was false, but as with so many other things, she said nothing. She simply fell into step beside him, garnet eyes as unreadable as ever.

He glanced over and saw the thin scar on the side of her neck. It vanished under the collar of her shirt, but he knew just how far down it went and exactly where it crossed the shoulder blade.

Aurelia had taken him to her bed half a dozen times, in the earliest days. Not even Astarion's well-trained ego could make him believe that he had seduced her. It hadn't felt like pity sex so much as mutual comfort, as if the sex were merely something they had to get through so that they could hold each other in the dark. Like everything else in Szarr Palace, though,

comfort had to be rationed out so that it could not be used against you. It had been a long time now, and Astarion, at least, would rather sleep alone.

"Perhaps it has something to do with his dinner guest the other evening," Aurelia said, breaking into his thoughts.

Astarion considered this. "I don't know that that would be a good thing."

"No," Aurelia said somberly. "No, neither do I."

They entered the great hall together, which from Aurelia might be a subtle show of solidarity or simply the fact that they had both arrived at the same time. Cazador's throne was empty. Violet was already there, sitting upside down in a chair with her legs draped over the back.

"Starion!" she crowed in her grating little-girl voice. "Aurry!"

Aurelia inclined her head a fraction of an inch what might have been in acknowledgment. Astarion ignored her completely.

"Wine," he observed quietly, "but no food." He did not need to say that it was a bad sign.

Lack of food meant that Cazador was not planning a normal family evening, and that very rarely boded well.

Violet sat up. In a much more normal voice, she said, "I saw that, too."

Aurelia picked up one of the goblets of wine and sniffed it, then dipped her tongue into the burgundy liquid. "If it's drugged, I can't tell."

The three of them drew together, animosity briefly abandoned in the face of their common enemy. *Violet may be a wolf in spoiled brat's clothing, but she understands what might happen next.* He had a vivid memory of Violet gazing down at a pile of her own severed fingers, her face dead white, her lips trembling. It was Yousen who had coaxed her into laying her mangled hands flat on the table and who had set the fingers next to their corresponding stumps, Yousen who had held a cup of blood to her lips until the healing power could take effect and knit together bone and flesh.

She had never forgiven Yousen for helping her, and poor wretched Yousen would never understand why.

"Do you think he's come up with something new?" Violet asked quietly.

Aurelia turned her burnt-garnet eyes on the other vampire spawn. "We thought perhaps it was related to his guest the other evening."

"You spent more time with him than the rest of us," Astarion said.

Violet shot him a brief burning glance. "Jealous?"

He feigned a yawn. "I can't say I was terribly impressed with his technique."

Violet started to reply hotly, but Aurelia set down her goblet, the clink of metal on marble ringing like a shout. Violet and Astarion watched the tiefling prowl around the throne, eyes narrowed, looking for clues.

Perhaps it shamed Violet, or perhaps she simply realized how little time they had left until someone else arrived. "He was in service to Mephistopheles, but that was all he could say. Apparently, Mephistopheles and Father are conducting... negotiations."

Aurelia's head came up at that. Her face was still as calm as ever, but her slit pupils expanded until her eyes were nearly black. "That is not welcome news."

"You know of him?"

"A high lord of Hell." She shrugged, and Astarion might have been fooled by the casual gesture if her eyes had not still been dilated into obsidian. "Any bargain he makes will come with a heavy price."

Violet swallowed hard, and Astarion guessed she was only now realizing that it might not have been wise to come to the attention of one of the archdevil's minions.

A wash of cologne heralded the arrival of Petras. Violet immediately rounded on him, smiling her girlish smile. "Petras! Have you come to play?"

"Save it." Petras stalked into the room, trailing a cloud of cologne after him. *Of course it would be sandalwood and musk. How very cliché.*

"A new scent, brother?"

Petras picked up a cup of wine. "What if it is?"

"It suits you."

The spawn frowned slightly, clearly trying to find the insult hiding in Astarion's words. "It's from the perfumer in the Temples District."

"I shall have to make note of them." *And avoid them like the plague.*

Petras took a swallow of wine and picked nonexistent lint off his sleeve. "I take it no one else could leave, either."

"I couldn't," Yousen said, materializing seemingly out of the wall. It was one of the rock gnome's more annoying habits. Astarion wondered how long he'd been there. *Of course, I'd avoid being alone with Violet, too, if I were him.*

"I wonder what Father has planned," Petras said.

"We have been wondering that, too." Astarion drifted across the room, seemingly at random, to a position that put Petras between him and the throne.

The spawn stood in gloomy silence for a moment. Then all five lifted their heads, almost in unison, and turned toward the door.

"Most excellent," Cazador said, striding in. "You are all here. I have the most marvelous plan for you."

Dalyria followed him, carrying a small chest.

Astarion watched her expression closely. He was expecting a grim set to her lips, but she looked oddly... pleased?

"Set it down there, my dear." Cazador gestured, and Dalyria placed the chest on the marble table that held the wine, flipping up the lid. Cazador reached in and pulled out an empty glass tube.

"It has occurred to me," the vampire said, turning the tube between his fingers, "that it has been a long time since I have made a new vampire."

Six sets of eyes were immediately riveted on him. Astarion ran his tongue across the points of his fangs. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't this.

"But you are all so dear to me, my children. How can I choose who shall be first among you?"

"Me!" squealed Violet, clapping her hands. "Oh, me, me, me, Father!"

"Patience, daughter." Cazador smiled indulgently. "I cannot possibly choose among my children. But dear Dalyria" - he leaned over and ran his fingernails up her throat, as if stroking a cat - "has given me a *perfect* idea." Astarion switched his attention to Dalyria. She wasn't looking at Cazador. She was looking at the empty vial he held with the same expression of desire and fear of disappointment that she had worn when Astarion delivered the unicorn blood. The same look Sebastian had worn, more than a century ago, when Astarion sat down at his table and smiled -

Stop that. You can wallow in self-pity some other time, when the old bastard isn't talking about making someone a vampire.

"What unites us?" Cazador asked, beginning to pace back and forth in front of his throne.

"What force is it that brought us together as a family?"

You, you sadistic old goat. Fortunately, this appeared to be a rhetorical question, because Cazador turned suddenly to face his spawn, his cloak flaring dramatically. "Blood, of course.

It is the blood that brought us together and made us what we are. And thus, it is the blood that will decide who among you will be the first to become a true vampire."

The room was so utterly silent that Astarion didn't think his fellow spawn were even breathing.

"Ah..." Cazador said, clearly enjoying drawing out the suspense. He picked up a goblet and drank from it, lips stained sanguine. "Delicious, of course. But so familiar. I have tasted virtually every vintage that Baldur's Gate has to offer. Elf, orc, human, dwarf. They all begin to blend together. What I long for now is something *new*."

He brandished the vial in his hand, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Each of you will take a vial from this box. And in ... hmm... let us say five days' time, you will return it to me, filled with blood. The enchantment upon the vials shall keep it as fresh as when it was taken from the vein." His smile grew, showing his fangs. "Bring me the most precious blood that you can. I want to taste angels, unicorns, kings. The bearer of the most exquisite vial ..."

Cazador spread his hands. "Well. I think I have made myself clear, have I not?"

Dead silence reigned for an instant, then the spawn scrambled for the wooden box. Violet tried to snatch up two vials, and Astarion's hand closed over her wrist like a vise. She snarled at him, and he bared his teeth. "Dear sister, you simply must learn to share."

He plucked the extra vial from her fingers and released her, pleased to see the livid marks he'd left behind. She rubbed her wrist and glared. "There's no point in Yousen having one," she muttered. "Or Dalyria. What are they going to do, walk down the street and beg for handouts?"

Astarion half suspected she was right, but he certainly wasn't going to let Violet have multiple chances at true vampirehood.

Yousen and Dalyria had grabbed their vials from the box while Astarion tackled Violet, and they were rapidly fleeing for the door. Astarion glanced around and realized that he and Violet were in danger of being left alone with Cazador, a situation with a great deal of potential, all of it dreadful. He sauntered toward the door, turned, and swept his most dramatic bow to the vampire lord. If he'd been wearing the ridiculous hat he'd taken from the bard, its feathers would have brushed the floor.

And then he was through the doorway, and the only things standing between him and freedom were five siblings and a source of exotic blood.

Blood. Where to get *living* blood to tempt the jaded palate of an ancient vampire? Astarion racked his brain. Perhaps the Guild would have some leads? Or Rat's Run ... hmm. There was a rakshasa associated with Rat's Run, but Astarion did not see that conflict ending well. *Unless I could convince her to simply donate a vial... "Pardon me, my tiger-headed beauty, but may I just open a vein for a moment?"* He didn't see that going well, either. *I'll leave that as a last resort.*

His thoughts were interrupted by a hesitant knock on the door. Caution kept him from simply throwing the door open. It would be just like Violet to decide to hamstring the competition.

She couldn't enter his room without permission, but she could certainly throw a knife in, or a vial of acid.

"Who is it?"

"Dalyria."

Astarion opened the door, making sure the wood stayed between his body and the hallway. When nothing happened after a moment, he looked around the edge and saw Dalyria and ... Yousen?

"May we enter?" Dalyria asked, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

Astarion was fairly certain that the two of them together would present no challenge for him. "Freely and of your own will," he said, stepping aside. The elf and the gnome crowded inside, and he shut the door behind them.

Dalyria seemed to relax once the door was closed. "We ... ah ... have a proposition for you."

"Darling, I'm flattered, but is this really the time?"

Yousen flushed, but Dalyria only rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. This contest. We - Yousen and I - have no hope of winning. We *know* that."

Astarion happened to agree with this but felt it would be impolitic to say so. "Go on."

They exchanged a glance. Then Dalyria said, all in a rush, "If he makes the winner into a true vampire, we'd rather it was you."

Now he actually was flattered, if only slightly. "Better me than Petras or Violet, you mean? And what about Aurelia?"

"Gone," Dalyria said. "We tried her room first. Sorry."

That startled a laugh out of him. "I can hardly fault you for that. But you realize that it's probably moot? This is bound to be a trick. He's never going to actually make one of us a vampire."

"Probably not." There was a suppressed fire behind Dalyria's eyes. "But are you willing to take the chance that he's serious and someone else will win the prize?"

The doctor might not have a good grasp of people, but she obviously knew Astarion well enough. "No. No, I am not. But if you've simply come to deliver your well-wishes, I am grateful but rather busy."

"We can help you."

He raised an eyebrow at that. Dalyria's connections as a doctor might well prove useful, but Yousen would bolt at the slightest hint of danger. "Can you, now?"

Dalyria met his eyes, as she so rarely did. "I know where to get the blood of a god."

Astarion's breath hissed between his teeth.

Yousen piped up in his thin voice. "And I'm the one who can get you there."

"So let me see if I have this correct. Yousen is going to lead me through tunnels below the Undercity to an undead cult, who are worshipping an artifact that Dalyria *happens* to know is the blood of a dead god."

"Right," Dalyria said.

"Mask, god of thieves and shadows, specifically."

"Right."

"But the blood is still alive."

"So my sources say."

"How do your sources *know* that?"

Dalyria studied the ceiling for a moment, clearly debating how much to tell him. Astarion folded his arms. "I know that it doesn't come easily to any of us, my dear, but if you want me to take part in this wild-geese chase, you will simply *have* to trust me."

She nodded to him, or possibly the ceiling. "You know that Cazador has me sourcing his various ingredients and reagents."

"Indeed." Astarion gestured for her to continue.

"I put it out some years ago that I was particularly interested in exotic bloods. That's why that fool wizard kept trying to sell me his unicorn scab. Another, more reliable source informed me of the cult, but I had no real way of reaching it. You, however..."

Astarion massaged his temples. He felt a headache coming on. "If you two want to kill me, I must say, this is excessively elaborate."

"We don't want to kill you," Yousen said earnestly. "We want you to *win*."

"You realize that I can't turn you, even if I'm a vampire. You'll still be Cazador's spawn. His blood is the only thing that can change you into a true vampire."

"No, of course not," Dalyria said. "But if *you* win, Violet and Petras lose. And I find the notion of you with power far more congenial. You, at least, have been supportive of my experiments."

That was true enough. Astarion tapped a manicured fingernail against his lower lip. *And why have you been making such an effort to befriend her, if not for moments such as this?*

Yousen, granted, was a contemptible little wretch, but even he might prove useful, if only as the source of an extra vial.

"We'll say that, provisionally, I accept your explanation. What is bothering me the most is that apparently there has been an undead cult under the city for decades and no one has bothered to mention it."

Yousen looked surprised. "You didn't know?"

"You did?"

"Where did you think all those skeletons in the sewers kept coming from?"

"I assumed that people bought them when they were small and cute, and then, when they grew up and became difficult to control, their owners dumped them down the privy."

Yousen at least laughed. Dalyria just looked blank.

Astarion was mildly appalled to realize that he was actually considering taking them up on it. *It's not as if you have any better ideas. And if this ends up as a wild-goose chase, you can always stroll into the Rat's Run and ask the rakshasa for a donation to the cause.*

"There is one thing," Dalyria said.

Here we go. Astarion was actually rather relieved to hear that she had an ulterior motive. He would have assumed she had one *anyway*, and this meant he didn't have to keep wondering what it was.

She held out her vial. "Take two samples of the god's blood. I'm not going to give mine to Cazador. I want to experiment on it."

"The unicorn scab didn't work? How shocking."

"It taught me a great deal. If I had a live unicorn willing to transfuse its blood directly into my veins and accept mine in return, it might well be able to cleanse the vampire taint over time."

Her lips twisted sideways in a scowl. "Or possibly it would cross the other way, and we'd end up with a vampire unicorn enslaved to Cazador."

Astarion rubbed his temples again. "That would certainly be ... novel."

"It is, at any rate, moot, since I lack a live unicorn willing to help me proceed. Sadly, I do not believe that its healing power would function if it was an unwilling captive." Dalyria sighed, clearly annoyed by the world's lack of available scientifically minded unicorns. "Nevertheless, I have high hopes for the living blood of a god. There is no magical cure for vampirism, but if we posit that a god is a being of a *miraculous* rather than a *magical* nature -"

"I'll go," Astarion said, holding up his hands to forestall the lecture. "I'll at least investigate this cult you claim exists." He looked over at Yousen. The gnome squared his small shoulders and met Astarion's gaze unflinchingly. "Give me twenty minutes to prepare, and then I shall meet you at the entrance to the eastern passage. And *do* try not to trip and fall on Violet's knife on the way."

The eastern passage led to a secret door that came out in a tunnel that connected to the storm drains. It was not terribly useful for luring back victims - even the most besotted individual tended to wonder why you were leading them through a sewer grate - but it was conveniently close to an entrance to the Undercity, and thus to the Guild. Astarion trusted Dalyria more than some of the other spawn, but that didn't mean that he wasn't going to verify her story.

"And if it turns out that this is a trap, my dear Yousen, I *will* cut you into chunks fine enough to drop through the grate into Violet's bedroom."

"It's not a trap," Yousen assured him, hurrying to keep pace with Astarion's longer stride. "I want you to win."

"Why?"

The gnome mumbled something. "I didn't catch that."

"Because you're nicer!"

Astarion's hand shot out, quick as a striking snake, and picked Yousen up by the collar. "I. Am. Not. Nice," he said, punctuating each word with a little shake. "Understand?"

"Grg!"

Astarion dropped him in a heap. The gnome rubbed his throat, coughing, and climbed slowly to his feet. "Compared to Violet -" He began coughing and tried again. "At least *you* leave me alone. If I help you win, at least Violet won't be a true vampire." Yousen shuddered at the thought.

"Ah, *spite*. You should have led with that. Spite I understand."

Yousen looked up long enough for Astarion to catch a glimpse of wry humor in the gnome's dark eyes. "I don't expect you to stop Cazador. I don't expect *anyone* to stop Cazador. But it's hard enough to deal with him and then go back to my room and find she's found a way to dump caltrops in my bed."

"If you put your bed under a vent, that *will* happen."

"I know, I know. But can you imagine what she'll do with *real* power? And you may kick me out of the way sometimes, but Petras just kicks me."

Astarion made a noise that might have been called a grunt if it were less elegant. They started walking again. The tunnel floor was damp and furred with moss, and water dripped somewhere in the distance.

If *he* were Yousen, he'd have asked for a lot more. But maybe if you were at the absolute bottom of the heap, the hope of being tormented somewhat less was enough to buy your services. *Or maybe he's planning some kind of elaborate double cross: steal the blood at the last minute, and ... and ...*

And then Violet beats him up and takes it and wins. And I'm pretty sure he knows it.

Astarion was aware that he was, by many measures, an evil man, even if Cazador made him look like a paladin of Tyr by comparison. One of the things that made him better than Cazador was that he was completely uninterested in tormenting the weak. *I never pulled the wings off flies because it seemed boring. What would I do with a pile of fly wings, anyway?*

He had passionate grudges against Petras and Violet, and elaborate fantasies about what he would do to Cazador someday, many involving sunlight and acid and a slow drip of blood to keep him alive. Yousen, though, was just there. He'd never once imagined torturing the gnome. *Honestly, being Yousen seems like torment enough. Anything more would be gilding the lily.*

"So why, exactly, do I need you to get into these tunnels?"

Yousen gave him a quick sidelong glance. "My grandfather was a svirfneblin. A deep gnome."

"I know what a svirf ... one of *those* is. What does that have to do with it?"

"He used to tell me that he could hear the stone singing." A coldly wistful look crossed Yousen's face. "Sometimes I could hear it, too, a little. Though not since I was turned." The gnome reached out and trailed his fingers along the stones of the wall. "It all feels dead now, just like everything else."

"Yes, yes, we're all in torment," Astarion said testily. "Wait until you've been a spawn for over a hundred years."

"Does it get better?"

"Not remotely. Although you stop expecting it to, which is worth something. Now, what do singing rocks have to do with blood?"

"I can find the way through the tunnels. Even if I can't hear them sing, the stones will tell me."

"I see." *Well, if nothing else, I suppose I can use him as bait.* Although now that he thought of it, the gnome *was* remarkably good at vanishing against walls. Maybe there was something to his affection for stone.

The tunnel ended in a metal door with an iron-barred window. It looked as if the hinges should shriek like banshees, but it moved silently. Two skeleton guards, positioned in wall niches just inside it, watched the pair with empty eye sockets.

"Don't wait up," Astarion told them. They did not reply, but then again, they rarely did.

When Astarion was seventeen, Lady Erikinia announced her intention of going on a journey. "Your great-great-great-aunt is planning on becoming a lich," she said, "and I must go and make certain she's taken care of." She patted Astarion's sleeve with her twiglike fingers. "I shall likely be gone for a year or more. Wendin, arrange to have young Astarion stay in the townhouse, will you?"

Wendin bowed stiffly from the waist. "Forgive me, My Lady, but the townhouse is being renovated. Something to do with the drains, I believe. May I suggest he stay with Sir Lazlo?"

"Lazlo! That prosy bore." Lady Erikinia clucked her tongue. "Still, he does live in Silverymoon. It will do until the townhouse is ready. Give your great-grandmother a kiss, lad, and pack your bags."

Astarion kissed her skull-like cheek dutifully and went to pack his bags, seething with secret excitement. *Silverymoon! The city! At last!*

Bajia served as his guide and bodyguard on the road. They had been on their way for perhaps thirty minutes when Astarion said quietly, "The townhouse isn't really being renovated, is it?"

"No," the human woman said, her eyes straight ahead. "It was sold ten years ago so that we could continue paying the servants."

"I see."

It was a crisp fall day, and the air smelled like woodsmoke. Leaves crunched under the horses' hooves. The breeze that tugged at Astarion's hair had a hint of chill to it.

"When did you figure it out?" Bajia asked.

Astarion stroked a hand down his mare's neck. "It was never any one thing. Just small things adding up. The stable is huge, but there are only four horses in it. Most of the house is closed up and either empty or under dust covers." He had picked the locks to those wings

and spent many happy hours exploring them, but as he grew older, the oddity of it had occurred to him. "How bad is it?"

Bajia shrugged. Years had passed, but her curls were as dark as ever, and there were no lines at the corners of her tawny eyes. "Bad enough."

Astarion raised a pale eyebrow and waited. He had never outgrown his desire to impress Bajia - was still, in fact, rather hopelessly in love with her, in a hero-worshipping way - but he had also learned to predict her. She could rarely stand an expectant silence.

His escort heaved a sigh. "The Lady of Silvermoon has decreed that Lady Erikinia be allowed to die in her own home, for services rendered long ago. The manor and the few lands entailed to it are mortgaged to the hilt. The moment that she finally dies, her creditors will descend like jackals." A smile twitched the corner of her mouth. "Though she's outlived a few of them, the old termagant. No one expected her to last this long."

"How much does she owe?"

"More than you could earn in a dozen lifetimes." Bajia gave him a wry look. "You could slay the oldest dragon in Faerûn, sell every scrap of it from tongue to tail, and drag its hoard to market, and you *might* cover the interest. For a little while. And that's just the money. There are creditors who deal in more... complex ... matters."

Astarion, who had indeed been harboring the notion of doing something wild and dashing, hurriedly changed the subject. "So my tutors ..." He still felt a fondness for his speech instructor, who had drilled him until the most discerning courtier would swear that he had been raised as a noble from his first breath.

"Paid in other coin. The dwarf woman's son was a warlock who bargained badly. Your great-grandmother helped disentangle him from his patron. Your history instructor was glad enough for bed and board. Few historians are wealthy."

Astarion let the silence grow for a time. "Does Great-Grandmother know?"

Bajia sighed. "Sometimes? She's not senile. She's sharp as a tack when she wants to be. But I think she chooses not to know. She would prefer the world to be as it was two hundred years ago, so she simply lives in that world, and the rest of us work around it."

"The rest of us?"

"Me. Wendin. Now you."

Astarion's distant cousin Lazlo was a plump man who had inherited his pointed ears from his Ancunín mother, and very little else. His office was lined with bookshelves and a whole herd of cows must have been skinned for all the leather-bound volumes that filled them. He looked at Astarion over his glasses and said, "So, what can you do?"

Astarion bridled at his tone but kept it off his face. If he offended this man, there was a chance he'd be sent back to the manor. He'd seen enough of the city on the ride in to make him vow to be courteous to a cockatrice, if that's what it took. "Sir?"

Lazlo took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Are you a wizard, a warlock, a druid? Any magical talent at all?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"A fighter? Good at archery? Prone to berserker fits?"

"I'm good with a rapier -" Bajia cleared her throat, and Astarion amended it to "I'm competent with a rapier, sir. May I ask why?"

"You'll need some way to make a living when the old lady dies," Lazlo said bluntly. "There are places in the world where being pretty and well-spoken will keep you fed, but not here in the North." A sudden thought occurred to him, and he grimaced. "Hells take it, you're not a *bard*, are you?"

"No!"

"Thank the gods for small favors." Lazlo polished his glasses. "So, what *can* you do?"

"I ... err ..." Astarion found himself briefly flummoxed. He'd learned a great many things in Lady Erikinia's care, but he wasn't sure how to turn any of them into a living. *Nine Hells, I am not cut out to be a department teacher.* He was very good at arguing and at finding loopholes in any rule applied to him, but he was fairly certain that you couldn't *eat* loopholes.

Bajia cleared her throat. "He can read and write a fair hand."

"Can he, now?" Lazlo looked suddenly interested. "My scribe went off to have a litter of kits. Sit over there at her desk and copy this." He plunked a piece of parchment in front of Astarion. "Now, come with me, Mistress Bajia, and tell me how the old lady fares ..."

They went away, closing the door. Astarion found paper and an inkwell in the desk. Also a quantity of cat hair, which led him to suspect that Lazlo's usual scribe was a tabaxi. He set to work copying the parchment in his best hand. It seemed to be a proposed amendment to a law regulating ... city flowerpots?

Astarion shrugged mentally and bent to his writing.

When he had finished, he rose and went to the office window. The window overlooked a street that was not terribly impressive by Silverymoon standards, but to Astarion, it was a feast. Ivy climbed the walls and twined around windows like a lover. Over the roof of the far building, he could see towers and treetops, thin spires and branching duskwoods. Even the cobblestoned street was beautiful, the stones set in undulating curves, the walks studded with tiled mosaics for no reason except to be beautiful.

He was here. He was in the city. And it was still full of people: people wearing a thousand colors, in fabrics he had never dreamed of; people with jewelry that dripped from their hair and necks and fingertips; people with painted lips and eyelids and hands. Smells from nearby food carts promised meats he'd never tasted and spices he'd never imagined. On the walk to his cousin's home, they had passed a mural painted on the side of a building - *outside!* Where weather could get to it and wear it away, and no one worried about it! The wealth on display was so extraordinary that Astarion didn't even register what it was a painting *of*, merely that it was vast and colorful and luxurious.

And there was something else, too, something he hadn't noticed as much at seven but which he noticed very much at seventeen. In that sea of people, there were youths with kohl-darkened eyelashes and women clad in sheer silken veils, slender people who moved with the boneless grace of serpents and curved women with breasts and hips like earth goddesses.

Astarion wanted all of it. He wanted to drown in it - eat everything, drink everything, fuck everything. The city was a banquet, and for years, he hadn't known that he was starving.

"Finished?" Lazlo asked, coming back into the room. "Let's see... hmm. Not bad. Clear and readable. You could stand to space the lines a little closer together-parchment's not cheap, you know-but serviceable. Very well, I'll try you as my scribe for now." He frowned over his glasses. "It's hard work, mind you. I'll expect you to keep the same hours I do. You might be used to lolling around on velvet pillows for the old lady, but here, you work."

Astarion might have taken offense at his tone, but he dared not risk being sent back to the manor. So he lifted his chin and said, "I'm willing to work hard, cousin. I know I have a lot of ground to make up." (The last bit was even true, although he was thinking about all the exotic foods he hadn't tasted and the luxuries he hadn't tried, not to mention all those *fascinating* people wearing very little clothing.)

Bajia nodded in approval. Lazlo grunted. "You speak well enough, I'll give you that."

"Thank you, sir. May I ask a question?"

"Just one?"

"What is it you *do*, exactly?"

The half-elf's face cracked in a smile, and Astarion suddenly saw him differently - not as a sarcastic man making light of a country cousin but as a tired one beset by responsibilities, to which another responsibility had just been added.

Lazlo clapped a hand to Astarion's shoulder. "Why, I study the law, of course."

"The entrance is this way," Yousen said, pointing into the darkness.

"Ah, but first we are going this way," Astarion said, strolling in the opposite direction.

"We are?" Yousen hurried to catch up with him. "Where are we going?"

"To a very exclusive private club that specializes in, among other things, the buying and selling of unusual information."

Yousen rolled his eyes. "You can just say it's the Guild. I'm not going to faint with shock."

"One certainly hopes not."

The Thieves' Guild of Baldur's Gate was located in the nicer part of the Undercity, which meant that it didn't smell too much like raw sewage, and the rats were the size of only large rats, not small dogs. Astarion was aware of eyes on him as they approached the entrance. He could see at least one watcher, crouched silently on an overhead beam, but there were doubtless others. None of them seemed hostile; they were simply ... watchful. The guildmaster liked to know who was coming to visit and, furthermore, that her guests would be polite.

That was fine. Astarion was not so lost to reason that he would hunt at the Guildhall. That would be an excellent way to discover exactly how easily a vampire spawn could be eaten by sharks. Which reminded him ... "Yousen, if you ever come back here without me, these people will kill you. If you even think about hunting here, *I* will kill you, and I will do so in a remarkably original fashion. Perhaps something involving silver wires inserted under the skin. Do we have an understanding?"

"Completely."

They stopped at a door in the wall. Astarion slipped his glasses on, straightened his cuffs, and knocked. After a moment, a slot in the door opened, and a gruff voice said, " 'They'll be fine' ... ?"

" 'We left them trail rations.' Who comes up with these pass phrases?"

The clunk of a bar being lifted echoed through the narrow corridor. The door swung open. A slim ginger tabaxi sat at a table just past the entryway, playing solitaire. He looked up as they entered, eyes flicking to Yousen, who was trying to hide behind Astarion.

"He is ... temporarily ... with me," Astarion said.

"So long as he doesn't cause problems."

"If he does, I will solve them myself."

"See that you do." The feline slid a book across the table, and Astarion signed it with a flourish. The tabaxi took it back, wrote *and guest* next to Astarion's name, returned Yousen's coin purse, and waved them on.

The main common room of the Guild was quiet this evening, probably because most of the thieves were at work under cover of darkness. Oil lamps provided a smooth golden light, and incense chased away the faint odor from the sewers below. It was better lit than many pubs Astarion had been to, and arguably safer. You did not start shit in the Guildhall unless you

wanted to be dangled headfirst over raw sewage while Nine-Fingers cleaned her remaining fingernails with a knife and spoke at some length about the perils of antisocial behavior.

The bar near the entrance was polished oak, gone mellow with age. The bartender gave Astarion a nod, lamplight gleaming off his tusks. A game of cards was going on in one corner, but the players had the quiet, focused air of serious gamblers.

The Guild functionary keeping an eye on the place gave Astarion a nod. Since she was a minotaur, her nods were a rather impressive production. Minotaurs came from the Underdark and tended to be brutal, bestial, and male, but in the Guild, you didn't ask where someone came from, and they extended you the same courtesy.

"Haven't seen you for a bit," the minotaur said in a distinctly feminine baritone.

"I've been terribly busy, darling. I'm on the prowl ..."

"When *aren't* you?"

"... for information."

Light glinted off the steel caps of her horns. "You'll have to narrow it down more than that."

"I'm trying to find out more about a cult of undead that may be operating below the sewers."

"Oh, *them*." She rolled her eyes.

"You've heard of them?"

"Yeah, sure. Every now and then, one of their pet skeletons gets loose and goes wandering around making trouble." She patted the two-handed maul on her back. "They smash nicely."

"And you never mentioned them to me?"

"Honey, this is Baldur's Gate. If there's not a dozen cults operating out of attics and warehouses and holes in the ground, people start to wonder why they're paying taxes." She made a thoughtful sideways champing motion with her jaw. "Go talk to wossisname at the shop. I think he was studying up on them a while ago."

Astarion took one of her enormous hands and kissed the back of it. "You are, as always, a treasure."

"Flatterer. Get on with you." She swatted lazily in his direction, which Astarion ducked, since even her playful swats would have knocked him into the wall. Yousen's eyes were the size of saucers.

"Do you know if she's single?" the gnome whispered as Astarion led him toward the Guild's shop.

"She's too much woman for you, Yousen."

"Yes, but what a way to go." He was staring so intently at the minotaur that he nearly walked into the wall. "Do you think she'd step on me? If I asked very respectfully?"

"Darling, I don't even want to talk about my *own* fetishes, let alone yours." He opened the shop door, which jingled with cheerful bells. Learning to open the door without setting off the bells was often a young thief's first lesson in stealth.

The man behind the counter was a short, dark-haired moon elf with a voice like sand being poured directly onto the listener's eardrums and a personality to match. He glanced up from his book as Astarion approached, his nostrils flaring. "Come to buy a potion? If it's oil of slipperiness, I warn you, I'm not responsible if you attempt to use it in ways the manufacturer didn't intend."

"I'm actually looking for information about an undead cult."

The moon elf gave a haughty sniff. "Which one? And don't say the Arcane Brotherhood, because you don't have enough money for that."

Astarion lifted one sardonic eyebrow. The moon elf lifted one right back. Astarion reminded himself that he needed information and let the other man win the battle of eyebrows. "I'm curious about the one supposedly practicing under the sewers here in Baldur's Gate."

"Oh, them."

Why does everyone say it like that? And how do they all know about it?

The moon elf reached under the counter and pulled out a book stuffed with bookmarks, then hunted through it for a page. "Ah, here we are... Call themselves the Cult of the Undying Blood. Led by an undead priest who was originally a cleric of Mask and refused to die when his god did. He's apparently convinced that if he keeps worshipping, eventually the god will have no choice but to return. I'm fairly sure it doesn't work like that, but far be it from me to judge other people's religions. He worships a relic that supposedly contains the god's blood and has a bunch of skeletons doing his bidding, along with some soap mummies."

"I'm sorry, for a moment there, I thought you said *soap mummies*?"

"Saponification," the moon elf said in a lecturing tone, "is a chemical process occurring after death whereby the fats in the body are transformed into a soap-like substance known as corpse wax. It can occur when the corpse is submerged for long periods in cold water which is one thing Baldur's Gate isn't lacking. The corpse wax preserves and desiccates the bodily tissues and prevents decomposition. If you perform the correct rites before submerging the corpse, you can eventually raise an extremely unpleasant-looking mummy." He shuddered theatrically. "And given what regular mummies look like, believe me when I say that is a very high bar."

"Do you have any idea how many of them there are?"

"My informant was last in the area several years ago, so even if I had a number, it would likely be inaccurate by now. More than I'd care to encounter, anyway."

"And they're just living under the sewers?"

"If you can call that living." The moon elf's expression indicated that he didn't. "Presumably, they're snatching the occasional body to make more skeletons, but honestly, they just don't do very much. As undead cults go, they're small potatoes." He tapped another bookmark.

"Now, if you wanted to talk about followers of Bhaal..."

"Thank you, no." Astarion fished out a coin and tossed it to the shopkeeper, who caught it, sniffed it, and stowed it away.

"If you end up trying to steal from them and learn anything new, do come back," the moon elf called after them. "I'm always glad to add to my research." And then, in an undertone almost too quiet for Astarion to hear: "And buy something next time, you bastards. These unguents aren't going to sell themselves."

The path through the Undercity was winding and tedious and had nothing much to recommend it, unless you liked the smell of raw sewage. Yousen caught a rat and drained it, then caught a second one and offered it politely to Astarion. Astarion wiped the creature's neck clean with his pocket handkerchief before biting its throat out.

"Have you ever noticed that the rats have a different flavor depending on where you catch them?" Yousen asked as they scrambled over rubble where ancient walls had collapsed. (Well, Yousen scrambled. Astarion refused to do anything so undignified and preferred to think that he glided lightly over the broken stone.)

"The ones you catch in the Lower City are gamier than the ones in the palace pantry, and the ones in Wyrms' Rest are sweeter. The ones by the docks have a fishy taste."

"Terroir," Astarion said absently, picking his way across a rivulet of sewage.

"Beg pardon?"

"*Terroir*, my uncultured friend, is a term used in winemaking to denote the flavor imparted by the soil in which the grapes are grown. You are describing the *terroir* of the rats, based on

their diet. The Lower City rats eat garbage, the dock rats eat fish, and the Wyrms Rest rats eat from the grainfields."

"Oh." Yousen considered this. "So the reason the rats down here in the sewers taste like sh _"

"*Fascinating* as this discussion is, are we near your tunnel?"

The gnome frowned and peered in both directions, then scrabbled up to the top of the nearest pile of rubble. "This might be it. This rockfall wasn't here the last time I was. Let me see..." He ducked into the ragged opening and laid his hands on the stone, bowing his head as if in prayer. After a moment, he reached down, selected a rock, examined it from all angles, then licked it.

Astarion gazed at the ceiling and wondered, if he left right this minute, if he had enough time to find a virgin and hunt down a unicorn. Alas, probably not. It's a nearly impossible quest, the sort of thing that makes or breaks great heroes, and then you'd still have to find the damned unicorn.

"This is it," Yousen said, dropping the licked rock. "The rubble threw me a bit. I've only been here once before."

"Only once?"

"A few years ago. Dalyria asked me to see if the blood was easily accessible." The gnome went into the opening, past the scarred remains of the rockfall, then ducked into a narrow, nearly invisible tunnel coming off the remains of the main passage. Astarion had to bend down to follow him.

"And is it easily accessible?"

"*Ha.*"

"... I see."

"I didn't get any farther than your friend at the Guild did. Looking down into a sea of skeletons was enough for me."

"Lovely." Astarion felt the back of his head scrape the ceiling and hunched lower. He hated enclosed spaces. He had never been claustrophobic as a boy, but between waking in a coffin and spending a year in the mausoleum... But he certainly wasn't going to show weakness in front of Yousen, of all people, so he kept his voice deliberately light. "You're the one who can speak to rocks. Is this ceiling talking about coming down and squashing us into spawn carpaccio?"

"Hrm? No, no." Ahead of him, the gnome paused for a moment, one hand on the wall. "No, it's happy where it is. It would find an earthquake very upsetting."

"You may tell the rock that it is a scholar and a gentlemineral."

The tunnel ceiling stayed where it was. The floor, however, began to buckle and rise the farther they went, a phenomenon that Yousen cheerfully informed him was called a *squeeze*. Astarion would have liked to squeeze the gnome's throat, but his corpse would block the tunnel.

"I don't suppose this opens up soon? I am in danger of doing irreparable damage to this jacket."

"Just ahead."

Just ahead, in this case, was at least another hundred yards, but at last the tunnel opened into a narrow stone corridor that appeared to have been carved from living rock. Astarion leaned against the wall to give his legs and lower back time to recuperate.

"This is old," he said, his eyes roving over the walls.

Yousen nodded excitedly. "It is! You can tell by the tool marks that they cut it with iron tools, not steel, which dates it to no later than -"

"Maybe *you* can tell by the tool marks. I'm going by the graffiti over there that says, 'Sable was here, 691 DR.' And look, they drew a little penis next to it."

It was amazing that so much sigh could fit into someone as small as Yousen.

Astarion admired the graffiti for a few more minutes, which covered the last seven hundred years of Baldur's Gate's history and a wide range of opinions on whom you could call upon for a good time. Finally, he pushed himself away from the wall. "All right, let's keep moving." For a moment, he thought he heard something back the way they had come, a sound like a rock knocked loose from the rubble pile. *Probably just a rat. Probably.*

He kept an ear cocked as Yousen led him through a maze of passageways. The gnome had been right: Astarion couldn't possibly have found his way there alone. *At least, not without a map. And given how frequently we've ended up backtracking, I don't think I'd trust any map he'd be able to draw.*

"Are you certain you know where you're going?"

"It's been a while," Yousen said, shoulders hunching defensively. "We'll get there."

"How ever did you find it in the first place?"

"I asked an old halfling treasure diver where the skeletons were in this part of the Undercity. He told me what to avoid, and I did the exact opposite."

"So why hasn't some other clever gnome done this before," Astarion asked, watching Yousen plaster himself flat against the rough-hewn wall, "if this maze of tunnels is such common knowledge?"

"Those gnomes haven't been undead."

"It makes a difference?"

"There are wards set to keep out the living. Would you mind not talking? I'm trying to feel the vibrations in the stone."

Astarion rolled his eyes but held his peace.

The gnome worked his way down the wall, tapping and stopping, tapping and stopping, then finally murmured something inaudible and set his palm against a particular stone. It shifted soundlessly aside, revealing another passageway.

Fine, I admit it. That was impressive ... and was that a footstep behind us, or an echo? He listened carefully but couldn't be sure.

"Something wrong?"

If they were being followed, Astarion would prefer that their shadow didn't know they'd been spotted. "Whatever could be wrong in this delightfully skeleton-infested sewer?" he asked, and followed the gnome into the shadows.

The corridor split and split again, but Yousen seemed to know where he was now, or perhaps the rocks were being more cooperative. Astarion had no idea if Yousen's claims were true or a pathetic attempt to make himself seem mysterious. Then again, if you were a rock gnome, maybe other rock gnomes found an air of mineral mysticism to be irresistible. This led Astarion perilously close to contemplating Yousen's sex life, a line of thought he murdered with extreme prejudice. So far as he knew, the gnome didn't have one, and that was fine by Astarion. He'd certainly never been tempted. Yousen seemed like the type who would cry afterward. *Or apologize. I'm not sure which is worse—wait, what was that?*

He was careful not to let his stride change as he listened. Did the echo of their steps conceal someone else's muffled footfalls? Had someone followed them from the Guild? Was one of the cult's tame corpses slinking after them? Or was it someone else entirely?

"Ward," Yousen said, coming to a halt.

It was indeed a ward. Tiny runes were carved into the stone, anchoring it permanently. It didn't glow, exactly, but if you turned your head just right, you could see a very faint shimmer, like air rising from a hot road. The graffiti stopped abruptly, too.

"And this keeps the living out?"

"Yes. I tested it with a mouse the first time. It couldn't pass through, but I could." Yousen stepped through confidently. When he failed to fall over, explode, or turn into a weasel, Astarion followed. The ward passed over his skin like a sigh, leaving a vague queasy feeling in its wake.

And that should take care of anyone from the Guild following us. So far as I know, I'm the only undead on the rolls. Granted, he would have been surprised if no one in the Guild had guessed that the very pale elven rogue was not an albino but something rather more predatory. Still, the code of silence held - you paid your dues and you didn't pry, and other people extended the same courtesy.

Astarion was very careful to stay current on his dues.

Their path changed repeatedly, sometimes running along ancient roadways, sometimes cutting directly through stone. Few of the denizens of Baldur's Gate realized that it was built atop the ruins of its former self. The city had sunk over the centuries, two-story buildings gradually becoming one-story buildings with a basement, then basements with a storm drain, and likely a couple more stories built on top. Streets were elevated so that runoff might be managed more effectively, and old structures in the depths of the Undercity were walled up like anchorites.

Astarion was old enough to have seen one such cycle. From what Cazador had said, he had seen many. The vast underground holdings of Szarr Palace had once been mostly aboveground, but time had sunk them deeper into the grave. *Which is safer for us than having big picture windows everywhere, I imagine. All it takes is one careless servant, and we'd be vampire spawn charcoal.*

There were two more wards placed at intervals throughout the tunnels. Astarion wondered how the Guild elf's informant had gotten into the place, but perhaps they, too, had been undead. *Or perhaps there are more entrances. Once you hit the ruins of the old city, all bets are off.*

Then Yousen stopped before a particular bend and held up his hand. He inched forward, peered around the corner, then pulled back and nodded to Astarion.

Astarion also peered around the corner. His eyes widened slightly at the sight.

The passage dead-ended at a door. It was a large door, and it had been designed by someone who felt that black iron and skulls were integral parts of any décor. Astarion would not have wanted something like that in his bedchamber, but he could see the appeal for, say, a guest bathroom.

Two skeletons stood before it, unmoving. They carried swords, which probably meant they were the smarter sort. Although a single skeleton or even two wasn't much of a threat, it was possible they were sharp enough to sound an alarm.

He turned to ask Yousen a question, but the gnome was already moving back along the passage, tapping and listening. "Up there," he finally whispered, pointing up.

The ceilings here were very high. Astarion squinted at a dark emptiness far above.

Yousen's spider-climbing ability wasn't as good as Violet's, but it was still better than Astarion's. The elf gritted his teeth, watching the gnome carefully scale the wall as if he were picking his way through uneven ground.

I will not take my shoes off in front of him. I won't. Astarion set his hands to the wall and thought very hard about sticking to it.

"Something wrong?" Yousen whispered after a few moments.

"Not at all. Give me a moment." Astarion had made it about six feet up and was proceeding by fits and starts. As long as he kept his eyes closed, he could pretend he was crawling along the floor. He'd crawled on plenty of floors. Been doing it since he was a little pointy-eared toddler. Nothing to worry about.

"It's just that you're -"

"I *said*, give me a moment!"

Nine Hells, was that a giggle? Did Yousen giggle at me?

No, surely not. If it was Yousen, he'd have apologized by now.

When Astarion finally reached the hole in the ceiling, he shoved his way past Yousen and set his back against the wall.

"Are you okay?"

"I am *fine*." Astarion reached for a lie and found one at his fingertips. "I was *listening*, you dolt. I think we're being followed."

Yousen's eyes went wide. "Who?"

"If I knew that, I would not have had to keep freezing to listen for their footsteps. They're good, whoever they are, and this place is full of echoes."

"Oh dear." Yousen wrung his hands. "Should we go back?"

"And run right into them? I think not." Astarion studied their surroundings. Some unknown hand had found a crack in the rock and carved the bottom into a narrow passage wending its way slightly upward. The walls rose up, canyon-like, and were lost in shadow.

"It's over here," Yousen whispered. He led the way, though he kept glancing over his shoulder.

A faint glow of light heralded the end of the passage. The stone had been carved out here, forming a ledge with a low wall around it. Even here, someone had scrawled a name on the wall, along with a suggestion that they engaged in unnatural acts with kobolds.

Astarion crouched low and slipped out onto the ledge. Yousen gave one last, worried look at the mouth of the tunnel and joined him.

Astarion leaned over the wall and looked out into Hell.

The cavern where the Cult of the Undying Blood conducted their foul and unholy rites was perhaps a quarter mile across, dug out of the rubble of the buried city. Streets radiated out from a central plaza, lined with the remains of buildings. Some were intact, while others lacked roofs or walls or had been reduced to outlines of old foundations.

The central plaza had three tiers and looked as if someone had started building a ziggurat and gotten bored partway through. Lights burned along the walls, a shade of green that turned the ragged stones the color of rotting flesh.

In the center of the plaza, a globe of absolute darkness sucked in the light and gave back only velvet blackness. Some part of Astarion's mind noted that if he were worshipping a holy relic of the god of shadows, he'd probably keep it in something like that.

The rest of Astarion's mind was screaming incoherently about the skeletons.

The undead filled the streets of the ruined city, five and ten abreast, a seething mass of ivory and old rags. It was like market day in Baldur's Gate, if it had been stripped of color and flesh. A real market day would be full of speech, though, people shouting and laughing, vendors hawking their wares. The only sounds that rose to the watchers on their perch was the hollow clatter of bones.

Astarion was reminded of nothing so much as an anthill. Each ant might be on its own specific errand, but together they formed a scurrying river that swirled with currents and eddies, a whole infinitely greater than its parts.

"That," he said, "is a lot of fucking skeletons."

"There weren't nearly as many last time," Yousen said, swallowing hard. "And there were a *lot* last time."

Astarion nodded. He hadn't planned a frontal assault anyway, but he was beginning to reconsider the entire plan. There were daring heists, and then there were ... whatever the hell this was.

"This is as far as I got." Yousen shrank back toward the safety of the passage. "And as far as I go."

Astarion nodded, getting to his feet. "Only one thing left to do," he said, letting a dagger fall into his hand. He turned to Yousen and smiled.

Something about that smile made the gnome back up a step, his eyes going wide. "Wait -" Astarion struck.

The gnome fell onto his back with a yelp of terror. Astarion's blow went high, the weighted pommel clenched in his fist. His knuckles cracked against bone with a satisfying crunch. The recipient's cry of pain as he slammed her hand into the stone wall was even more satisfying. The knife she'd held clattered to the ground.

"Dear Violet," he said, dragging her out of the shadows. "I was wondering when you'd join us."

Astarion had fallen in love several times in his life - with his first teacher, with Bajia, with a particularly handsome stable lad a year older than he was who had taught him some fascinating things in the empty stalls behind the manor house. But when Lazlo handed him his first law book - *Introduction to Legal Procedures*, Twelfth Edition, by Frankwilliam and Kiva - and told him to familiarize himself with the basics, something clicked inside Astarion's brain, and he fell in love so deeply and profoundly that he would bear the scars for the rest of his life.

There are people with minds like corkscrews. Astarion was not one of them. He had a mind like a lockpick, always trying to open up a rule and find the loophole, or the exact combination of clauses that would turn it into something that applied to other people. But here, here was not just a set of rules but an entire *framework* dedicated to rules and loopholes and clauses.

The games he used to play to amuse himself, where he would obey the letter of his father's orders while stomping the spirit into dust, suddenly seemed small and petty. You could use the law to tie the whole *world* in a knot.

His legal career started, bizarrely enough, with the flowerpots.

Alustriel Silverhand, ruler of Silvermoon, liked gardens. She liked flowers and parks and civic green spaces. The city government paid out quite a lot of money in contracts to maintain those gardens, and some of those contracts were very valuable.

"And the bastards with the contract for the Miller park - the one on the east side, near the water wheels? - got what they *said* was a bad batch of fertilizer." Lazlo flung himself back in his chair, eyes closed, an expression of irritated amusement on his face. "It was a ground-up troll. The thing reassembled itself out of eleven separate raised flower beds and ate a visiting dignitary. *And* uprooted the begonias. The Silver Lady is *not* pleased."

Astarion had already seen the broadsheets, which featured lurid drawings of a rampaging troll with flowers growing out of its ears. "Get them under the suitable materials clause," he suggested.

"They say that they were sold it as blood meal, which is listed as a suitable material, and that they're the injured party."

"Nonsense," Astarion said. "That much blood meal would lead to excess leaf growth and reduce flowering. If they're not crooked, they're incompetent."

Lazlo opened his eyes and sat up. "Are you serious? How do you know that?"

Astarion, who had never mentioned his parents or the vineyard and didn't intend to start now, said, "I ... err ... had a brief interest in botany... many years ago. Many, *many* years ago."

Lazlo, who was nearly two hundred, said something under his breath about Astarion having been a precocious toddler, but he opened a file. "Their contract *does* list blood meal as a suitable material..."

Astarion leaned over his cousin's shoulder. "But this line here says, 'Provide maintenance as seasonally appropriate.' That was *not* seasonally appropriate, regardless of whether it was a powdered troll."

"We generally only use that line to go after people who aren't weeding or are leaving dead plants in the flower beds, and only after they've been given a warning."

"It's still in the contract. Get a farmer to testify, or better yet, a druid."

"They'll argue we have to issue them a written warning and give them suitable time to fix the issue before canceling the contract."

Astarion frowned, then went to the shelf and pulled down another volume, flipping pages.

After a moment, he said, "Would you consider a troll to be an agricultural pest?"

"That one was an agricultural *menace*."

"Under the Agricultural Safety Act of 1196 DR, in the event of blight or infestation, a crop may be destroyed upon the recommendation of an agricultural official, *at any time*, if required to secure the safety of Silverymoon or its food supply." Astarion looked up. "Does preventing trolls count as securing the safety of Silverymoon?"

"It damn well ought to. Do we have to pay them afterward?"

"Ah, let's see ... The owner of the crop is entitled to compensation equal to the market value of said crop. It is forbidden to plant the same crop in the same field, orchard, pasture, garden, or other designated agricultural area for at least three years or until certified safe by agricultural officials, upon pain of eviction and forfeiture." Astarion grinned abruptly. "Tell me, did these people replant begonias?"

Lazlo stared at him for a moment, then began to laugh. "You're mad," he said. "Brilliant, but utterly mad. Write it up, and I'll take it to the judge tomorrow."

Two days after the successful conclusion of the begonia incident, Astarion signed papers of apprenticeship with his cousin to become a junior law clerk, not merely a scribe. He celebrated by purchasing an elegant pair of boots, getting falling-down drunk, and deepening his acquaintance with a server at the Cock and Warlock tavern.

When he staggered into the house two hours past dawn, his cousin looked at him, sighed, and said, "You know, when I was an apprentice and went out drinking and whoring at all hours, I at least remembered to bring a bottle home for my master."

"Don't pretend you knew who it was," Violet said sullenly, rubbing her hand where Astarion had struck it.

"Petras sounds like a peacock in iron boots, and we'd never have heard Aurelia at all."

She made a rude gesture, then clutched her hand. "*Fuck*, that hurts. I'm telling Father you broke my hand!"

"Why don't you run along and do that, then?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I could tell him other things. Like the fact that you went into the Thieves' Guild."

Astarion stifled a yawn. "I know it's difficult, but try to use your brain for something other than keeping your ears apart. Do you think he doesn't already know I'm a member?"

Violet's lips curled. *She* clearly hadn't known.

"I am more curious as to why you followed us in the first place." Astarion leaned against the wall, folding his arms. *How much does she know?*

She shrugged, unrepentant. "Dalyria and Yousen were clearly up to something. All that lurking and looking over their shoulders. I wanted to know what."

Astarion glanced around for Yousen, but the gnome had vanished. Either he had found a wall to blend into or, more likely, he was scurrying back out of the Undercity as quickly as he could.

Well, I'll find my way back eventually. I remember the graffiti, if nothing else.

"Anyway, I wasn't expecting all this." Violet leaned over the stone wall, looking down onto the mass of undead. "Pretty impressive."

"Yes, yes." Astarion waved a languid hand. "I suggest you leave, but if you want to swan dive into their midst, I certainly won't stop you."

"Let me guess ... whatever you're after is in that big black blob over there."

Astarion wasn't certain whether she truly didn't know what he was looking for or she was simply lying to throw him off the scent. It was entirely possible that Dalyria and Yousen had discussed the whole plan without bothering to check the door for eavesdroppers. Plausible, even. *Tymora, why must you surround me with incompetents?*

"My dear Violet," he said, "why would I share *anything* about my plans with you?"

She turned to study him through narrowed eyes. When she wasn't doing her artificial childlike act, her gaze was alarmingly shrewd. While Astarion was taller and stronger - not to mention smarter - than Violet, and he was reasonably sure he could take her in a fight, he didn't feel that a small ledge over a sea of skeletons was the best place to test that hypothesis.

"I could tell everyone else what you're up to," she said.

"Since I doubt you'll find Aurelia, that leaves, what, Petras? Please, feel free." He made shooing gestures. "Run along home and tell your big brother."

He could actually hear Violet's teeth grinding. He was increasingly certain she didn't know that the blood of a god lay below. She had probably seen Yousen and Dalyria acting secretive and followed them impulsively, hoping to learn more. Astarion was a trifle annoyed with himself that he hadn't spotted her sooner, but if Violet had a single skill, it was turning up at the most inconvenient possible time.

Though I suppose it could be more inconvenient. She could have appeared while I was dangling on a rope over the plaza, for example.

No, there had to be a better way down than that. Leaving aside that all the skeletons would see him descending like a foolhardy spider, ropes were much too easily cut. If he watched for long enough, he could likely spot a useful pattern - areas that were less heavily patrolled, guard shifts that changed on a regular basis. Unfortunately, that would require him to watch the skeletons, not Violet, and he certainly wasn't going to take his eyes off her.

"Maybe I'll climb down there and steal it myself," she said.

"Please, feel free. I'll tell Father you died as you lived: grossly overestimating your own abilities."

"What's that thing there?" She leaned outward, pointing to something on the ground. Astarion, being at least a century too old to fall for that, kept his back firmly against the wall. "Describe it to me."

"You're no fun at all." She turned and flounced away. Over her shoulder, she snapped, "I'll find something better than yours. Just you *wait*."

Astarion rolled his eyes but didn't move from his position. He certainly wasn't going to turn his back on her until he was very sure that she was gone.

Unfortunately, this meant that he was still standing in the same place five minutes later, when she dropped the thunderstone on his head.

The explosion knocked Astarion to his knees. His ears were full of a high-pitched keening sound. He shouted, "*Fuck!*," but couldn't hear himself and wondered if he'd actually said it out loud or only thought it. For that matter, he could barely hear himself think.

Dust rattled down from the ceiling, pebbles bouncing on the ground in front of him. Through the horrible sound in his ears, he managed to think of cave-ins and tunnel collapses, and that sent him crawling out onto the ledge. It might break away from the wall, but at least it wouldn't crush him under a million tons of stone.

The ringing seemed to be affecting his balance. He clutched the low wall for support, shaking his head, waiting for his inner ear to sort itself out. Violet. That miserable little bitch. Behind the bratty exterior lay the soul of a ... a ... *shit*. Something awful. He couldn't think of anything quite awful enough. More importantly, he couldn't believe he'd underestimated her so badly.

He was in mid-recrimination when a much more immediate thought worked its way through the ringing. Astarion pushed himself up, very slowly, and peered over the wall.

The cavern was still full of hundreds, maybe thousands, of skeletons. But they were no longer milling about. The ruined streets were utterly still. Every one of them had stopped in their tracks. And every single one was looking up at him.

The cultists who came for him were led by a soap mummy, and the man at the Guild had been right - they were *nasty*. Astarion had only ever met one mummy, a mummy lord who had come to Szarr Palace, but it had been a tall, gaunt creature wrapped in linen, its desiccated flesh pulled tight against the bone. Its voice was as dry and whispery as a desert wind, and a scarab crouched in its mouth where other beings had a tongue.

It had also, as Astarion recalled, been a bit of a snob.

This mummy looked like a half-melted candle. It bulged out of its wrappings, waxy flesh partially engulfing them, and its fingers had fused together into lumpy mittens.

"Hello," Astarion said, waving. His ears were still ringing faintly, but he'd made a stab at escaping. Unfortunately, the mummy and a number of skeletons were waiting for him in the corridor. As soon as he saw them, he tried to make it up a wall, but the mummy gestured, and three skeletons raised crossbows, all of them pointed in his direction.

"Get down," ordered the mummy. Its voice was deeper and thicker than that of the other mummy Astarion had encountered, cold water instead of desert wind.

Vampire spawn were hard to kill, but an arrow directly through the heart would do the job nicely. Astarion decided that perhaps it was time for diplomacy. He climbed down the wall and turned, putting on his most charming smile.

"How nice to meet you all. I had no idea you had such a marvelous place down here."

The mummy gazed at him. At least, Astarion thought it did. Its left eyelid had melted into its cheek, and its right was covered by linen.

"Trying to bring down the ceiling won't work." Buried in that cold-water voice was a distinctive accent. Astarion was betting that in life, it had been a dockside bully rather than the scion of a noble house. The mummy lord would doubtless have been appalled.

"I *wasn't* trying," Astarion said. "I was minding my own business, and someone dropped a thunderstone on me."

The mummy made a scoffing noise that sounded like something splattering inside its chest.

"I realize it sounds fantastical, but I *assure* you that it is true." Seeing that this wasn't helping, Astarion tried a different tactic. "Actually, perhaps you can help me. I was wondering how I would arrange an audience with your leader. Perhaps I could speak to their secretary?"

The mummy shook its head, possibly in disbelief. "Bind him."

Two skeletons advanced on Astarion. One still wore the ragged clothes of a sailor. Brass knuckles gleamed on the other's bony fist.

"Now, I'm certain we can talk about this," Astarion said, taking a step back and hitting the wall. "Surely we can come to some kind of mutually beneficial arrangement?"

There was a long moment, presumably while the mummy worked out the long words, then it said, "Nah," and struck Astarion across the face.

Its hand might look melted, but it hit like an ogre. One did not survive Szarr Palace for long without learning when fighting back was futile. Astarion let the blow crumple him to the floor and went limp as a dishrag. The two skeletons bashed him around a bit in the process of removing his daggers and tying his hands. Fortunately, the one's brass knuckles cut open his forehead, which poured blood everywhere and made the beating look much more impressive than it actually was. He moaned dramatically, and the mummy said, "That's enough. The Inquisitor will want a word with this one."

Of course they have an inquisitor. It's always an inquisitor. Hells, I hope my nose isn't broken.

The skeletons dragged him upright and kicked him into motion. Astarion blinked blood out of his eyes and let out a whimper for verisimilitude. The other thing you learned in Szarr Palace was how to sound much more wounded than you actually were. Fortunately, it appeared the skeletons were not terribly good at searches. He still had a lockpick up each sleeve and two more, plus a holdout knife in his boots.

The troop of skeletons followed the mummy through the door that Yousen had pointed out earlier. Up close, it was clear that the craftsman hadn't been concerned with such niceties as "filing down the pointy bits" or "cleaning the skulls." Astarion's jacket caught on a jagged piece of iron and tore, trailing threads.

So much for this outfit. Ah well, wearing velvet in a dungeon is always a risk.

The mummy led its troop along the ruined streets that Astarion had seen from above. The other skeletons had begun moving again. He saw some clearing debris from tumbledown buildings and others hauling stones. It appeared that renovations to the cult's compound were ongoing.

The mummy reached another door, this one made of wood banded in iron, and pushed it open. This section actually had intact ceilings, and the dark interior was lit by a single hanging brazier that burned with the same unpleasant greenish light as those outside. The moving skeletons cast a symphony of shadows on the walls.

Another mummy sat at a table, playing solitaire. More skeletons flanked an unlit doorway on the far side of the room.

The card-playing mummy looked up. It had either been larger in life than the first one or more bloated when mummification had started, because it was enormous. Its shoulders looked like lumpy anvils strapped to its collarbone, and its linen-wrapped biceps were as big around as Astarion's thighs.

"Another prisoner," the first mummy said. "Cell's occupied," the second one said. "Kill him."

"Excuse me," Astarion said, "but if I could make a suggestion ... ?"

Neither mummy appeared interested in his suggestions. One of the skeletons wrapped an arm around his throat. Astarion could feel the bones of its forearm pressing into his neck in two distinct lines.

"Inquisitor will want a look at this one. Kill the one in the cell."

"Inquisitor wants a look at that one, too."

"Then put them *both* in the cell."

The card-playing mummy, evidently the jailor, contorted its waxy face into a much-put-upon expression. "Might kill each other."

The first mummy shrugged, indicating that this was not actually its business.

"*Told* the Inquisitor one cell wasn't enough, but no, had to keep turning them into tanks ..."

The jailor pushed its chair back and stood. It looked even more melted than the first mummy, its waxy flesh sliding slowly down its body, held in place by inadequate linen wrappings and what looked like improvised suspenders, if suspenders were made of chain and hooked directly into the muscle.

It loomed over Astarion, who didn't have to try very hard to look cowed. In life, the creature must have been at least six and a half feet tall. "Fine," it muttered. "I'll take 'em. But if it dies, I'm telling the Inquisitor who ordered it."

The first mummy shrugged again. The skeletons who had relieved Astarion of his daggers dropped them onto the table. The jailor mummy shook its head and reached out with hands that appeared to have been cut back into usable fingers. It performed a far more thorough pat down, removing the lockpicks from Astarion's sleeves and yanking off his boots entirely. He could feel the chill of its touch even through his jacket.

Damnation.

"Come on, then," the jailor said, clamping one hand over Astarion's arm. Since the options were to follow or to have it ripped out of the socket, Astarion chose to follow. Half a dozen skeletons trailed behind.

The corridor was surprisingly long, and it branched several times. At the end of one of the branches lay a room that had clearly been converted into a cell by virtue of driving iron bars into the floor and ceiling. Astarion could make out a humanoid figure slumped in one corner.

"Brought you a friend," the jailor said with a gurgling laugh.

The mummy unlocked the door and swung it open. Four of the skeletons marched inside. Two held swords on the person in the corner, and the other two removed Astarion's ropes and replaced them with manacles.

"You two play nice," the jailor said, then turned and stomped away, with the skeletons clattering behind.

The other person in the cell moved with a faint metallic sound. Armor of some kind, Astarion thought. The little cataloging voice in his mind pointed out that this was a bad thing for the person wearing it, because you didn't leave armor on a prisoner unless you thought it would be easier to get it off their corpse in the immediate future.

"I'm glad for the company but sorry they caught you," said a voice like golden gravel. "Are you badly hurt?"

"I'll let you know in a moment." Astarion drew up his knees and cautiously rubbed his cheeks against them, wishing that his hands hadn't been manacled behind him. Nothing in his face went *crunch* or *twang* or *squish*, which was a good sign. His nose still hurt, and he was very aware of the bruise across his cheekbone where the mummy had struck him. He blinked more blood out of his eyes. His ribs felt dreadful, but they didn't stab when he breathed - at least, not any more than they stabbed when he didn't breathe. There was a spot on his right thigh where a skeleton had stomped that was going to bruise right down to the bone. *That is going to turn some truly magnificent colors, too. All the blues and purples and apple greens. Pity I can't frame it.*

"As dreadfully impressive as all this looks, I can still fight." This was more or less true, though he would have said so even if it wasn't. There was no point in letting strangers know that you couldn't fend them off. He tried to turn his head to look at the other prisoner, and his neck spasmed with pain so intense that it was almost visible. "Though I can say without fear of contradiction that I have felt better."

"That I can fix," said the melodious gravelly voice. The other man moved away from the wall. His feet were manacled, but his hands had only been tied with rope. He reached out and clapped his bound hands firmly on Astarion's shoulder.

Something blazed up between them, something that felt like raw sunlight poured over his skin, a radiance that sang along Astarion's nerves and sank into his blood. For a moment, the sensation was almost pleasant, a burn as kindly as whiskey down his throat, but the whiskey turned to acid, and the burning built until it was a desert sun blazing down to bleach his bones beneath it, and every part of him fell back, screaming, from the light that wasn't light at all but something else, something terrible, something *holy* -

"Um," said his cellmate. "It's never done *that* before."

Astarion came to himself pressed up against the bars, as far from the other man as his chain would allow. He looked down at his shoulder, expecting to see blackened skin or possibly even burnt bone where the man's hand had gripped him.

The skin was smooth, without a trace of a blister. Despite causing the sensation of being burned alive from the outside in, the magic - it could only have been magic - had done absolutely nothing to him.

"Never do that again," Astarion said in a voice that should have made his cellmate cower like a whipped dog.

His cellmate did not cower. He wasn't even looking at Astarion. He was staring at his own hands as if he'd never seen them before, turning them over in apparent puzzlement.

The green light at the far end of the corridor offered just enough light for Astarion to make out colors, even if the colors were tinted green. His cellmate was a large man with pupilless white eyes and skin that was probably golden. There was a scabbed-over wound on his temple, and blood darkened the hair around it, but the rest gleamed like a newly minted coin - although, given the lighting, Astarion would be hard-pressed to guess the denomination.

His face could have been stamped on the selfsame coin - square jaw, aquiline nose, chiseled cheekbones, ears that came to a rounded point. Also, he seemed to be ... glowing? *Nine Hells, he is.* A faint radiance surrounded him, barely visible unless you looked straight at it. It wasn't strong enough to read by, but Astarion imagined it was useful for getting keys into keyholes in the dark. Probably no one would notice in broad daylight, but in a dark cell, it became obvious.

Aasimar. A child of celestial beings. The white eyes were a dead giveaway, and the glow only cemented it. Astarion's gaze traveled down across broad shoulders that still bore the

ragged remains of a tabard, chain-encased biceps, a breastplate scarred from innumerable battles but still somehow *shiny*... "Oh Hells," said Astarion. "You're a *paladin*."

"Yes?" the aasimar said, as if surprised he had to ask. He held out his hands as if to shake. "Hahn den Suriel, at your service."

Astarion looked at the offered hand as if it were a dead flounder. "You tried to lay *hands* on me."

"Yes," den Suriel said, "and I can't imagine why it didn't work." He stared at his hands again. "I wonder if the cult has managed to somehow block divine energies ... but no, that's not possible." He nodded to himself. "The gods can always find us, no matter how dark the night or deep the hell."

Oh, joy. I'm in a small cell with a religious fanatic. One who, judging by the size of those biceps, can break me over his knee. Astarion eyed the chain holding den Suriel to the wall. *Can he reach me over here? I don't think he can ...* The elf eased a little farther away.

"I am sorry," the paladin said. "I can try to cast cure -"

"No!" Astarion cleared his throat. "Ah, that is to say, it's *quite* all right. You should save your spells. Undoubtedly, you'll need them before too long. The hospitality of our charming hosts leaves something to be desired."

"Truth," the paladin said. "They said something about an inquisitor." That handsome golden face screwed up in a scowl.

"Why is it *always* inquisitors?"

"Thank you," Astarion said, with real feeling. "Surely there has to be some other religious vocation that strikes fear and terror into the hearts of the enemy and all that."

"Nuns," said the aasimar glumly. "I'd rather face twenty inquisitors than a single Mother Superior."

"Oh, I don't know. I once knew a pair of twins in service to Sune who were a lot of fun at parties."

"Maybe *Sune's* nuns." The aasimar shuddered. "Ours ... aren't."

Astarion craned his neck, studying the paladin's breastplate. It was hard to make out the device, even with his superior darkvision. "Is that a silver *wease*?"

"Argent Badger." The paladin rubbed the emblem on his chest. "Have you heard of us?"

His voice rang with hope. Astarion took a certain amount of pleasure in squelching it. "No."

The aasimar sighed. "No one ever has. You know the Order of the Radiant Heart?"

"I've heard of them," Astarion said warily. Three junior paladins of the Order had once gotten into Szarr Palace, following a spectacularly ill-conceived effort by Violet to seduce one. It had taken days for the burns to heal and years for Astarion to stop bringing it up at dinner.

"We're sort of like that."

Astarion suspected that *sort of* was doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence. "Is that so?"

"Well ..." The problem with paladins was that they were fundamentally honest. "There's, um, fewer of us. And we're more specialized."

"Are you, now."

"Oh, yes." The paladin put his shoulders back, and the faint glow grew a hair stronger. "We specialize in hunting undead."

"Of *course* you do."

Astarion spent a few minutes silently cursing the goddess of misfortune in all her aspects.

Really, Beshaba? Really? I toss a coin on your altar every time I'm in that part of town. I've never robbed your collection box, not even once. And this is the thanks I get?

For that matter, Tymora, where have you been for the last hundred and fifty-odd years?

The paladin was still talking. Astarion might have found this annoying, but he really did have a magnificent voice. *Mind you, most paladins do seem to have the sort of voice you need to stand and declaim about the inherent goodness of people ... and the sort of brain that doesn't realize you're spouting absolute nonsense.*

"... Anyway, that's why I came to Baldur's Gate. And once I heard that there was an undead cult under the city worshipping a relic of a dead god - well, you can see why I'm here." The paladin made a self-deprecating gesture. "Suffice to say, there were a lot more of them than I expected."

"Yes, I imagine there were. So, you worship a badger?"

"No, no." Den Suriel looked aghast. "I serve Lathander, the Lord of Morning. The Badger is an ideal we seek to emulate. Strong, fierce, tenacious ..."

"Good at destroying henhouses."

"I will have you know that I am murder on henhouses."

Was that a joke? Hells, I think that was a joke. I didn't know they made paladins with a sense of humor. Then again, I suppose Lathander is an easygoing god, as these things go. Except when it comes to undead. A thought occurred to Astarion abruptly. "How did you even get down here? The tunnels are full of wards to keep out the living."

"Knocked down a couple of walls," the paladin said cheerfully. "How about you?"

Astarion realized belatedly that he should not have started down this conversational road.

Can't some paladins tell if you're lying? There were those ones who would come into court sometimes in Silverymoon, and the witnesses would be compelled to tell the truth. Shit. Was that a spell or just something they could do naturally? It had been nearly two centuries, and he honestly couldn't remember. Baldur's Gate never bothered with that sort of thing, truth not being a particularly valuable local commodity.

"I came with a rock gnome," Astarion said, choosing his words carefully, just in case. "He's very good at finding secret passages. Says the stone talks to him."

"Useful, that." Den Suriel nodded. "Any chance of him coming to find us?"

Astarion pictured Yousen attempting a daring one-gnome rescue and snorted with laughter.

It made his nose hurt. "Not a chance. Incidentally, does my nose look broken to you?"

The paladin gestured at him to turn his head. "It looks fine from here, but there's rather a lot of blood in the way. Hold on." He got to his knees and awkwardly picked up a bucket of water that had been left near the bars, then shuffled in Astarion's direction. "May I?"

Vanity warred with sense, and, as usual, sense lost. He scooted closer to the paladin. "If you would."

There was a rag already floating in the bucket. It had probably been white at one point, and it seemed to match the torn end of den Suriel's tabard. The aasimar took it and began carefully wiping the blood from Astarion's face.

The water was shockingly cold at first, but the paladin's touch was very gentle. *Ahh*, Astarion thought as coolness stroked across his lips, *the sort of hands that can hold a sword hilt or a newborn chick with equal ease*. He'd always been a sucker for men with hands like that. If the water was warmer, and if he hadn't felt as though he'd been hit with a hammer, Astarion would have quite enjoyed the paladin's ministrations. As it was, he couldn't help a hiss of pain when the rag moved over his right cheekbone.

"It's not broken," den Suriel said, "but you are going to have an incredible black eye on that side. Was it one of the mummies?"

"Hideous creatures, aren't they?"

Den Suriel shook his head. "Many ugly creatures are beautiful on the inside. Sadly, these aren't."

Astarion closed his eyes, partly so they could be washed and partly because the man had positively glowed with sincerity when he talked about being beautiful on the inside. It was enough to make a decent cynic ill.

The aasimar dipped the rag into the bucket again and set to work on the blood crusted in Astarion's hair. "I feel like I should probably know your name if I'm washing your hair for you."

"Petras," Astarion said, wondering if den Suriel could sense the lie.

"A pleasure to meet you, although I could wish it was under better circumstances."

"Likewise," Astarion said, not entirely sure whether that was true. He tried to remember what else he knew about paladins, which wasn't a lot. They didn't tend to move in the same social circles as he did, even when he was alive. Clearly, he couldn't tell Astarion was undead. Did he not have magic for that, or would it simply be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of undead in the immediate area? Astarion had never gotten out of the habit of breathing, which was a small bit of luck. *All right, Tymora, I'll give you that one.*

On the other hand, if he could somehow point the aasimar in the direction of the other undead, he'd be a remarkably good shield. That was why you kept paladins around, wasn't it? You stood behind them and let the enemy wear themselves out bashing against all that armor.

Hmm ...

"That's the best I can do, I'm afraid," den Suriel said. "Your nose looks fine."

"Thank Tymora for small favors." Astarion opened his eyes and found the paladin's face inches from his. Close enough to bite or kiss. He could smell the man's blood - almost human, but with an overlay of something both bitter and fragrant, like incense.

It came to him that if he couldn't steal the blood of a god, the blood of a child of angels might make a very good offering in its place.

They stayed there a moment too long. Those pupilless white eyes widened just slightly, then den Suriel dipped his head and moved back to his corner, chains rattling. Astarion began investigating the range of motion available to his manacled hands.

"What are your current plans?" he asked.

"Oh, well." The aasimar shrugged. "I figured I'd wait until they drag me in front of this Inquisitor person, then, you know, break free and get to him, see if I can take him down with me in a blaze of radiant glory, die pierced by a thousand wounds, something like that."

"So, the usual paladin thing."

"Pretty much. May I ask what on earth you're doing over there?"

"The usual rogue thing." Astarion wedged one foot against the wall and twisted in a fashion that made his ribs shriek with pain.

"I'd offer to help, but I don't think I can bend like that."

"It *is* a specialized skill." Every twist went a little further and hurt a little more, until he finally managed to get his hands against his thigh. He snagged one broken fingernail along a particular seam. It took more wriggling to get the wire out, and afterward he had to simply lean against the wall and concentrate on not vomiting for a moment. Each individual rib felt as sharp as Violet's knives.

"Are you all right?"

"Better than you'll be after those thousand wounds." Astarion began working the wire into shape. "I don't suppose you've considered not dying in a heroic blaze of glory?"

"I'm afraid it's part of being a paladin. What is it they say? *The fox has a bag of tricks, the hedgehog only one.*"

Astarion pursed his lips. "Do you know, there's a type of bird near Silverymoon that specializes in eating hedgehogs. It has a very long beak, and it stabs right through the quills. Do you know what its primary predator is?"

The aasimar raised his eyebrows. "I have no idea."

"Foxes."

Den Surriel considered this for a long moment. "Okay. What's your idea, then?"

Astarion held up his hands. The unlocked manacle clanged to the floor. He waved his makeshift wire lockpick gently at the aasimar. "Escape seems like a fine idea. Would you care to join me?"

Even chained to the floor, the paladin managed a bow. "It would be an honor."

The ten years that Astarion spent studying law in Silverymoon were among the happiest of his life. He made friends among the other apprentices, and occasionally lovers, though he never told them where he came from. None of them ever came close to guessing. As an Ancunín, he was assumed to be some minor offshoot of the house, come to Silverymoon for his own amusement. He cultivated what he hoped was an air of mystery and knew was a sense of good taste. Half his money was spent on elegant clothes at the height of fashion and the other half on entertainment. "Wine, women, and song," as Lazlo said, although there were also a great many men and very little singing.

Bajia came to check on him every now and again, bringing him news of his great-grandmother. No, she was still abroad. She planned to return soon, whatever *soon* meant. She sent her love. Astarion accepted this gravely and did not ask questions that he knew Bajia couldn't answer.

And always there was the work, the delicate, twisty work of laws and rules that so often fell open like a lock if you simply poked the right bit and twisted just so.

He kept his hand in picking actual locks, though he certainly did not announce it. It was another apprentice who recognized it, one whose master had been known to represent individuals of dubious legal standing. The young halfling woman moved like a centipede and smiled like an assassin. She sat down beside him at the Cock and Warlock tavern and said, "You dropped this."

"Oh? Thank you -" Astarion started to say, then recognized the skeleton key Bajia had given him, which he kept in a pocket next to his heart and most assuredly had not dropped.

"Interesting trinket to keep around," she said.

"It was a gift," he said stiffly. "From a friend."

"Interesting friend." She drew her finger through a puddle of spilled beer. "I've got some interesting friends, too."

"How delightful for you. Perhaps you should run along and drink with them."

"Mmm." She propped her chin on her hand.

"It can be dangerous, being too clever. Some of those interesting friends might get a little *too* interested, if you know what I mean."

"Madam, I assure you that I have not the slightest idea what you mean, nor the slightest inclination to find out."

She cocked her head and gave him a wry, amused look. "Are you drunk or just thick?"

He opened his mouth to deliver what he hoped was a devastating setdown, then something in his brain clicked belatedly. "Oh," he said. "I see. Drunk, if you must know."

The halfling chuckled. "Maybe don't drink so much tomorrow," she said. "And we can chat."

It was thus that Astarion met the local thieves' guild, a collection of like-minded artisans, fingersmiths, and occasional outright thugs. He was on his best behavior and, with the help of his new halfling friend, managed to navigate the guild's political waters without falling prey to any unexpected undercurrents. It helped that no one actually cared about two junior apprentices and, in return for nominal yearly dues, continued not to care. Astarion met some people who were indeed very interesting, learned how to pick a wider variety of locks, and even picked up the occasionally torturous dialect of Thieves' Cant, though he was never more than passingly fluent in it. He did not practice most of the things he learned, because being caught robbing a house would have had a detrimental effect on his legal career. Nevertheless, he hugged that knowledge to him like a small, secret flame.

By the time he was twenty-seven, Astarion Ancunin had completed his apprenticeship to become a journeyman barrister; could pick an eight-tumbler lock armed with both curse powder and poisoned needles; and knew twenty-seven things he could do with his tongue, eleven he could do with his cock, and fifteen he could do with someone else's. And then his great-grandmother came home to die, and everything changed.

Astarion heard voices coming from the office he shared with his cousin. The door was closed but not locked, so he knocked lightly and waited.

When Lazlo opened the door, his face was pale and set. "Thank the gods," he said. "You're here." He hustled Astarion inside and locked the door behind him, then crossed to his table and began to write.

Bajia sat in one of the chairs. She lifted a hand in greeting, but her face was grave.

"Something's wrong with Grandmother," he guessed.

"She's dying," Bajia said. "She did not come home sooner because she was not well enough to travel. She still isn't, but she knew that it was time. I've come to take you to the manor house."

Astarion nodded. He was surprised to feel a pang for the old lady, given how long it had been since they had seen each other. But she had lifted him out of the wretchedness of his childhood and given him a chance at a better life.

"Lazlo," he said, "I'm working on the gnomish guild case. It's not urgent, so if you can tender my apologies for the delay, I'll be back as soon as -"

"No, you won't," Lazlo said.

Astarion blinked at him. "Say again?"

"Pack everything you mean to keep," Lazlo said. He picked up the page he'd been writing and thrust it at him. "Here's a letter of introduction to an old friend of mine in Baldur's Gate."

"Baldur's Gate? But that's hundreds of miles -"

"And the gods willing, that will be far enough." Lazlo shoved more papers at him. "You are now the last scion of the obscure Baldur's Gate branch of the Ancunins, just returned from legal work abroad."

"I'm *what*?"

Lazlo startled him by catching him in a brief, savage hug. "I'll try to keep the dogs off, but you have to get *away*."

"What? What dogs? What are you talking about?"

His cousin laughed mirthlessly. "I'm sorry, Astarion. The old lady made you her heir."

"She meant it kindly," Bajia said as he frantically flung clothes into a pack. "She's slipped rather a lot, I'm afraid."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"I did stop her, the first two times. Then she did it while I was traveling. I don't think she understands quite what she's leaving you."

"She's not in her right mind," Astarion said. "Surely I can challenge the will on those grounds."

"Lazlo will do his best. Most likely it will work, once it comes before the Silver Lady, and the creditors will have to be content dismantling the estate. But it's best that you're far away by then."

"Otherwise they'll seize everything I own to pay her debts," Astarion said grimly. "Possibly including me." He had learned how these things worked in his years as both a lawyer and a Guild member. Debts were things that could be bought and sold, and the respectable creditors who had loaned money to Lady Erikinia had likely been dissolved and their debts sold to other, less respectable individuals who would try to collect. In Silverymoon, of course, it would be entirely illegal for someone to grab Astarion off the street and sell him, but that would be cold comfort if he found himself hog-tied and bound for an auction block in Skullport.

It was cold comfort now, as he looked at his small jewel box of an apartment. It had a balcony that overlooked a park, and it was exquisitely tailored to his needs. He had furnished it lovingly over the course of years, trading out the battered castoffs of his apprenticeship for lacquered wood and embroidered silk. Every surface you trailed your fingertips over was a sensual delight.

In matter of hours, it would likely be pulled apart by vultures. The law was slower to react than the creditors, and even in Silverymoon, possession was nine-tenths of the law.

Astarion paused in front of a large oil painting. A market scene, rendered so lovingly by the artist that you could almost smell the spices and hear the clink of coins changing hands. He had spent nearly a month's salary on it and never regretted a copper of it. Sometimes in the evenings, he would stare at it, a cup of wine clasped loosely in his fingers, inventing stories for each of the figures, even the ones in the far distance that were little more than a blob of paint.

Losing it felt like losing a friend. But he could hardly load it onto the back of a packhorse. It was five feet long, and Bajia was already jittering with impatience.

He took a last look over the balcony. The sun was setting, dyeing the towers a hundred shades of orange and gold. The view, too, felt like a friend. He could feel anger begin to burn away his shock, rising like bile in his throat.

He had friends and a living and a *life*. How dare someone take those things away? And not even because of something he'd done, but because his great-grandmother was going to die and was so far gone that she'd made him her heir.

He couldn't even really blame her, much as he wanted to blame *someone*. Without her, he would still be scrabbling miserably in the dirt.

Astarion had never expected the world to be fair, but he had at least expected it to be just.

Why even have gods and laws and governments otherwise? What was the *point*?

He turned on his heel and stalked toward the door. "Come on, then," he said, feeling as if he were sinking into darkness, as if his words should echo from the depths. "Let's be out of here before the jackals arrive."

"Now, before I set you free," Astarion said, tapping the lockpick against his fingertips, "I am going to need you to promise me something."

Den Suriel's eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

"Yes. You see, I'm actually here to steal some of that blood they're worshipping." Astarion pointed the wire at him. "Swear to me that we are allies until the blood is stolen and we've escaped."

The aasimar frowned. "What do you intend to do with the blood?"

It would have been very nice to be sure that the paladin couldn't sense lies. He hadn't said anything about Astarion calling himself Petras, but perhaps he expected people to give false names, at least when they were in a jail cell. *Hells, what can I say that's at least partly true?*

"Without getting into too many details, I can promise you that it will be destroyed."

Den Suriel studied him for a long moment. Under other circumstances, Astarion would have assumed that a gaze that intense was a prelude to a proposition and preened a little. As it was, he attempted to look trustworthy.

"Are you attempting to bring back the god Mask?" den Suriel asked.

"*What?*" Astarion was so startled that he nearly choked. "Bring back - is that even *possible*? I'm pretty sure he's dead. At least, as dead as gods get. If he wasn't, I imagine this crew would have brought him back by now."

The aasimar smiled slightly. "If you're a fanatical zealot in his service, you're hiding it well."

"My dear paladin, the only thing that I am a zealot in service to is my own self-interest."

Den Suriel looked slightly disappointed by this, but that was paladins for you. Most of the world was disappointing by their standards. "Very well," he said. "If you free me, then we are allies until we have escaped and the blood is ... ah ... dealt with."

"Swear it on your oath as a paladin."

Full lips pulled down in a frown. "That seems a trifle extreme."

"Darling, I'm a thief who came to steal something you came to destroy. I don't think a little extra insurance is a bad idea."

The aasimar's eyes narrowed. Astarion concentrated on the fact that he was telling the exact truth. *Hells, I wish I knew if I had to keep doing this. The best lies may be true, but it's helpful to have some falsehoods around the edges.*

Whatever those blank white eyes were searching for, they either found it or didn't. "Very well." Den Suriel straightened, and the slight glow around him intensified a fraction. His voice rang out like the tolling of a bell. "I swear on the oath I serve to Lathander that we are allies until then, that I will protect you with my life and soul, by Tyr and Ilmater and all the just gods, upon my honor as a knight of the Argent Badger."

That was all rather impressive until he reached the bit with the badger. I wasn't expecting the part about life and soul, though. That certainly may come in handy.

Aloud, all he said was, "Thank you. Now, roll over and let me get at this lock on the back of your ankles."

The manacles were the easy part, as it turned out. The door lock was much larger, and while big locks tended to give you more maneuvering room, the tumblers were heavy enough to snap lockpicks. Astarion spent more time bending and twisting wire than he did actually picking the lock.

When the door creaked open, den Suriel was through it immediately, one arm raised instinctively in front of him as if it still bore a shield. Astarion rolled his eyes. "May I suggest that you wait back here and allow me to reconnoiter?"

"Ah ... yes. I suppose that might be a good idea." The aasimar had the grace to look embarrassed. "I don't suppose you saw my weapons on the way in?"

"No, but I'll keep an eye out." There was a good chance that said weapons were with Astarion's daggers, which he would very much like back.

He glided down the hallway, moving lightly on the balls of his feet. It intersected another hallway, and Astarion glanced in both directions before turning down one. Despite the lack of obvious enemies, his back felt exposed.

The hall was very short and dead-ended at what had probably once been a prison cell but was now filled by some kind of waist-high concrete box. Astarion could make out writing that looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't quite place it. He reached out a hand, then drew it back before he could touch the surface. Cold radiated off the box so intensely that he could easily imagine the skin of his palm sticking to it.

The opposite hall held a nearly identical structure. Astarion made his way back to den Surliel, who frowned. "Let me take a look."

"Do you know that writing?" Astarion asked while the paladin examined one of the boxes. "I believe it's a variant of what is written on a sarcophagus to create a mummy." The paladin frowned. "But what's it doing in Baldur's Gate? And why is it so cold?"

"Saponification," Astarion said. "It's how they're making those waxy mummies. Don't give me that look, someone explained it to me. I have no interest in making mummies, waxy or otherwise." *And if I did, he added silently, they would be much better looking.* "When they were hauling me in, they said something about cells being converted to tanks. I imagine this must be what they meant."

"Well, I suppose there's no reason a mummy has to be from the desert, as long as it's kept dry and you use the right spells ..." Den Surliel's hand hovered over a carving of a scarab.

Oh, that's where I've seen these before. They're like the carvings on those ridiculously tasteless pillars in the great hall. Except these were done by someone who knew what they were doing. No wonder I didn't recognize them.

"We need to find a way to smash these," den Surliel said.

"May I suggest we find our weapons first? You may have the unwavering fists of justice, but my hands are precision instruments, and I would rather not smash them on frozen cement."

"Yes, of course." The paladin stepped back and nodded to him. "I'll wait here."

"Good. And if anything crawls out of the tank, please do try to dispose of it *quietly*."

There was another set of modified cells before Astarion reached a corner. Green light spilled around it.

Good thing the paladin can't see me, or he might notice that I don't actually cast a shadow. It had become second nature to Astarion not to stand between a light source and a wall, but there were limits to what you could do in a corridor only five feet wide.

At the end of the hallway lay the room where the jailor was playing solitaire. From this angle, all he could see was the edge of the table and occasionally a half-melted hand laying down cards. The skeleton guards were visible only as bony elbows protruding into the doorway. Halfway down the hall stood a door. Astarion slunk toward it, keeping low. There was absolutely nowhere to hide, unless you were someone like Yousen who could stand up against a rock wall and become invisible, but there was no point in making things easy for the enemy.

The door was slightly ajar, enough to make out some of the room's contents. *Excellent.*

There was a battered shield nearly as tall as Astarion, an absurdly large sword, his own daggers tossed in a careless heap atop a trunk, and something that looked like a cross between a sarcophagus and an unmade bed.

Astarion started to move, then froze with one foot suspended in mid-step.

He could not, *should not* go inside. It was wrong on every possible level. His stomach churned at the mere thought of crossing that inviolable threshold.

Private dwelling. Well, shit. Who knew mummies had bedrooms?

He hastily pulled back against the wall. This was the reason that Astarion had never devoted himself wholeheartedly to being a thief. It was very hard to steal things when you couldn't invade someone's bedroom. Public buildings like shops and temples were fair game, but even a private room at an inn stopped him in his tracks.

On the other hand, it kept Violet from breaking into his room and leaving powdered silver in his bed, so he couldn't say it was all bad.

He made his way back down the hallway to den Suriel, who was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, as if meditating. He opened his eyes at Astarion's approach. "Any luck?"

"Yes and no. Our weapons are in a room right before the guard post. The door is partly open, but if the hinges are anything like the ones on our cell, the minute you touch it, it will scream like a priest in a brothel." Astarion spread his hands. "Even if I could oil the hinges, I strongly doubt I could get out with that oversized sword and shield you carry without making *some* noise, and that will bring at least two skeletons and the jailor down on my head." He gave den Suriel his best rueful smile. "I fear that I am a lover, not a fighter."

And this is where he suggests the paladinly thing ...

"Fortunately, I'm both," den Suriel said.

That was not quite what Astarion had expected. *Is he ... flirting? No, surely not. He's a paladin. I'm sure something terrible happens to them if they flirt.*

"I'll rush in and grab the weapons," den Suriel said, which was closer to what Astarion had expected. "Even if they come charging at me, once I'm armed, I can deal with them."

Astarion had to struggle to keep the triumph out of his smile. "How did they catch you in the first place?"

The aasimar rubbed his temple ruefully. "Bad luck, I'm afraid. I happened on a group of skeletons, and they were no problem, then another group, and they were no problem. The third group had about forty, though, and that was a problem. Then one of those mummies showed up, and while we were going toe-to-toe, another one came up behind me, hit me with a spell, and then bashed me over the head."

"These things happen," Astarion said. Privately, he thought forty skeletons was an excellent sign of the need for a strategic retreat, but it was clear that he and den Suriel had very different approaches to life. "Let's go, then. Try to stay quiet until we reach the last hallway."

Half a minute later, Astarion was forced to admit that the paladin was following his instructions exactly. He was indeed trying. He was trying very hard. It was just that most of his wardrobe was made of metal, and his boots were made for kicking evil in the soft bits, not for padding stealthily through enemy territory. Whenever he took a step, he sounded like a symphony scored for chain mail and kettle drums.

Clank.

Clink.

Jingle, jingle, jingle ...

Stomp.

Perhaps I am dead, Astarion thought, and in Hell.

Clank.

Astarion stayed behind him, both to cover his lack of shadow and to use the man as a shield when the enemy inevitably heard them.

Den Suriel reached the halfway point of the hallway and suddenly broke into a run.

Clank-clink-jingle-jingle-stomp-stomp-stomp!

The paladin hit the half-open door like a charging bull. The hinges did indeed squeal, but this was nothing compared to the slam as the door hit the wall. The skeleton guards spun around so quickly that one's arm bones got caught on the other's broken ribs.

Astarion, standing in the middle of the hallway without weapons, cover, or a plan, lifted a hand and said, "So sorry to be a bother, but I'm afraid the maid hasn't turned my cell yet. Do be a dear and send her along?"

The skeletons took a step forward together.

One had a sword, and the other had a truncheon. Neither seemed to have a sense of humor.

"What in the Nine Hells is going on down there?" called the jailor. The scrape of a chair indicated that the mummy was getting up.

"Nothing!" Astarion called. It probably wouldn't work, but you never knew unless you tried.

The mummy appeared in the doorway, slablike features pulling into a frown. It lifted its strangely cut fingers and uttered something arcane.

Something green and glowing appeared in front of Astarion, just as den Suriel erupted into the hall.

"For Lathander!" he roared in a voice like thunder, smashing his shield into the skeleton guards. "For Ilmater! *For the Badger!*"

"For fuck's sake..." Astarion might have said more, but the green glowing thing resolved into a sword hanging in midair, which promptly tried to decapitate him.

The skeletons went down in a pile of bones. Astarion hit the ground, rolled, saw the sword stabbing down at him, and kept rolling. Briefly, upside down, he watched the paladin jam his shield into the mummy's face and force it back through the doorway.

While Astarion had no real desire to be in the same room as an enraged mummy and the sort of person who would shout "For the Badger!" with such enthusiasm, it seemed like a better prospect than being hacked apart by a spectral weapon. He dove through the door and fetched up under the table.

Den Suriel drove his sword through the mummy. The mummy looked down at the blade protruding from its chest and broke into that unsettling cold-water laugh. Then it punched den Suriel in the head.

"Things going well, I see," Astarion said as the paladin hit the floor in front of him. Den Suriel got his shield up just in time as the mummy rained blows onto it.

"If only I had my holy symbol!"

"If only I had a dozen flasks of alchemist's fire. While we're wishing, I would also like untold riches, sexual inexhaustibility, and perhaps a pony."

"See, I wouldn't want that," den Suriel said, kicking the mummy in the knee. Corpse wax splattered under his boot, and the monster roared.

"Oh?" Astarion was briefly distracted by the spectral weapon, which had finally located him. He grabbed the jailor's chair and yanked it in front of him. The sword chopped futilely at its wooden back.

"I'd just give the riches to the temple, I'm too tall for a pony, and ..." He managed to grab the hilt of the sword protruding from the mummy's chest and yank it free, taking a large chunk of the mummy with it. The backhanded slash took the monster's head off and sent it bouncing across the floor. More wax splattered with every bounce. Den Suriel reached down and offered Astarion a hand up. "I'm already sexually inexhaustible."

That caught Astarion by surprise. *Gods above and below, he is flirting with me.* "I see the gods don't mind bragging," he said, a trifle breathlessly.

The aasimar grinned at him. "What can I say? They require us to speak the truth."

Damnation, the man really *was* attractive. Astarion had used sex as a weapon for so long that actually being attracted to someone was both delightful and mildly annoying. *Like having a favorite outfit and seeing someone else wearing it. And making it look good, too.*

The last time he'd been genuinely attracted to someone had been ... gods, who had it been? *Oh yes, that lovely little assassin from Phlan. Body of an acrobat and morals of a rutting barracuda. Was that before or after that charming blacksmith I climbed like a tree? No, had to be after. The one before the blacksmith was that diplomatic functionary from Cormyr.* He'd actually convinced Cazador that kidnapping the woman would cause a political crisis and had handed over information about a number of upcoming trade deals instead. The blacksmith hadn't been so lucky. The assassin he'd actually had to put down himself. Some people's ideas of proper postcoital activity were exceedingly uncivilized.

Then there had been Sebastian, that first decade after he'd been turned, and that ... *Was under totally different circumstances. No need to dwell on it. And anyway, he was an innocent. Den Suriel is quite obnoxiously wholesome, but nobody who grins like that is an innocent.*

Well, two could play at that game. Astarion let his fingertips trail down den Suriel's wrist as he released the aasimar's arm, and was rewarded with a sharp inhalation. Or perhaps he was only out of breath from having just decapitated a mummy.

"Right," the paladin said, with a little more gravel in his voice than before. "It won't stay dead for more than a day. Let's see if we can find my holy symbol."

Astarion was very glad to discover that the jailor's bedroom no longer felt like a private dwelling. Apparently, the cult's leader did not particularly care about it, so now that the mummy was temporarily dead, it was merely a room.

He slid his daggers back into their hidden sheaths and examined the rest of the furniture.

The trunk he'd noticed before contained bedding. It was strange to think of a mummy wanting blankets, but after looking at the cold cement box that dominated the room, Astarion could understand it. It had none of the molded charm of a true sarcophagus. He'd have put down a layer of blankets, too.

The only other object of interest was a narrow wooden chest against one wall. It was locked, at least technically.

"Precision instruments indeed," den Suriel said as Astarion cracked it open as easily as flipping a latch.

Astarion let a slow smile spread across his face. "I'm flattered you noticed. Still, I must admit that locks like these are only to keep honest people out. Or honest mummies, I suppose."

"It would have kept *me* out."

"I believe that is what I just said." Astarion swept out the contents, which included his lockpicks, his coin purse, a handful of loose change, a leather sack, and what appeared to be a set of erotic woodcuts featuring bipedal elephants. "Are these yours?"

"The bag is. The woodcuts definitely aren't." Den Suriel's brow furrowed. "I don't know what's more disturbing: a mummy keeping loxo erotica or the thought of someone storming a cultist stronghold armed with loxo erotica."

"It's not even *good* loxo erotica. You can tell that the artist didn't know how to draw a prehensile -"

"Oh look, my holy symbol!" Den Suriel picked up the bag and unwrapped a leather thong coiled around the mouth, then hung it on his neck. Astarion caught a glimpse of a small silver pendant in the shape of a badger crowned with the sun. "That's better. I was afraid they might have chucked it into a pit or something."

No, Astarion thought, I wouldn't be that lucky.

Den Suriel riffled through his bag, pulling out small objects as if to reassure himself they were still there. Astarion noted several scrolls, a small ivory carving, and a set of crudely printed pamphlets titled *Is the Order of the Badger Right for You?*

"Ready?" he asked before the paladin could try to inflict a pamphlet on him.

"Half a moment ... there!" Den Suriel pulled on a pair of gauntlets, then removed a large mace from the bag, cementing Astarion's impression that it was a bag of holding. "Let's go smash some tanks."

"Tanks? I was thinking of skeletons."

"And let them keep raising those mummies under the city?"

Astarion, who had stopped thinking about the tanks as soon as they were out of sight, shrugged. "This is Baldur's Gate. As long as they bribe the right people, they'll be accepted as valuable members of the workforce."

"Undead are *never* valuable members of the workforce."

That stung a little, even though Astarion preferred to think of himself as a gentleman of leisure in temporary straits rather than a member of the workforce. "What about archliches?"

The aasimar grunted. "I suppose they're fine. They give me the creeps."

"One of my maternal relatives became an archlich."

"I'm sure they're lovely, but they'd still give me the creeps. Sorry."

Astarion shook his head. "Regardless, may I suggest that we make our escape and leave the soggy mummies to the professionals?"

"I *am* the professionals."

"Then you can bring back others later. I don't know how much time we have until this Inquisitor person wants to talk to us, but I doubt it's very long."

Den Suriel heaved a mournful sigh that seemed to travel up his entire six-foot-plus frame. "I *suppose*."

"Think like a fox, not a hedgehog."

"Arf, arf. Wait, do foxes go *arf*?"

"Hedgehogs certainly don't." Astarion took a firestarter out of his pouch and lit the mummy's corpse on fire. It ignited so violently that he jumped back to avoid singeing his eyebrows. The flame settled after a moment, the wax melting and sliding off the bones beneath. It smelled strongly of pork tallow.

"Uck." Den Suriel waved his hand in front of his face. "Let's get out of here."

The heavy door to the jail had no windows. Astarion slid his polished knife blade underneath and turned it back and forth.

"Two skeletons on either side," he reported. "I can't see any others ahead, but I can't swear they aren't there."

Den Suriel nodded. "Stay back."

"There's probably -"

The paladin wrenched the door open, grabbed a skeleton around the neck, and yanked it back into the guardroom. It barely had time to flail before he bashed it against the wall and followed up with a sword pommel to the skull.

"- another way," Astarion finished. "Or not."

"Would you like to get the door this time?"

"Of course. Always happy to contribute to the mayhem." Astarion pulled the door open. Den Suriel grabbed one of the confused skeletons milling around and pulled it inside to dispatch it.

By the third one, the skeletons had figured out that something was going on. When Astarion opened the door, there was a sword waiting. Den Suriel stepped aside as the skeleton tried

to skewer him, caught its bony forearm, and pulled it inside. Astarion slammed the door again.

The fourth one just stood there, apparently resigned to its fate, and den Suriel knocked it down and stomped on its head.

"Right," Astarion said. "Now, which side of the cavern did you come in on?"

The paladin had come in on the side opposite Astarion, but his directions on how to return were perhaps not as clear as they could be, since they relied on landmarks like "about twenty skeletons here" and "two mummies over there" that were presumably no longer in place. Astarion eventually decided to just follow the trail of bodies and hope the priest hadn't gotten around to raising the bones again.

They made it to the cavern wall and a good five yards down the road before the army of skeletons arrived.

That is a lot of skeletons. Even Cazador doesn't keep that many around. Each individual one might be a minimal threat, but dozens together? Astarion looked around for somewhere to bolt. *No point going back to the prison. Could I get my boots off and go up the wall?* The wall on the right was living rock, but the wall on the left was mortared and only went up about fifteen feet, probably another chunk of ruin that had been repurposed by the cult.

Astarion opened his mouth to say something about the better part of valor, but then den Suriel lifted his hand and shouted, in a ringing voice, "The earth holds no place for such as you! By the gods above, by Lathander's light, by the Badger's wrath, *I abjure you!*"

He did not just say that.

He did.

If I weren't undead, I would die of sympathetic embarrassment.

Bare skulls were incapable of expression, but Astarion could swear they looked appalled. He cleared his throat and said, "Just so you know, I'm not actually *with* -"

The paladin's hand began to glow.

Terror engulfed Astarion, sudden and shocking, as if his heart had been plunged into ice.

Den Suriel's hand burned like a miniature sun, but this had none of the kindness of his earlier touch. This was the sun that beat down on deserts, relentless, scouring every shadow clean. This was a sun that would strip Astarion's flesh and burn his bones to char. Light blazed in Astarion's vision, and all he could do was run from it, knowing even as he did that the light would pursue him wherever he fled, endless, implacable, blazing through the darkness until -

"What on earth are you doing up there?" den Suriel asked.

Astarion wiped his watering eyes and peered over the edge of the building. The corridor was filled with lifeless bones. The paladin was no longer glowing. As Astarion watched, he tucked his holy symbol away, then looked back up with a puzzled expression.

Ah. Apparently, I do not actually need to take my boots off. "I've got daggers," Astarion said.

"Not terribly useful for fighting skeletons. I thought if I got up here, I could pry some rocks loose and drop them from above."

"Oh, good thinking."

"You handled it, though."

Den Suriel smiled modestly. "It's what I do."

"So I see." Astarion consulted his nerves. They were not thrilled about returning to the company of the paladin, but they were even less thrilled with the prospect of being flung back into a cell. "I'll just ... come back down again, shall I?"

It was easier said than done. He made it only halfway down before den Suriel reached up and caught him around the waist.

"Where were you when I was sixteen and daydreaming about heroes?" Astarion muttered. The paladin set him on his feet. "Sorry, what was that?"

"Nothing." Astarion brushed at his clothes, removing enough dust to reveal an exciting new layer of dust underneath. He gave it up as a bad job. "If we can get to what's left of that tower over there, I can climb up and see if there's a way out that doesn't involve quite so much mayhem."

"I don't mind the mayhem."

"I didn't think for one moment that you did."

The view from the ruined tower was not as good as the one from the overlook high on the wall, but it was enough to confirm Astarion's suspicion. There was simply no way to reach the plaza holding the relic that did not involve a hundred skeletons, minimum. There were rooftops he could have snuck across, but the amount of open ground increased the closer one got to the plaza.

And then I have to assume that there are alarms on the relic and that if I trip one, the skeletons from all over the cavern will converge on me. Which is, what, a thousand of them? If I had a potion of invisibility, and perhaps a very large distraction ...

The large distraction at the base of the tower shifted from foot to foot.

I would still need the potion, or something similar. I can't do it right now. But if we're up against undead, I'm sure I can convince the gentleman to come back down here and smite some of them while I get to work.

Astarion smiled to himself. This could be the beginning of a very profitable relationship. *And if worse comes to worst, I can always take a vial of his blood to Cazador. Probably not enough to win the old bastard's favor, but you never know.*

This wall was easier to climb down, but den Suriel reached up to help him anyway. Even with gauntlets, his touch was confident and careful, the grip of a man who knew his own strength but did not fear it. Astarion entertained a brief pleasant fantasy, which was rudely broken when another skeleton came around the corner and den Suriel bashed it over the head.

"Any luck?" den Suriel asked, stomping on the bones until the phalanges stopped wriggling.

"I can get us out, but I do not think I can get us to the blood without infuriating at least a thousand skeletons."

"Hmm." Den Suriel rubbed his chin. "Well, if my back is to a solid wall and there are no mummies, I suspect I could take forty or fifty before they brought me down. Do you think you can handle the remaining nine hundred and fifty?"

"Alas, any more than nine hundred is likely to prove insurmountable."

Den Suriel's teeth flashed. "Do you want to try anyway?"

Astarion was beginning to get the impression that his new companion had something of a death wish. "Or we could come back later? Maybe with a plan?"

The aasimar looked like a small boy deprived of a treat, but he said, "I suppose that's an option, too."

It took Astarion a moment to mentally map the best route, during which den Suriel murmured something over his sword. Astarion caught the words "Lathander, Morninglord, grant your blessings upon my blade." He would have rolled his eyes, but then den Suriel ran a mailed finger up the blade, and a spark of golden light followed in its wake. Astarion's ears popped.

"We go this way," Astarion said once the sensation had faded. "Hug the cavern wall. It will take longer, but there's fewer of these unpleasant individuals in the way."

Most of the skeletons came in ones and twos. It wasn't until they had reached an area den Suriel recognized that they encountered another large group, standing in front of a rough archway cut into the stone.

"That's it," den Suriel said.

Astarion glanced around. There were multiple bridges that passed over the main street here, but they were all crumbling to the point that his weight would likely bring them down, let alone the aasimar's. Even if he could get close to the group on one, the best he could do was drop rocks. Chipping away at the group, rock by rock, could take hours.

"May I charge?" den Suriel asked. "If you don't have a better plan? Please?"

"Far be it from me to deny you your fun, but -"

Den Suriel charged.

"- there are a lot of them," Astarion finished. "Why do I even bother?" he asked the nearest skeleton, who tilted its skull to one side and then tried to hit him.

Astarion kicked its kneecaps out but hung back from the rest, just in case the paladin decided to turn some more undead. This time, however, den Suriel's approach was much simpler. The aasimar just lowered his head, raised his shield, and plowed into the ranks of skeletons like a dog scattering chickens. Since most of them weren't carrying weapons, the effect was extraordinary.

Astarion wished for something better than a dagger. Stabbing a skeleton was an exercise in futility. He could probably take off one of his stockings and put half a brick in it, but his stockings were the only things that might survive the night's adventures intact.

One of the dead ... *more* dead ... skeletons left in den Suriel's wake had an intact femur.

Astarion picked it up, hefted it, and tested the makeshift club on the back of a nearby skull.

The skeleton went to its knees, and Astarion's second blow took its head clean off and sent it flying. It was effective, though he didn't enjoy it.

"I'm not sure how I feel about this," he informed his companion, bashing in another one's head.

"Oh?" The aasimar knocked another one down and crushed it beneath his massive boots.

"How so?"

"It lacks finesse. And, I don't know. Hitting them with their own bones feels wrong somehow. Somewhere between masturbation and cannibalism."

"Ah." Den Suriel broke one over his knee in a contemplative fashion. "Ever seen a cow drink its own milk?"

"No, and I could have lived many more years without thinking about it, thank you very much."

Astarion clubbed another skeleton in the back of the knee. "Something along those lines, though. If you made one of those edged clubs and lined it with my teeth, then beat my head in with it, I would be very upset."

"More so than just having your head beaten in?"

"Possibly. It violates my sense of aesthetics."

The paladin knocked the last skeleton out of the archway and turned to wave Astarion through. "How does your sense of aesthetics feel about running like hell?"

"You may now observe the elegance of my heels," Astarion said, and took to them at once.

For a man wearing a great deal of plate and chain, den Suriel had a decent turn of speed.

Fortunately, the tunnel here ran reasonably straight and had high enough ceilings that Astarion didn't worry about bashing his forehead on things. He was rather more worried about traps, trip wires, and unexpected pits full of spikes, but since the paladin had come this way initially, presumably he would have found them already.

You can only run for so long, though, even if you fear that mummies are after you. Astarion slowed to a jog, then a stagger. Behind him, the paladin was doing the same.

They collapsed against the wall. Den Suriel was breathing hard. Astarion was, too, though more out of a feeling that he *should* be than from actual necessity. He reached into his

pocket and pulled out the vials, checking them for cracks, and was relieved to see only smooth glass.

Gods and devils, what a night it had been. *You spend decades in the same routine, with nothing more exciting than the occasional burglary, and then you're set loose for a night and find yourself fighting your way out of the clutches of an undead cult.*

He started to laugh. He couldn't help it. He probably sounded like a madman, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so alive. Possibly not since he'd *been* alive.

"Err... Petras?"

It took Astarion an instant to remember that he'd lied about his name. He wiped tears from his eyes and tried to control himself. "Yes?"

"Is there really a bird that eats hedgehogs?"

"Damned if I know. I left the countryside as soon as elvenly possible. There was far too much clean air."

That set den Suriel off laughing as well, which eventually led to them both collapsed against the wall holding their sides. "It wasn't even that *funny*," Astarion said plaintively, which only made the paladin laugh harder. "It's just... heh... release of tension..."

"As the cleric said to the dryad's daughter."

Astarion didn't even know the joke the aasimar was referring to, but it set him off again. If his ribs hadn't been stabbing with every laugh, he wasn't sure he'd have been able to stop.

When they'd finally finished catching their respective breaths, den Suriel raised one eyebrow at Astarion. "Sure you don't want to go back and try to fight them all?"

"Gods, you really do have a death wish, don't you?" He straightened. "Are all the weasel people like that?"

"It's a badger. And I wouldn't call it a death wish. More like a blaze-of-glory wish."

Astarion shook his head, sobering. "Well, I don't have either. Anyway, maybe you'll be lucky and they'll send someone after us."

"Ooh, really?" Den Suriel looked back the way they had come.

"I certainly would. I'd be afraid that you'd go tell everyone in your order about a nest of undead under the city."

The aasimar snorted. "There's not very many of us, and we're widely scattered. It's been a while since I've even seen one."

"Yes, but do *they* know that?"

"Clever as well as handsome, I see."

"My dear paladin, you don't know the half of it."

"I look forward to finding out." Den Suriel winked at him and began to stride down the tunnel. Astarion grabbed his arm. Granted, this was rather like a fox grabbing a draft horse, but the aasimar stopped anyway.

"While I realize that paladins think of traps as those things you open with your face, may I suggest allowing me to check ahead?"

"I came this way once already."

"Yes, and our friends below are doubtless aware of that fact. If it were me, I would at least have placed a guard."

"... Yeah, that's fair."

Astarion slunk down the hallway, studying the shadows intently. The walls here had collapsed in several places, and the ground was strewn with rubble. Some of the broken areas had spaces large enough for an enemy to hide.

He saw nothing suspicious and turned to wave den Suriel forward. The paladin's faint glow made it seem like he was standing in his own personal beam of light. Astarion felt his stomach turn over.

Seriously? Those are not butterflies in my stomach. That is ridiculous. I haven't felt butterflies since that marvelously shy young swashbuckler in Silverymoon. The one with the incredibly impressive sword tattooed across his back.

Den Suriel hurried toward him, and his stomach quivered again. *Maybe it's not just that he's attractive. Maybe it's the idea of despoiling all that determined goodness.*

It was hard to tell where those pale eyes were looking, but the aasimar suddenly lifted his head, and his mouth turned to a grim slash. Astarion spun around, expecting to see something with teeth and tentacles bearing down on him.

Nothing. The corridor held nothing but dust and tumbled stone. Astarion backed up, wondering what the paladin had seen.

The faintest gleam of light from above caught his eye. He looked up.

A sigil flickered on the ceiling, then died away. It was part of a line carved into the stone that ran down one wall, then vanished beneath the dust. Astarion stared at his own footprints and the sigils just barely visible beneath them.

It hadn't been butterflies. The quiver had been because he was standing in the middle of one of the wards.

Wards that the living couldn't cross.

Fuck you, Tymora, he thought, just as a mailed fist closed over his neck.

It wasn't the first time that Astarion had been pinned to the ground with a man's hands clamped over his wrists. It wasn't even the tenth time. It was, however, the first time that the other party had been wearing plate mail while he did it.

"What *are* you?" den Suriel snarled, voice dropping into that strange ringing register. "Ghoul? Wight? Lich?" He was kneeling on Astarion's chest, and every time he shifted his weight, one of Astarion's bruised ribs sang a painful sonata.

"Bite your tongue. No lich has skin this good."

"You can't be a vampire, or you'd have turned into a bat by now."

There no longer seemed to be any point in disassembling. Some undead might require dramatic measures, but decapitation would work just as well on Astarion as it had on the mummies. "I'm a vampire *spawn*. I couldn't turn into a bat even if I wanted to, which I don't. I am *never* turning into a bat."

"Child of darkness," the aasimar growled.

"Oh, I like the sound of that." Astarion smiled up at him, trying to ignore how fast his heart was beating. "Much nicer than *spawn*."

Den Suriel's grip tightened on his wrists, gauntlets digging into the skin. "I should kill you now."

"Probably." He lifted his head until they were almost nose to nose. "Of course, you *did* swear to protect me with your life and soul."

The paladin flinched violently. *Dear sweet Tymora, I take back everything bad I've ever thought about you.* Astarion pressed his advantage, running his tongue along dry lips. "All you have to do is ... break your word."

The paladin cursed and flung himself backward. Astarion saw a glimpse of naked terror on the man's face before he was on the other side of the hallway. *Interesting.*

"That's why you wanted me to swear," den Suriel said bitterly.

Astarion sat up, rubbing his wrists. "Can you blame me? Locked in a cell with a sworn slayer of undead? Of course I wanted some protection."

The paladin gave a short, humorless laugh. "You don't understand. You've already destroyed me, vampire."

"You're looking rather undestroyed to me." Actually, Astarion thought he was looking rather lovely. Those cheekbones even made misery look good. He put his chin in his hand and admired the picture the aasimar made, the way those full lips pressed together, the hint of resolution in his despair.

I could parade him through town like that, and every maiden in a three-mile radius would show up to offer to soothe his tormented brow. Gods, I could charge admission.

"I cannot allow one of your ilk to survive," the paladin said grimly. "Not when I could stop you. It is a violation of the oath I took to the Order. *Thou shalt not suffer the undead to walk free.* But I cannot kill you, or I am forsworn. No matter what I do, I will be an oathbreaker."

"Yes, yes, how terrible for you." Astarion climbed to his feet. "Are you certain you want to have this conversation in the middle of a hallway that could be flooded with skeletons at any moment?"

"At least if they kill me, I die with my oaths intact."

Astarion told himself that he wasn't going to strangle the paladin. "You haven't broken your oaths yet. It's possible that there may still be a way."

In the end, Astarion was fairly certain that the only reason den Suriel agreed to move was because the paladin wasn't willing to let him walk away by himself. He waited until den Suriel had picked his way through the collapsed wall beside the ward, then turned away. He could feel those pale eyes boring into the back of his neck as they hurried down the twisting corridors.

At last, he found a secluded chamber half hidden by a rockfall and beckoned den Suriel into it. The paladin took up a position by the entryway, picked up a small piece of stone, and murmured a single word. It began to glow with soft white light. He tossed it into the center of the chamber, where it fell at Astarion's feet.

Vampire spawn and knight studied each other in silence. Without the sickly green illumination of the cavern, the aasimar's skin was even more golden than Astarion had expected, with coppery undertones like no elf or human Astarion had ever met. The scattering of marks across his cheekbones gleamed like metal.

He did not comment on Astarion's eyes. Perhaps when yours were a blank white, you learned not to judge.

Now, how to play this? In more than a hundred years, he'd never had to charm a victim who knew he was undead. *Normally, a paladin would be easy - tell them you saw someone kick a puppy in the park, and you'd have to run to keep up. But in the absence of a puppy...*

Inspiration struck. Astarion wanted to crow with delight but kept his features somber. "I don't know about you," he said, sitting down, "but I am exhausted."

Den Suriel remained standing long enough for Astarion to wonder if the man was simply unwilling to show any similarity to a vampire spawn, but at last he dropped to his knees. His unsheathed sword lay across his lap in a distinctly unsubtle warning. "Well. Now I see why laying on hands didn't work. More the fool me." The bitterness in his voice seemed to be for both of them. "You said there might be a way."

"There might be. I don't pretend to know the minds of your gods, of course."

Before he could go on, the paladin lifted a hand to stop him. "Wait."

"Oh?"

The aasimar put his free hand to his holy symbol and murmured something. A wave of cool air washed over Astarion, and a lump seemed to lodge briefly in his throat.

"What was *that*?"

The paladin's smile was not entirely pleasant. "What's your name?"

"Petra... Pet... *Astarion Ancunín*. Oh Hells." Astarion rubbed his throat. "You did the thing, didn't you?"

"If by 'the thing,' you mean cast a spell of truth over the room, yes." Den Surliel considered him. "You look more like an Astarion than a Petras. Why did you lie to me?"

"I usually give that name if I'm suspected of doing something illegal." Astarion could feel the words *because I don't like him* on the back of his tongue and clamped his mouth shut.

"Who is your master?"

He tried to sidestep this one, picturing what the old man would do to him. "Telling you could be very dangerous for me if my master found out." *That* was certainly true.

Den Surliel frowned, but he didn't press the matter. "What lies have you told me?"

Astarion actually had to think. Apparently, the spell did not include sudden knowledge. "My name. The bird that eats hedgehogs. The reason I climbed that wall."

"Ah. I abjured you, did I?"

"Yes, and it was extremely unpleasant." The magic didn't compel the last part; he just felt like adding it.

"Do you plan to kill me?"

"Not at the moment." When den Surliel's eyes narrowed, Astarion spread his hands. "I can't say I wouldn't try to kill you in self-defense, but I have no immediate plans to do so. You're far more useful to me alive." He paused, then added, "Besides, you're far too good-looking to be murdered on a whim. I don't smash priceless vases or burn exquisite paintings, either." When the aasimar flushed, his skin acquired a deeper copper tone. He cleared his throat several times. "Did you become a vampire willingly?"

Astarion's bark of laughter was too loud in the enclosed space. "Trust me, I had *no* ambitions of becoming a vampire's spawn. Some bastards beat me to death in an alley, and as I was bleeding out, someone showed up and offered to help me." He didn't know how much truth the magic required, but his anger was no lie. "The next thing I knew, I was clawing my way out of a coffin, in thrall to a sadistic bastard who could bring me to my knees with a thought. I didn't choose this. *No one* would choose this if they knew what it was like."

"Then I pity you." The aasimar drew himself up. "But I would kill myself rather than live such a life."

"*Do you think I haven't tried?*"

Astarion's cry rang off the stone walls and woke echoes that skittered mockingly in his ears. Den Surliel stared at him. The aasimar's eyes might be impossible to read, but the tiny muscles of his eyelids were the same as any other man's. Astarion watched his astonishment twist slowly into horror. "Your master prevents you?"

"Of course he does. He's spent over a hundred years breaking me. Why waste that?"

All the best lies were true. Astarion saw the exact moment that the paladin's loathing was subsumed by sympathy. *Be the kicked puppy you want to see in the world...*

"I'm sorry," den Surliel said quietly. "I did not know."

"No reason you should."

"Is it ... do you wish me, then, to release you from your bondage? That would lie within the terms of my oath to the Order."

Astarion's breath caught in a laugh that made his ribs ache. "No. No, I am afraid that I want to live, no matter how inconvenient it may be."

"But if the vampire lord torments you so ..."

"That's *why* I want to live. It's been a very long time now. If I simply drop dead, what was the point of all that agony?" He shook his head. "For a decade or two, yes. I only wanted it to stop. But it never did. *Now* I want to outlive the miserable old bastard." He drew a meaningless pattern in the dust with a fingertip, then wiped it away. "Don't you see? If I die now, then everything I've endured for the last hundred and fifty-odd years was wasted. I might as well have died in that alley. But if I *live* ..." He spread his hands. "He can't last forever. And you'd be amazed at how long spite can sustain me."

"It appears we are trapped, then." The paladin laughed again, soft and bitter.

"I've been trapped for many, many years. You get used to it."

"My oath is not the same as being a vampire's *spawn*."

"Perhaps not, but from where I am sitting, the difference is currently negligible." He waited long enough that he heard the paladin's teeth grinding, then added, "May I offer a suggestion?"

"Go ahead," den Suriel said warily.

"You aren't technically an oathbreaker until you allow me to walk free, correct?" At den Suriel's nod, Astarion smiled again. The old feeling was coming back to him, the rush of prying a rule apart so that he could sidle through it. It had been a very long time. "So don't. Keep me in your sight at all times. We are allies until we've escaped *and* the blood has been acquired." He held up his empty hands. "I don't have the blood. Do you?"

The paladin narrowed his eyes. "You know I don't."

"Once we have that vial, we'll no longer be allies, and you can kill me with a clean conscience."

Den Suriel tilted his head. "And you'll just stand there and let me?"

"No, of course not. I imagine it will be ..." The truth spell let him choose his words, at least. He settled on "... *interesting*. But as long as you *plan* to kill me, you haven't broken your oath, have you?"

The paladin shook his head slowly. "I do not think the gods are impressed by legal trickery." Astarion, for whom the law might best be described as a series of loosely connected loopholes, shrugged. "You'd find out soon enough, wouldn't you?"

"Hmm."

The aasimar's eyes bored into him. Astarion feigned nonchalance. "Of course, if you let me live, I suppose there's a chance you *could* track me back to my master's lair. That place where he sleeps during the day. Helpless." *Was that obvious enough? He is a paladin. They think subtlety is a type of pastry.* He wondered how pleased Cazador would be if he served up both the blood of a god and a live aasimar paladin, then hastily buried the thought before the truth spell could force him to blurt it out.

Den Suriel gazed at him for long enough that Astarion began to worry he needed to draw a diagram. Then the other man nodded slowly. "What happens to you if this vampire is slain?"

"I remain a spawn, but one in control of his own mind. Not the ideal circumstance, perhaps, but better than my life now."

"I would still be bound to kill you."

"Yes. But before that happens, you might die, or I might die, or illithids might invade, or the sky might fall."

The paladin was silent, clearly weighing his options. Perhaps it was time to give him a little nudge. Astarion let his tongue drift across his lower lip. The aasimar's eyes riveted on the motion. "Don't you *want* to kill me?" Astarion asked.

The paladin flushed and looked away. "Believe me," he said in that low golden gravel voice, "there is nothing I want mo ... *mm* ..." He choked then, as if the words were being dragged out of him: "Killing you feels like such a goddamn *waste*."

"Oh." Astarion cocked his head. "Oh, I *see*. The spell works on you, too."

"It does, yes."

"So, just how attractive do you find me, Hahn den Suriel?" He let himself linger on the syllables of the man's name, drawing them out like a caress.

"I shouldn't find a vampire attractive."

"That wasn't the question I asked."

"It's as much of an answer as you're getting." Astarion laughed out loud. He bounced to his feet. "Come on, then. You help me steal the blood of a god, and then you get to take a stab at killing me ... and who knows what else might happen in between?"

A thought clearly struck the paladin then, and he gazed up at Astarion with narrowed eyes.

"Perhaps it would be better to break my oath than to deliver the blood of a living god to a vampire lord." His voice was acquiring that ringing timbre again. "Who knows what evil your master intends to commit with it?"

"He wants to see what it tastes like."

Den Suriel blinked. In a rather more normal voice, he said, "You're *shitting* me."

"I can't right now, remember?"

The aasimar rubbed his temples. "We are constantly warned about the banality of evil, and yet it never fails to astonish me."

"Darling, you should see his choice of *décor*."

Den Suriel climbed slowly to his feet. "Very well," he said, sounding as tired as Astarion's heart. "May the gods forgive me. I will assist you as I can, and then I will slay you as I must." He reached out and caught Astarion's shirtfront. The battered silk ruffles flattened under his grip. "Answer this one last question, though. Do you intend to see me turned into a vampire?"

"Gods and devils, *no*." Astarion tried to imagine the aasimar dropped into the politics of Szarr Palace and repressed a shudder. He enjoyed a certain amount of chaos, but that went beyond chaos and well into catastrophe. "I hadn't even thought of it."

"To drink my blood, then?"

"I do not drink the blood of thinking beings." That came out a little too clipped, so Astarion smiled to soften it. "Darling," he murmured, leaning in until they were separated only by the width of den Suriel's fist. "It isn't your *neck* I'd like to suck."

The paladin released him and stepped back hurriedly. Astarion strolled past him, a lazy smile on his face.

That went far better than expected. It's amazing how much you can lie with the truth.

The truth was, Astarion didn't actually like necks. There was far too much cartilage there on a large mammal. Given the choice, he'd go for the femoral artery every time.

Astarion's anger sustained him on the journey to his great-grandmother's deathbed.

Strangely, it did not occur to him to worry that she would not last until his arrival. Lady Erikinia had been sustained by pure will for nearly a century. She would endure for as long as was needed to die with a proper audience.

Bajia, who had known him longer than anyone else, tried once or twice to charm him out of his current mood with stories of her travels in far-off places. On the surface, he allowed

himself to be charmed, but only on the surface, and she knew it, and eventually she lapsed into silence.

The manor house had slid further into disrepair in Astarion's absence. They left their horses tied out front because no stable boy came to take them.

The front door was ajar. Inside, the great tree was still alive, but lichen had crawled up its trunk, and the leaves that had fallen onto the marble floor had not been swept away. The hallway that led to his grandmother's rooms was cold and smelled of mildew instead of incense.

Wendin opened the last door for them, naked relief showing on his face. "Bajia. Master Astarion. Thank all the gods you're here."

It was a sign of his despair that he did not bother to close the door after them but hurried back to his mistress's side.

Lady Erikinia lay on white sheets that served only to emphasize the sallowness of her skin. Her face had already been skull-like with age, but now the skin drew so tight across her bones that Astarion half expected it to split and peel away from her cheekbones when she moved.

"Lady," Bajia said. "We're here."

Erikinia's eyes opened. The right one had gone milky with cataracts, but the left still burned with the old fire. Her hand stirred on the coverlet and moved an inch, and Bajia took it tenderly in her own.

"The boy?" she croaked, her voice a thin imitation of its former richness.

"He's here."

Astarion cleared his throat. "I'm here," he said. He marveled at how calm he sounded. He was still so angry that it felt as if there were a live coal beneath his breastbone, but he knew there was no point in giving vent to it. His great-grandmother had burned brightly for a long time, but the last spark was guttering and going out.

The ancient elf's fingers twitched in Bajia's hands. "Go back to your people, my dear. The game has ended."

Bajia made a small choked sound, then passed the old woman's hand carefully to Astarion. Her fingers were as fragile as burnt twigs. When they tightened on his hand, he half expected them to break. "Astarion," she whispered.

"I'm here," he said again.

She swallowed, a dry rasp like snake scales over stone. "It's yours now."

A hard laugh clawed at his throat. He swallowed it down for Bajia's and Wendin's sakes.

"Always been an Ancunín here ... Promise me. Take care of it."

"I promise," he lied.

"You're a good child," she breathed.

She didn't breathe again. Wendin gave a single harsh sob and reached out to close her eyes.

When he straightened up again, his face was wet, but his expression was as calm as ever.

"Go," he said. "Both of you. Go now. They will have felt her death across the realms."

Astarion went. Leaves were falling from the great tree to lie golden across the floor. He was already mounted when Bajia emerged from the house, her face twisted in a frown. "He won't come with us," she said grimly. "Says he'll see her buried. He's going to get himself *killed*."

"That is his choice," said Astarion, who had seen such things even in his short time practicing the law.

Bajia searched his face for a moment, then nodded once, almost angrily, and flung herself into the saddle. "Come, then," she said. "I'll see you to Baldur's Gate."

"Perhaps we should have waited to have our little heart-to-heart," Astarion said, eyeing the forces arrayed against them.

"Hindsight is always perfect," den Suriel said, drawing his sword.

"The Inquisitor's not real happy," the mummy said. "Says he wants to talk to both of you. Now."

The dozen or so skeletons surrounding him said nothing, but that wasn't a surprise.

Astarion and den Suriel had almost reached the door that den Suriel said led to the outer passages, which served mostly as maintenance access to the storm drains. Unfortunately, the priest's minions were waiting for them. Since he hadn't heard the tromp of skeletal feet, Astarion guessed that there was a shortcut somewhere.

"You gonna come quietly?" the mummy asked.

The paladin put his hand on his holy symbol, then glanced at Astarion and frowned.

"Don't mind me," Astarion said.

"There's a chance I'll turn you into a pile of ash."

"In that case, please *do* mind me."

"I *said*," the mummy said, rather more loudly, "are you gonna come quietly?"

"For the Badger!"

"I believe that's a no," Astarion said as den Suriel plowed into the wall of skeletons.

"I got that," the mummy said, and swiped at Astarion's head.

Astarion ducked under the punch. "Not the *face*, you bastard." He spun to the side and left a dagger in the mummy's left kidney, or what would have been his left kidney if it hadn't been turned to soap. The mummy ignored it, but den Suriel was suddenly up in his face, which was much harder to ignore. He drew back his arm to punch the paladin, which meant that Astarion was in the path of a large, waxy elbow. He managed to duck again, but he put his foot down on something that rolled, and he pitched forward.

His nose and one cheekbone hit the stone floor. Neither appreciated it. Astarion stayed down for a minute, listening to the sounds of combat. A skeleton stepped on him, which was annoying, but then it collapsed into a pile of bones that bounced off Astarion's back, which was even more annoying. He lifted his chin groggily, just in time to see the mummy's head smack into the stones directly in front of him. The face had a puzzled expression, possibly because it had misplaced the rest of its body.

"Are you alive?" den Suriel asked.

"I find that question in very poor taste."

"Sorry."

Astarion sat up. "Are there any more of them?"

"Not in this hallway." The paladin nudged one of the skeletons with his foot and traced a sign in the air.

"Well done. Now, more importantly, is my nose broken?" Astarion felt it gingerly.

"Again with the nose?"

"My face keeps hitting things. Does it look straight to you?"

"You're undead," the aasimar said.

"Yes? And? The undead can still have broken noses."

"I suppose, but can't you just ... I don't know ... drink blood or bathe in ichor or whatever you people do?"

"It's not that simple. If it heals before it's set properly, there could be a *bump*." He ran his finger across the bridge. Was it still perfectly straight?

The aasimar, whose own nose had a distinct bump at the bridge, rolled his eyes. (At least, Astarion thought he did. The lack of distinct pupils or irises made it difficult to tell.)

"Listen, you slab of armored beef, there are very few exquisite noses in the world, and I have protected mine for nearly two hundred years. I consider it a *sacred duty*. My nose is like a *shrine*."

Den Suriel was clearly trying not to laugh despite himself. "Which nostril do they leave the offerings in, then?"

"The right one. The left is for penitents." Astarion got to his feet and dabbed his face with a handkerchief.

With a deep sigh, the paladin leaned forward and inspected Astarion's face. "Does it hurt when I do this?"

"Ngo," Astarion said, somewhat muffled because den Suriel had just pressed a gauntleted finger against the bridge of his nose.

"Then it's probably fine."

"Easy for you to say," Astarion muttered. "*You* probably make a broken nose look fashionable."

"Do you know, I think that's the strangest compliment I've ever received?"

"Hmmpf."

The maintenance door was locked in a somewhat lackadaisical fashion. Astarion opened the lock while den Suriel lit the mummy's body on fire and dropped the head atop it. Like the other one, it oozed greasy black smoke.

The corridors on the other side of the door were significantly larger than the ones they had come through, and they were laid out as if someone had thought very hard about sewer maintenance and drawn up plans with labels like SEATOWER STORM DRAIN OVERFLOW and UPPER CITY DRAINAGE STATION. This being Baldur's Gate, that master plan had suffered the ravages of centuries, at least two guild wars, and a brief infestation of kobolds. (Astarion remembered the kobolds vividly because one had poked its head out of the privy to yell at him mid-stream, to the severe detriment of both his aim and his emotional health.)

The maintenance tunnels might have survived those events easily enough, except that the average denizen of the Lower City would steal everything not nailed down, then come back with a pry bar for the nails. To them, the tunnels were a giant storehouse of only slightly pungent bricks to be ripped out and used for building.

Now there were missing walls and low crawl spaces connecting areas that probably should not have been connected, with the result being that a really good rain could make the streets of the Lower City run yellow, and not with gold.

Fortunately, the nearest access door lay in Bloomridge, which had both money and elevation. Astarion felt his boots had suffered enough without wading through raw sewage and was glad to see that these floors were quite dry. The crispness of the graffiti seemed to indicate that the high-water mark was somewhere below.

"That door leads onto the river steps," den Suriel said, pointing. "We can go out from there."

"Feel free," Astarion said, hanging back. "I will be waiting here for the next six hours or so."

The aasimar turned. "What? Why?"

Astarion gestured to the door. Cracks of light glowed around the edges. They left a painful dazzle across his vision when he looked away. "I would prefer not to turn into a pile of ash, thank you very much."

"Oh. Oh! Hmm." The paladin frowned. "I see. I can't just leave you here."

"We could arrange a place to meet up?" Astarion caught a glimpse of den Suriel's expression and put a hand over his heart. "Darling, you don't trust me? I'm hurt."

"If our positions were reversed, would *you* trust you?"

"That requires me to imagine being a paladin, and I fear that strains even my capacity for fantasy. Do they have a knightly order for great deeds of decadence?"

"Sadly, the Church of Sharess, Lady of Pleasure, does not actually field any knightly orders."

"That's a shame. She's the goddess with all the cats, right? I always rather liked cats."

Astarion moved down the hallway, away from the cracks of daylight, and inspected the walls.

"Why, do they taste good?"

Astarion didn't bother to look at the aasimar. "My dear paladin, do *you* go around eating other people's pets?"

"Errr... no?"

"Neither do I. I am an elven nobleman. I have strong opinions about wine vintages, painting techniques, and property taxes. I did not lose all culture and civilization merely because a vampire happened on me in a dark alley. And as we are stuck with each other for the immediate future, please *try* to remember that, hmm?"

A bit too late, Astarion remembered that he was trying to engage the man's sympathy.

Damnation. I suppose I should have acted hurt and told him about the cat I had in Silverymoon.

"You're right," den Suriel said. "That was unkind of me."

Now Astarion did turn to look at him, and caught an unexpected glimpse of shame on the aasimar's face. He probably shouldn't be surprised - paladins were basically a thin armored coating over a guilty marshmallow center - but he had expected den Suriel to feel that anything said or done to a vampire was justified.

"It's fine," Astarion said. "It's hardly the worst thing I've been accused of."

"Do you know, you are not at all like I expected a vampire to be?"

"I shudder to think what you *did* expect." Astarion located a crawl space of a room that would be shielded from the light if someone opened the maintenance door.

"Oh, you know." Den Suriel dropped to his knees and followed him into the room. "Ancient, powerful, delighting in the misery of others... stable of comely young victims on leashes..."

"If I had that last, I wouldn't be lurking in the sewers right now, believe me."

"I must say you don't look that ancient, either."

"I'm a little over two hundred. What about you?"

"A hundred and three."

"You don't look it. I suppose it must be all that clean living I've been hearing about."

Den Suriel laughed before he remembered he wasn't supposed to and turned it into a cough.

"Clean living. Yes. That."

"At any rate," Astarion said, removing his jacket and rolling it into a pillow, "I am twice your age and need my rest if I am to remain this extraordinarily good-looking. You may wake me when the sun goes down."

"Aren't you worried I'll kill you in your sleep?"

"Darling," Astarion said, rolling over, "if you can't trust an oath-sworn paladin, who *can* you trust?"

Darkness and the smell of dust. Cold stone leaching the heat from his body. Grit under his fingertips. And the ceiling was close, far too close, and the air didn't move, so the smell of dust mixed with the smell of unwashed velvet and the unmistakable musty odor of ancient bones.

Astarion knew all those sensations, knew them more intimately than any lover. He was in the mausoleum, in the locked crypt only three paces wide. He had torn his nails to the quick and shredded his flesh until he was scraping his own exposed finger bones against the stone door.

Not again, he thought, feeling the mindless animal panic rising in his chest. *Not again!*

But if not again... was it still?

What if he'd never gotten out at all? What if he had been here all this time, and his release had only been a dream brought on by madness, the people in that dream his own creations? Dalyria, Yousen, den Suriel, all puppets born of confinement and loneliness.

"Astarion?"

The tortures had felt real enough, but no more real than the agony of his fingertips. The great upheavals, the Spellplague and the Time of Troubles, that had rearranged the gods in the heavens - perhaps those had only been fever dreams as he starved and died and was reborn, as endlessly as a god himself.

"Astarion, I think you're dreaming."

I'm an elf. I don't dream. And I know that, so... is there someone else here?

That rich, rough voice was familiar, but of course it would be if Astarion had hallucinated it in the first place. And it must be a hallucination, because no one came and spoke his name while he was trapped in the crypt. He heard people walk by sometimes, but his tongue was so swollen in his mouth that he could not call out to them. Mist condensed on the cold marble door sometimes, and he was able to lick it off, but it was not enough to slake the thirst of a mouse, let alone a man.

"Astarion?"

Someone touched his shoulder, and Astarion's hand shot up and caught their wrist with the speed of a striking snake. His eyes came open, and he stared into the blank white eyes of an aasimar.

"Tell me this," he growled, the dream still clinging to him like scraps of fog. "Are you real?"

"I think so," den Suriel said, "but I don't have any way to prove it." The paladin's voice was deliberately soothing, gravel turning to stones washed in a streambed. "You've been having a nightmare."

"This isn't the crypt?"

"It's part of the sewer system, remember?"

"Oh." Astarion swallowed. "Yes, of course." There was a pulse beating slow and steady under his thumb, and he realized he was still clutching den Suriel's wrist. He peeled his fingers off, one at a time. The man had removed his gauntlets, fortunately, or Astarion would have either dented the metal or dented his own hand.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. This is normal." Astarion sat up.

"Crying in your sleep is normal?"

"I was *not* crying," Astarion snapped. "I was probably gasping. There wasn't much water there."

Den Suriel reached over to his gear, snagged a waterskin, and offered it to Astarion.

The water was tepid but tasted as good as anything that wasn't blood could taste. He drank, grateful and annoyed with himself for being grateful.

"Did you wake up in a crypt when you died?"

Astarion lowered the waterskin. "I fear the Ancunín family crypt was sold to some nouveau riche trader centuries ago. No, this crypt was a punishment. The old man locked me inside for a year without food or water."

The aasimar's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to say something, then clearly thought better of it. After a long moment, he said, "A year is a long time."

"Believe me, I'm aware." At the end of the year, Astarion had been a shriveled husk, nothing but bones and fangs and madness. "Did you know that when you're that dehydrated, your eyes shrink as the fluid is absorbed? I could actually fit my finger into the socket with them." Den Suriel's lips pulled back in clear disgust.

"That's *appalling*."

"I was remarkably short on ways to amuse myself. I suppose I should have been meditating on my crime, but that lost its entertainment value after the first tenday or so."

"Crime? What crime could possibly justify *that*?"

The words *It's none of your business* were on Astarion's tongue, but he was supposed to be a tragic figure, and this was, in certain lights, a tragedy. And it was all true.

"My master took a liking to a young man and sent me to bring him back to the palace. It was not a task I wanted to perform. He was... innocent."

Innocent, and he looked at me as if he had just learned what desire was. I should have turned him down that first night, told him to go home and not come back. I should have found some drunken sot and lured him back to the palace and hunted elsewhere. In those days, Cazador had not required so much prey. Astarion had been allowed to take his time selecting a victim, spending days, even tendays on the hunt. So he had gone back the next night, and the one after, and the one after that, and every night Sebastian was waiting for him with all the joy and terror of a man in love for the first time.

"So you refused?" den Suriel asked.

"I tried." Astarion made a soft, bitter sound in his throat. "I thought I had found a loophole. I was required to bring him *back* to the palace. So long as I didn't go back, it didn't count. I told him to leave the city, that it wasn't safe, but he thought he was in love with me." Astarion shook his head. "It turns out that vampire lords are even less fond of loopholes than gods. You can guess what happened after that."

"You tried, though."

"For all the good it did me." Astarion hadn't been in love with Sebastian so much as with what Sebastian represented. He'd been young and innocent himself once. Even at the time, he'd known it was irrational, and yet he'd felt that if he could save this one foolish child, he could somehow save himself.

He'd only been a vampire spawn for a decade then. He thought he knew how bad things could get. He'd been as naïve as Sebastian in that regard.

Astarion shook out his jacket and grabbed his pack, suddenly disgusted with himself for talking about the crypt at all. He'd used his body to seduce a victim more times than he could count. He no longer felt anything much about it. Spreading his emotions out for den Suriel felt different, though. The one thing Cazador couldn't get to was his memories, and yet here Astarion was, using them to manipulate a man for Cazador's ultimate benefit. He felt as if he were selling off pieces of his soul.

"Come on. It's dark out."

He was already out of the crawl space when he heard den Suriel say, "Even when we fail, I must believe that trying counts for something, and the world is a little better for it."

It was such a *paladin* thing to say. Astarion rolled his eyes. But the worst thing, the absolute worst, was that, despite himself, he did feel a tiny bit better because of it.

He stalked toward the river door but halted when den Suriel called his name. That golden gravel voice did something to the syllables that went straight to Astarion's groin - and, through a somewhat more roundabout fashion, his brain.

"Just a moment, if you will." Den Suriel held up one hand. "There's something behind that wall over there. I noticed it when we came in."

Astarion followed his gaze to one of the many walls that had been scavenged for brick. Behind it lay a tumbledown corner of the old city ruins, the stones so old and broken that not even the denizens of Baldur's Gate had found a use for them.

"Just through that gap. I can swear I see something."

"My dear paladin, we're in a sewer system. The *best* thing you can find in a hole here is live rats. Everything else is downhill from there."

Den Suriel ignored him, stepping cautiously through the opening in the brick. Astarion stifled a sigh. If the man hadn't been so potentially *useful* ...

"There. I thought so." Den Suriel leaned back so that Astarion could see. "Don't you recognize the shape? It's a shrine."

"A shrine? To what, the god of drains?"

"I'm not sure. It doesn't *feel* evil, though." Den Suriel unslung his pack and knelt down, brushing dust aside with his hands.

"One wouldn't expect a god of drains to be evil. A trickster, possibly." Astarion considered.

"Though it occurs to me that a priest who could lay hands on plumbing would rapidly become wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. Clearly you specialized in the wrong thing."

Den Suriel snorted but continued to clean. Now that some of the crumbled stone was cleared away, Astarion could make out a niche and what might long ago have been a font of some sort. He was astonished that the paladin had spotted it, but perhaps if you were a servant of the divine, you developed a sense for things like this.

"It's been here a long time," den Suriel said, tracing his fingers along a worn carving. "I don't recognize the god."

"Looks rather snakelike. Snake gods are hardly ever good news."

"True, but not always. Centuries ago, serpents were considered a symbol of healing. And this is at least that old." Den Suriel sat back on his haunches. "A little local god, I think. Perhaps a forgotten aspect of a larger one."

"Wonderful. We have struck a blow for archaeology this day. Can we go?"

"One moment." The aasimar reached into his bag of holding, fished around for a moment, then extracted several objects.

Astarion rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall. *Nine Hells, why did it have to be a paladin? Sure, they're good at smiting undead, but then they have to make friends with every scrap of a god between here and the abyss. Even snakes - if it is a snake, and not a worm or a shoelace or a symbolic representation of death to all who gaze upon it.*

From where he was standing, the snake looked cross-eyed. That was probably just damage to the carving, but with its tongue sticking out, it had a distinctly unintelligent expression.

Den Suriel, undaunted, broke off a piece of waybread and set it in the niche, then poured a palmful of salt atop it. A stub of candle followed. "I offer this gift freely, ancient one," he said, lighting the candle. His voice was calm and completely unselfconscious. "If you have a blessing to impart, I ask that you give it. If not, I ask only that you continue to endure."

Astarion was working on a complicated punch line about snakes and getting on one's knees when the candle flame wavered, and *something* happened.

It wasn't bad. It wasn't good. It wasn't much of anything, to be honest, except that there had been two people in the hallway, and for just a moment, there were three. The third was invisible and voiceless, but Astarion *felt* them nevertheless, there and gone, along with a scent so faint that it might have been the ghost of incense.

It was hardly a miracle. A *miraclet*, perhaps. It also made Astarion irrationally angry.

I went on my knees to any god that I thought might have me and begged them for help after I was turned. Not one answered. Not one so much as glanced in my direction. And this thick-skulled, muscle-bound bastard, with his earnestness and his conviction, casually calls up a god that barely even exists anymore?

He stalked away, heading toward the river stairs. Like the old god, he had no power of belief in him, no blessings to be given. All he had left, all he had had for many years, was the power to endure.

"Right." Astarion nodded as den Suriel joined him at the top of the river stairs. Together, they looked out over the Chionthar, which was doing its best impression of the sea. "There is someone who I believe can help us."

"Are you sure you still want to go back down there?"

"I don't exactly have a choice in the matter, do I?" Astarion put his hands on the railing. It was still early evening, and the streets were full of people getting off work and visiting the cafes. The smell of cooking filled the air, temporarily drowning out the river's perfume of brackish water and dead fish. "You're welcome to leave, of course. I have no hold over you."

"You know I can't do that."

Astarion shrugged. He wouldn't have made the suggestion if he'd thought the aasimar might take him up on it. As an ally against the undead, he could hardly do better than a paladin, and as a gift for Cazador in case their assault failed ... well, there was a reason that he was feeling remarkably pleased with himself, even if he was filthy, dusty, and in desperate need of a bath.

"In that case, we need to visit a place where I do business. A place that, shall we say, does not usually entertain paladins." He looked over den Suriel's battered armor and frowned. "Do you think you can look inconspicuous?"

"I am six and a half feet tall, metallic gold, and *glowing*."

This was undeniably fair. Passersby were looking at the aasimar with definite interest. In Baldur's Gate, people usually only paid that much attention if you were the main attraction at a public hanging.

"Do you have a cloak?" Astarion asked. Perhaps if den Suriel pulled the hood low and didn't talk to anyone ...

"Yes, of course." The paladin rummaged through his bag of holding and pulled out a length of fabric. It did indeed have a hood. It was also bright white and had a silver badger picked out in metallic thread.

"Put that away. I hope your tailor has been suitably punished for his crimes." Astarion rubbed his temples. "I'll think of something."

Two hours and some haggling later, they turned down a particular street in the Lower City. It should have taken substantially less time, but den Suriel kept stopping and giving alms to beggars. In Baldur's Gate, being a beggar was a respectable profession that rewarded ingenuity, so Astarion wasn't surprised to see familiar faces surround them and familiar hands on the begging bowls.

"You have a surprising number of lepers here," the aasimar said disapprovingly.

"No, we've got the normal number, and they're all in a colony just outside the city. That's Spotty Peg, and she does it with dried oatmeal and bandages."

"But we've passed four of them so far in a two-block stretch!"

"She is also very quick on her feet." Astarion pitched his voice up. "That's enough, Peg, you've shorn this sheep to the skin." In hand sign, he added, *The mark's with me*.

Spotty Peg grinned at him, showing stumps of broken teeth. "Can't blame a girl for trying, eh?" She scratched at her bandaged neck, curling her fingers into her own sign. *Good hunting, brother.* Astarion smiled, then helped himself to den Suriel's coin purse to keep the man from bankrupting himself with charity before they reached their destination.

Ten feet from the Rat's Run, the paladin balked. "In *there*?" His voice echoed slightly because he was wearing a full helmet with the visor down.

"It's better on the inside," Astarion lied.

"It would almost have to be."

Rat's Run had been a sailor bar for decades before the most recent change of ownership, and it still retained some of the same-for lack of a better term-character. The tavern's name was etched into an old oar suspended beneath a remarkably lifelike carving of a dead rat. The windows were grimy, the walls were grimy, and streaks of filth running down below the casements showed where chamber pots had been emptied from the upper floors. Drifts of trash had formed in the gutters. A drunk had passed out in a puddle of his own vomit, raising the cleanliness of the area by several notches.

Den Suriel reached beneath his tabard to touch his holy symbol. He murmured something. Astarion's ears popped.

"By the Nine Hells, don't start casting—"

"There's *evil* in there," the paladin hissed.

"Yes, well, needs must," Astarion said, putting both hands on the aasimar's back and shoving him forward. He prayed silently that there were no undead in the Rat's Run tonight.

"Look, if you can't behave yourself, I'm not taking you with me."

Den Suriel flipped up the helmet visor and turned to gaze intently at Astarion, who immediately did his best impression of an innocent but exasperated man.

Fascinating. I can actually hear his teeth grinding from here.

"And you're sure we have to go in there?"

"The owner owes me a favor, and I need that relic. And so do you, unless you want to traipse around after me for the rest of your life."

"*Fuck*," the aasimar said, with feeling.

"Not until we've both had baths, darling. You've still got mummy wax on you, and I smell like a priest's undergarments."

The paladin's sigh was loud enough to rattle his armor. "I am going to have to do so much penance for this ..."

"On your knees, one hopes." Astarion reached up and slapped the helmet visor down. "And remember, *don't say a word.*"

"What in the Nine Hells is *that*?" asked the human guarding the door. Her name was Deitre, and Astarion knew her to be discreet, pleasant, and capable of using a morning star like a surgical instrument.

"It's a golem."

Deitre studied den Suriel at some length. Between the gauntlets, the half plate, the helmet, and some hastily acquired chain mail, there was not an inch of exposed skin anywhere.

Astarion thought the line of bolts hastily shoved through the chain was a nice touch. The fence had even given him a discount because the chain was so full of holes to begin with.

"Looks like a knight in armor," the door guard said skeptically.

"Yes, the artificers are doing amazing things these days."

"*Why* do you have a golem?"

"Deitre, my darling, in all the time we've known each other, have I ever asked you about *your* personal life?"

Deitre shook her head. "Only because it's you ... Fine. If it starts breaking things, you're paying for it." She opened the door.

"I promise you that it shall be as well- behaved as a banker at audit time." He gave den Suriel a very hard look. "Or *e/se*."

The paladin clanked through the door. With his visor down, it was nearly impossible to see his eyes, and if anyone did, they would see only blank whiteness. Astarion could guess, however, what their expression would be.

The great hall of the Rat's Run was a disaster, naturally. That was fine. Sailors sang and drank and gambled. Palm-Slicer the halfling was running his usual game of Three-Dragon Ante, deftly harvesting coin from those too drunk to know better. Behind the bar, two dwarven sisters dispensed wine, ale, and occasional bons mots.

Astarion nodded to a well-dressed kenku at a corner table and made his way to the bar. He only had to stop once and go back for den Suriel.

"Don't make me keep you on a leash," he hissed. "Even if you'd *enjoy* it."

"But—"

"*Not now*."

A wake of puzzled silence followed vampire and paladin, but it didn't last for long. The Rat's Run had seen much stranger things.

"Astarion!" One of the dwarf sisters smiled at him, gold teeth flashing. "What can I get you?"

"A meeting with the mistress, if she's in. Lief if she's not." Astarion knew that the mistress of the establishment knew he was a vampire spawn—he'd used the Rat's Run as a hunting ground often enough—but he'd never been quite certain about Lief.

"Lief's in. Give me a moment." She waved to one of the waitstaff and murmured a few words. He nodded and scurried away.

Astarion leaned against the bar, listening to fragments of conversation around him.

"... swabbing the deck, every damn day ..."

"... and then the healer starts screaming, '*Dilute! Dilute!*' ..."

"... okay, one more, and then I have to get back ..."

"... and I says, 'Who the hell has a chicken familiar?,' and the warlock says ..."

"... dweomer? I hardly know 'er!"

Astarion felt something in his shoulders relax. The Rat's Run was a dreadful place, but it was a place where he was welcome. It was far too grubby to feel like home, but it at least felt like something you might scrape off your shoe at home.

Two sailors farther down the bar began pummeling each other enthusiastically. Astarion stomped on den Suriel's armored foot to keep him from intervening. *If my hair wasn't already white, it would be by the time we get out of here.*

Fortunately, Lief was willing to see them. Five minutes later, they were ushered into her office, a room as aggressively tidy and shipshape as any captain's cabin.

"Astarion! Come in, come in." The enormous goliath woman looked as if she were built from slabs of granite, with broad gray cheekbones and mountainous hips. Tattoos swirled across her forehead and vanished under her snow-white hair. "It's been too long. And who is your ..." She paused, shrewd eyes narrowing. "That's no golem, no matter what you told Deitre." Astarion knew better than to be surprised. "No, he's not. May I beg five minutes to explain before you throw us out?"

Lief considered this. She went to the door and said something to the man waiting outside, then closed it. "Five minutes," she said, turning. "And if I don't give the all clear by then, word goes to the mistress."

Astarion nodded. "Lief Cloudswell, may I present Hahn den Suriel, who is *not* law enforcement but *is* a paladin of the Golden Ferret."

"Argent Badger, actually," den Suriel said, removing his helm. Sweat darkened his metallic hair to bronze.

"Never heard of it."

Den Suriel sighed. "No one has."

"This fine fellow has sworn to protect me with his life and soul," Astarion said, "until I get my hands on a certain item. *Then* he gets to kill me."

The goliath looked from Astarion to den Suriel, then settled back. "This had better be one hell of an explanation."

Three and a half minutes later, Lief opened the door to inform her employee that everything was fine and to request that two dinners and wine be sent up. By the time the bowls of fish stew arrived, Astarion had just about finished a recitation of the previous night's adventures.

"This is a lot to take in," Lief said.

"It was a lot to experience, too."

"And you want *my* help to get you this relic?"

"That's the long and the short of it, my dear colossus."

"Huh." Lief gazed at the ceiling, thinking, while den Suriel fell on his food like a starving man and Astarion sipped from a cup of watered wine that contained no actual water. He recognized the taste of pig blood. Somebody in the kitchen had probably had their preparations for black pudding set back by at least a day.

It did nicely solve the question of whether Lief knew what he was. Astarion would have been much more worried about that if the blood hadn't gone down so smoothly. He could feel his muscles unknotting and a legion of tiny nicks and scratches beginning to heal. The deep ache in his ribs that had been background noise for hours began to fall silent.

While the two of them ate, Lief began sketching out a map with thick, nimble fingers. She had a cartographer's skill, roughing in elements as Astarion and den Suriel described them. By the time the meal had ended, she had a basic map of the cavern inhabited by the Cult of the Undying Blood.

"Hmm," she said, mostly to the map. "I can see how to get you to the relic. I'm not sure how to get you out again."

"Get me in there, and I'll worry about getting me out again. Though I may need your people to cause a distraction."

Lief raised a slate-colored eyebrow. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather pay the Guild for this?"

"Anyone in the Guild worth their salt will start thinking that the relic might be worth double-crossing me." Astarion examined his cuffs. The embroidery had so many stray threads that it looked like he was wearing a brightly colored jellyfish. "Also, *they* don't owe me a favor."

The goliath smoothed down the map. "The mistress *would* be glad to see her favor discharged."

Astarion offered his hand. "Help me acquire that relic, and the favor is returned, free and clear."

Lief engulfed his slender white hand with her own large gray one. Astarion could feel her calluses like sandpaper against his knuckles.

"Must be quite a favor," den Suriel said, "if you're willing to help us with something this dramatic."

"For some, a debt owed grows heavier with each passing season."

The paladin shook his head. "Better to do good with no expectation of being repaid."

Even though Lief was probably younger than the aasimar, her eyes were briefly as ancient as the sea. "Better for you, perhaps. To leave someone with a debt they have no way of repaying can be a cruel act."

Den Suriel frowned. "I don't understand."

Astarion thought of Violet and her hatred for Yousen. "I'll explain it to you later."

Lief tapped the map. "Give me the daylight hours to consider and to reach out to some people I know. You may have the hospitality of the house until then." She rose to her feet, and the two men followed.

The hospitality of the Rat's Run was resoundingly adequate. Astarion knew that they were receiving the best the house had to offer, and so he did not complain. There was plenty of room, even after another bed and washbasin were hastily dragged in, though the décor might best be described as post-nautical chic. Frayed fishing nets were draped across the ceiling, dangling glass weights below them, and the light fixtures were shaped like a ship's figurehead.

Astarion peeled off his jacket, checked the enchanted vials again to make sure they were still safe, and was working on a mental checklist of equipment he needed to replace when den Suriel cleared his throat.

"Hmm?"

"I am afraid I need to visit the privy."

"Downstairs in back. Look for the black curtains."

"Ah ..." The aasimar rubbed the back of his neck, looking desperately uncomfortable. "That is ... err ... would you mind coming with me?"

"To the *privies*?" Astarion turned to stare at him. "My dear paladin, I have embraced any number of perversions, but I assure you, *that* is not among them."

"No! Not for any—that is—it's certainly not one of *my*—" He stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I am worried that if I let you out of my sight, that will count as letting you live, and my oath will be broken."

"Far be it from me to lecture a paladin on theology, but any god who forces you to choose between your soul and your bladder cannot *possibly* call Themself good."

That wrung a rueful chuckle from den Suriel. "You make a distressingly valid point."

Astarion made shooing motions. "Go, go. I promise that if I'm not here when you get back, it's only because I've gone down to the kitchen to demand they send up hot water for a bath."

"A bath sounds *marvelous*."

"I thought it might."

The Rat's Run did not have a dedicated bathing area, but the kitchen was willing to send up a tin bath and heated water to fill it. It was not precisely luxurious, but it was hot, and since Astarion was covered in dried sweat, bone dust, rock dust, and bits of mummy wax, he was not inclined to be choosy. He did insist on his own soap, though, as the chunk the inn provided had the color and odor of earwax.

Den Suriel returned while the bath was still being filled. A servant brought in a folding screen, and another arrived with a pile of coarse towels. Astarion tipped them both generously, then slid the screen into place and stepped behind it.

"Oath still intact?"

"Seems to be. Apparently, I'm allowed to leave so long as I still plan to kill you in the end." A pause. "Err ... sorry, that wasn't very tactful, was it?"

"It's fine." Astarion stepped into the hot water with a hiss of pleasure.

An orchestra of clunks and clinks from the other side of the screen indicated that the aasimar was removing his armor. "I'll tell you, though, I'm very glad paladins are immune to disease. That privy looked like a shrine to the Mother of Plagues."

"Yes, they're certainly an experience." Astarion splashed water over his skin, wondering if the paladin was picturing him naked behind the screen. He rather hoped so.

He let out a long sigh of pleasure to gauge the effect and was pleased to hear the sounds stop for a moment before starting again.

Seducing him would certainly give me an edge when it comes time to fulfill his oath. And I rather think I'd enjoy dragging him down to my level ...

The thought made Astarion want to purr like a cat, though not as much as the hot water did. His life at Szarr Palace was slow and almost languorous, in between bouts of horror. The madcap pace of the last twenty-four hours had been an exciting change, but there was definitely something to be said for a little languor.

The water cooled all too soon. Astarion emerged from behind the screen wearing a towel around his hips and not much else, and he was pleased to see the aasimar's pale white eyes go wide. *Oh, very good. Now, what else can I do, hmm?*

Den Suriel was sitting on the edge of the bed, having removed the plate on the upper half of his body, as well as the padding that went under it. His loose linen shirt was open at the throat, revealing more metallic gold freckles trailing down his chest.

"Boots giving you trouble?" Astarion asked pleasantly.

"Boots?"

"On your feet."

"Oh, *those* boots." Den Suriel dragged his eyes away from Astarion's bare skin and stared at his feet. "Yes. Look at that. I am definitely wearing boots."

"Sadly, there aren't any bootjacks in this place," Astarion said. "There used to be, but the patrons kept breaking them over each other's heads. Allow me." He knelt with practiced ease and began unlacing the boots in question, which were heavy leather with steel-capped toes.

"Um. Yes. Thank you."

Astarion stole a glance from beneath his eyelashes and was amused to see that the aasimar's face was a study in contrast. *A very sexy man taking off my boots* seemed to be at war with *A very sexy vampire is taking off my boots*, and it was hard to say which one had the upper hand.

Dear me. If this keeps up, he may suffer permanent brain damage, and paladins have so little brain to begin with ...

"I suppose you usually have someone to help with this? Some eager young acolyte of the Shiny Raccoon?"

"Argent Badger," den Suriel said, "and they're called squires. And you would be terrible at it."

"I will have you know that I am *excellent* at getting people out of their clothes."

"I do not doubt that in the least. I simply doubt your willingness to spend hours polishing armor afterward."

"No, my mother always said that would make me go blind."

Den Suriel snorted. "I still have no idea what to make of you," he said as Astarion tackled the other boot.

"Normally, I would suggest a kept man, but I'm afraid you can't afford me." Astarion finished with the laces and pulled. The boot came off, and he let the momentum carry him backward, catching himself on his elbow, an act that disarrayed his towel to the point of mild indecency. "That's not *quite* what I meant," den Suriel said, although his eyes were riveted to the towel. Astarion rearranged it decorously, and the aasimar looked immediately away.

"Could you really?" he asked abruptly. "If you wanted to?"

"Could I what?"

"Be a kept man."

"Ah." Astarion studied his nails. "No, not really."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

Whatever lay in the air between them—sexual tension, animosity, pity—was so thick that Astarion was surprised the windows hadn't fogged up. Fortunately, it was interrupted by servants tapping on the door to bring in a fresh batch of hot water.

"My turn, then," the aasimar said, getting to his feet. He picked up the bag of holding. "May I offer you a dressing gown?"

"You carry a dressing gown around with you?"

"Not at all. I carry two. You never know when you'll need to loan one to a ... friend."

Astarion was careful not to show his glee at being referred to, even obliquely, as a friend.

That was the wonderful thing about truly good people. It was so hard for them to keep their guard up.

The dressing gown from den Suriel's wardrobe was a deep emerald green with copper dragons on the cuffs. Astarion folded them back quickly, and not just because they fell past his fingertips.

"It's a bit large," den Suriel observed.

"The statue of Balduran in the harbor is a bit large. This is immense." Astarion rubbed the fabric between thumb and forefinger. Linen damask, lightweight, and not terribly expensive.

The beauty lay in the weave and the way the color shifted as the fabric moved. "You could fit two of me in here."

"Lathander forbid," den Suriel muttered, heading behind the screen. "*One* of you is almost too many."

"I heard that."

"I meant you to."

The hem of the dressing gown did not just drag on the floor, it was in danger of sweeping it. Astarion looked around for something to belt it with and saw that the paladin had left his bag of holding on his bed.

In for a copper ... He opened it and stuck his hand in. It was clear from the cacophony of textures that den Suriel's organizational skills left something to be desired. His fingertips brushed over fur, fabric, metal, leather, and glass, over surfaces rough and lumpy and sticky and smooth. *How ever does the man find anything in here? And how are his clothes not a mass of wrinkles? And ... wait, is this cheese? My god, it is.* Astarion extracted a wheel of cheese from the bag, neatly sealed in wax. The stamp proclaimed it as Highmoon smokerind.

The man has good taste in cheese, if not in gods. I suppose if you can only have one of the two, cheese is more important.

The floorboards creaked. "What are you *doing*?"

"Going through your luggage," Astarion said, not bothering to turn around.

"So you are." Den Suriel's bemusement was almost tangible. "Some people would consider that an invasion of privacy, you know."

"My dear paladin, how else will I know if you've got anything worth stealing?"

"You are either the worst thief I've ever met or one of the best." The aasimar was wearing an even more elaborate dressing gown of pink silk with embroidered red flowers dripping petals across his shoulders. It made such a ridiculous contrast to the sword hanging at his hip that Astarion couldn't help but chuckle.

"Are you planning on stealing from me?" den Suriel asked.

"You can ask me the next time you cast that truth spell, but I'll tell you now that I have definite designs on your cheese." Astarion held up the ivory figurine he'd spotted earlier. It appeared to be an exquisitely carved elephant, perfect down to the wrinkled knees and delicate trunk. "Now, is this what I think it is?"

"A wondrous creature, yes. I have to tell you, it's less useful than you might think. The situations that are improved by an emergency elephant are surprisingly few and far between. And I always feel dreadful when the poor creature dies."

"It seems to me that we could have used an emergency elephant when we faced that horde of undead."

"There was no place to put it. You have to have a clear elephant-sized space without anyone in it."

"You can't use it to squish your enemies? What good is *that*?"

"I think it's a safety measure. The artificers don't want small children getting hold of a wondrous rhinoceros or something and getting squished when they summon it in the nursery. So if you don't have a clear space, the figurine just sits there. A necromancer once accused me of throwing knickknacks at him. It was all rather embarrassing."

"I'd be more than happy to take it off your hands."

"It wasn't *that* embarrassing. Anyway, it's a family heirloom." Den Suriel plucked it from Astarion's grasp. "Supposedly given to my grandmother by a celestial being." He smiled ruefully. "Of course, I'm proof that he gave Grandma something else as well. My parents were *extremely* surprised, but she was smug about it until the day she died."

"I can imagine." Astarion pulled out the next object. "A bottle of lover's oil? Oh my. And is this a second bottle? Dear me. One wonders how you have any time to fight evil."

"That second one is a healing potion, I'll have you know."

"And the first one?"

Den Suriel rocked on the balls of his feet and didn't meet Astarion's eyes.

"Is this what they teach nice young paladins in oath school?"

"Teach, no ... learned, yes. You can't coop that many healthy young people up in dorms and not expect things to happen." He coughed. "And a few had to take oaths of celibacy once they were knighted, so they were, um, sowing their wild oats first. As it were."

"I see."

"If you're quite done rummaging ... ?"

"Oh, very well." Den Suriel shoved everything back into his bag of holding while Astarion turned to more important matters.

"And now you're remaking your bed. *Under* the bed." The paladin pursed his lips. "Any particular reason?"

"The window," Astarion said, plumping his pillow.

Den Suriel turned his attention to the window. It was a decent size, though the curtains were rather faded. "This window here? Why—oh, sunlight. Yes, of course. I'd forgotten."

"Unless I wish to turn into an extremely attractive charcoal brick, I don't forget. There will be sunlight around the edges, but under the bed will be quite safe."

"Was your left hand burned by sunlight, then?"

Astarion went very still. A cold chill seemed to be crawling up his spine, each individual vertebra filling with ice.

"How," he said in a light, conversational tone that would send anyone with sense running for the hills, "the *hell* do you know that?"

No one knew that. No one except Cazador. Astarion's mind flooded with paranoid fantasies—Cazador arranging the entire encounter with den Suriel, Cazador listening in on the truths Astarion had been forced to speak—and the possibility that the last few days had been nothing but another mad illusion, only instead of a hallucination in the crypt, he was still in Szarr Palace, probably talking to a pig carcass.

"Uh ..." Den Suriel sounded concerned but not particularly alarmed. "Whenever you talk about sunlight burning you, you start rubbing your left hand. Did you not know?"

Astarion looked down at his hands as if they belonged to some other person. He was cradling his left hand protectively against his chest, massaging the knuckles with his right.

"No," he said quietly. "I didn't know." He dropped his hands, suddenly much too aware of them.

White eyes watched him solemnly. Astarion sank down onto the bare mattress and heard himself saying, from a great distance away, "It wasn't long after he turned me. He told me I had to know what it felt like, so I wouldn't get careless. He put on these heavy leather gloves, like a falconer's gauntlets, and pulled back the drapes so there was a single beam of light coming into the room. Then he took my wrist and held my hand in the light. The skin burned off it and turned to ash. I watched all the little black flakes drifting down to the floor ..."

Den Suriel reached out and gripped Astarion's shoulder. The vampire spawn started, then forced lightness into his voice. "I screamed bloody murder, of course. But in fairness, I've never been even a little careless about sunlight since."

"That sounds monstrous. I'm sorry."

Astarion shrugged. The hand on his shoulder was warm, even through his shirt. He did not usually like to be touched, but there was something almost impersonal about the heat, as if the paladin were a hearth fire and he was merely warming himself beside it. The fire would be there for anyone who needed it. Astarion could smell the scent of his soap on the man's skin, rosemary and bergamot, and underneath, the spicy scent of the aasimar's blood.

"When you said you wanted to live to make it all worthwhile, I didn't really understand. Now, between that and what you said about the crypt, I think I do, a little." Den Suriel squeezed Astarion's shoulder briefly, then withdrew his hand and went to his bed on the other side of the room.

Astarion slid underneath his own bed, into the nest of blankets he'd built. It wasn't uncomfortable. Compared to, say, the stone floor of Godey's kennels, it was downright luxurious. And it was warm from the kitchens below, and there was no reason that Astarion should feel cold, as if he'd stepped away from a fire. Absolutely no reason at all.

"I hate this," Astarion said. "I hate this, I hate the entire plan, I hate Lief for coming up with it, I hate you, I hate these undead, I hate that druid, and I'm not feeling very well inclined toward the god Mask, either."

Unfortunately, what came out was an agitated, almost mechanical buzz. "Sorry," den Suriel said, stroking Astarion under the chin with one fingertip. "I don't speak Bat."

"I said I hate you. In fact ... no, wait, keep doing that. That feels wonderful." Astarion craned his neck so that the aasimar could scratch under it. "Gods, why did I never consider the benefit of having fur before? Though I'd have been a cat. Or perhaps an ermine. Not a mouse with wings."

When Lief had laid out the plan, Astarion had been skeptical but forced to admit that it was better than anything he'd come up with. It even had a moderate chance of success. And den Suriel must have noticed that there was a large opportunity in there for Astarion to simply bolt, but he hadn't objected.

Is he hoping that I'll get away and it won't be his fault? Does he think his god won't blame him if he's been deceived by the tricky vampire?

It wouldn't surprise him. Den Suriel had been subdued after they woke, and Astarion caught him sneaking glances his way several times, with an expression like a man trying to pick a complicated lock.

They'd eaten either an early dinner or a very late breakfast and gone to the river stair to find Lief's associates waiting for them. There had been no undead blocking their way, though Astarion found and disarmed a rather simple set of trip wires, the sort that a skeleton might set up under orders. And then they had reached the first staging point, and it was time to put the plan into action.

Being polymorphed hadn't been that bad. He'd seen his mother change to wild shape often enough that he hadn't worried about that part. He just hadn't expected his brain to feel so *squashed*. His thoughts felt sluggish and strangely distant, the way they did after an enthusiastic round of torture.

"I never realized bats were so cute," den Suriel said.

"I will bite your fingertips off, you gigantic celestial bastard."

"May I suggest that you get moving?" said the druid, whom Astarion currently hated. "The spell only lasts an hour."

"Can you understand what he's saying?" The paladin's voice boomed like thunder. Nine Hells, why were they all so *loud*?

"I'd need to cast Speak with Animals, and I think you would prefer that I concentrate on your friend not turning back at an inconvenient moment. Mid-flight, for example." The druid was a catlike young man with hair dappled like a leopard's spots. Astarion didn't know what he was doing in the city or why Lief had called on him in particular, and he hadn't asked questions. Now he rather wished he'd asked a few more questions, like *Is there a way to stop this?* and *Are you sure you couldn't have turned me into something better?* He wouldn't have minded being a cat. Cats had *style*. Bats had weird little membranes between their fingers and hardly any feet.

The trio that Lief had picked out to assist him were crowded together in yet another of the ruined buildings that made up the Undercity. Astarion hadn't bothered to learn any of their names. He trusted adventurers even less than he trusted regular people, which was to say not at all.

"Does he understand what we're saying?" den Suriel asked.

The druid nodded. "At the moment, yes. The longer he stays in that form, the more it will influence his thoughts. I have shaped the spell as kindly as I can, but his mental powers are decreased simply because his brain is so much smaller."

"That's hardly polite. Do I make personal comments about the size of *your* brain?"

"Fortunately, I do not think he will be required to solve complex mathematical equations," den Suriel said gravely, although there was a twinkle in his eye.

"Trust the bat when you need to fly," the druid said, looking directly at Astarion. "But don't become too comfortable, or you are likely to forget your purpose. And don't get into a fight with any real flying creatures, because they'll make a meal out of you."

"Squeak once for yes and twice for no," den Suriel suggested. "Are you ready?"

Astarion let out a single grim squeak.

"We'll be there when you need us," said one of the druid's associates. If the druid was catlike, the barbarian guarding him reminded Astarion of a shaggy mountain dog, all jowls and bluff good nature. She also smelled like she'd been rolling in something. Astarion the elf hadn't smelled anything, but to Astarion the bat, the odor poured off her in waves. The druid smelled strongly of herbs. Den Suriel smelled like sweat and metal polish and the soap he'd used last night.

The last member of the group, a gnome even shorter than Yousen, stank of explosive powders, but Astarion had been able to smell *that* even as an elf. She'd promised she wasn't going to do anything to bring the cavern ceiling down on them, which would have been reassuring if she hadn't added, "At least, not intentionally."

Den Suriel saluted the trio and strode out, Astarion clinging to his shoulder like a grumpy pauldron.

Although Astarion had been through these ruined halls more times than he wanted, they looked totally different now. The sound of den Suriel's footsteps went out like a pulse of light, briefly illuminating each individual stone. When Astarion chirped experimentally, the light seemed to expand farther down the hallway. There was even less color than in his usual darkvision, but he could make out the most extraordinary textures. The pockmarked stone and den Suriel's armor were suddenly as different as silk and sand. When the aasimar's hair brushed against Astarion's ears, it caused a visual explosion akin to pressing against his closed eyelids. It was fascinating and also made him slightly queasy.

"Right," murmured den Suriel. He had reached a narrow crack in the stone that looked out over the cavern. Astarion had overlooked it in their earlier retreat because it was barely wide enough to slide a hand through. "We'll get into position and wait for your signal."

"Squeak."

The paladin lifted him carefully with one hand and brought Astarion's tiny wrinkled face level with his own. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Astarion was increasingly sure he didn't, but damned if he was going to suffer the indignity of being a winged mouse and not have something to show for it. "Squeak."

"You can back out, and we'll find another way."

With my luck, the other way will involve being turned into a millipede or something equally dreadful. "Squeak-squeak."

Den Suriel's lips turned up in a smile. "And, Astarion?"

"Squeak?"

"Your little scrunchy face is *adorable*."

"Darling boy ... *fuck you*."

That came out as another buzzing chatter. Den Suriel laughed and put his hand to the crack in the stone.

At Astarion's current size, the opening was as broad as a carriage road. His miniature lungs inflated as he took a deep breath. Trust the bat. *What a remarkably druid thing to say.*

He launched himself into space.

The first seconds of free fall were unbelievably horrible. Astarion screamed, which brought the cavern walls into sharp relief. "I'm trusting the bat! I'm trusting! *Why is nothing happening?*"

The floor was rushing toward him. In blind terror, he tried to turn and grab the wall, which meant throwing out his arms, which meant that his wings flared, and his descent slowed considerably.

... *Oh*.

His arms were his wings now. He was hugging the air, which felt almost like water.

He gave an experimental flap, and the floor stopped coming toward him. That was good.

That was *wonderful*. It would be terribly ignominious to survive as long as he had and then die from a fall while he had wings.

A few more flaps, and Astarion started to get the hang of things. The air really was like water, buoyant but full of drifts and currents and stray eddies. An updraft sent him perilously close to the cavern ceiling. He banked without even thinking about it, dropping one wing and curving down out of the way.

It was amazing. Gravity's grip on him was suddenly loosened. It wasn't like climbing, where you could fall at any moment; it was more like swimming, but without any need to hold your breath.

It was ... *fun*.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had purely innocent fun. It might have been before he'd moved to Baldur's Gate. Astarion enjoyed many things—he loved the feel of silk and the smooth roll of a good wine over his tongue; he was often pleased, amused, smug, and sometimes even triumphant—but *fun* was something he'd genuinely forgotten.

I've changed my mind. When I become a true vampire, I'm turning into a bat all the time.

His chirp of delight picked up a nearby dot in the air. *Moth*, he thought absently, swooping toward it.

Astarion was already spitting out the papery wings before he realized what was happening. It tasted like something between pudding and peanuts. No real blood in it, but he'd learned that years ago, eating cockroaches under Godey's bizarrely benevolent eye.

Trust the bat, and you ended up eating bugs, apparently. The druid's warning about becoming too comfortable rang in his head, and Astarion reminded himself that he had business to attend to. The last thing he wanted was to overstay the time limit and suddenly become a wingless but exceedingly handsome creature fifty feet in the air. That led to one becoming an exceedingly handsome splat in short order.

The magical sphere of darkness was not designed to interfere with sound, which was one of the reasons the druid had pronounced bat shape as the best solution. Astarion spiraled downward toward the central plaza, suddenly able to make out details. Three slabs of stone were arranged in a C shape, with hulking skeleton guards stationed at either end. The middle stone had a shallow basin carved into it, half full of liquid.

Landing was somewhat fraught. If he left his wings outstretched, he went into a glide, but if he pulled them tight against his body, he dropped like a stone. His legs weren't made to absorb the shock, either. Trusting the bat wasn't much help because the bat didn't *want* to land on the ground; it wanted to roost.

He made three abortive passes before finally just flinging himself out of the air directly at the altar. He hit at a bad angle, flipped over, and went tumbling over the back of the altar onto the pavement, stunning himself.

Ow, he thought. His head felt fuzzy.

The white bat gingerly extended first one wing, then the other. Nothing seemed to be broken. His fur was badly mussed, though. He licked it carefully back into place, twisting to work on his back, which was covered in dust. How annoying. Fortunately, his hind claws worked like little rakes, so all he had to do was lift one over his back and comb the dust out.

Was there something he was supposed to be doing? He had a vague nagging sensation that he was forgetting something. Maybe it was his wings? It was important to groom the membranes thoroughly and often. Even a small irritant could lead to holes that would affect his flight.

The nagging sensation wasn't going away. Was he hungry? No, he'd just eaten a big moth. Maybe the moth wasn't agreeing with him?

The white bat had just decided that its problem was a case of bad moth stomach when the polymorph spell wore off, and Astarion found himself lying on his stomach next to the altar with one foot bent behind his head and his tongue jammed between his fingers.

His first coherent thought, as he eased his foot down before his pelvis snapped in half, was that it was a damn good thing Violet couldn't see him now.

His second thought was that when he saw that druid again, he was going to throttle the Iman with his bare hands. *I've changed my mind. I don't want to be a bat, or even a cat. I don't want to be anything but myself. How did Mother stand it?*

Astarion sat up. His skull felt enormous, his thoughts echoing inside it as if they came from a long way off. At the same time, sounds had flattened out so much that hearing felt like a different sense entirely, as if he'd been standing in a waterfall that suddenly dried up and turned into an intermittent trickle. *Like an old man trying to piss around a prostate the size of a grapefruit.*

It's good to see that my capacity for metaphor hasn't suffered. I will certainly never say blind as a bat again, though.

Now that he couldn't see with his ears, he truly was blinded by the sphere of darkness. After centuries of darkvision, it was unsettling to be subjected to such dense magical blackness, the sort where you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Astarion tested this theory and almost poked himself in the eye.

His back was up against the altar, though, which gave him a good idea of where he was.

There are two very large skeletons there and there, so I just have to be careful not to run into them. He rose soundlessly to a crouch, straining his merely elven ears for the faintest rattle of bone.

Nothing. His crash landing must have been quiet enough not to alert the guards.

He slid his hands along the polished basalt surface of the altar. Shallow carvings caught at the fingertips of his kidskin gloves. *Now, what could those be? Prayers to Mask? Images of great heists of yore? Warnings that anyone attempting to steal the sacred blood will be hung by their ankles over a pit of sacred crocodiles?*

When he finally reached a corner, he stopped and compared the angle to his memory of the altar. *Let me see, that means that I fell here, and flipped over here, so this must be ... oh.*

He lifted his head very slowly. He couldn't see anything, but unless he was mistaken, he was currently less than ten inches away from an eight-foot-tall skeleton with a very large axe.

His heart gave an unpleasant jump, and he was suddenly very glad that he didn't actually need to breathe. Moving back the other way seemed to take several years. In theory, he had at least thirty minutes before den Surriel and the adventurers caused a very loud distraction, but he could feel time flowing away like the running water that burned his soul.

When he reached the next corner of the altar, he wasted no time. The top was smooth and unmarked until he reached the lip of a bowl carved into the basalt. Astarion dipped a finger

into it, felt cool liquid soak into the leather of his glove, and pulled back. *The blood of a god is on my hands.*

He sniffed the tip of the glove. It had a sharp metallic quality that was different from the usual coppery scent of blood. He was reminded of the cold tin smell of snow, of the hard darkness of the sky over a frozen lake, lit by impossibly distant stars.

He could not drink the blood of a thinking being, but even if he could have, Astarion would not have tasted the god's blood unless he watched someone else do it first. Preferably someone like Yousen. He had no trouble believing that blood like this would do something terrible, like turn you into an avatar or make you explode.

That will be Cazador's problem. If he explodes, hopefully I can lick up some of his blood before it goes bad, and if he turns into an avatar of Mask ... well, that will certainly liven things up at the palace.

Careful not to let the rustle of fabric betray him, Astarion removed the vials from his pocket and dipped them, one after the other, into the carved basin. The vials were small, but even so, the level of liquid went down by half.

However the priest of the Cult of the Undying Blood had acquired the blood, he hadn't been able to acquire very much.

He sealed the vials by touch, hoping that the magic worked as well as Dalylia thought it would, then stepped back from the altar. *And now I wait until I hear the explosion, then get out while everyone is distracted.*

It was a good plan. It was simple, and simple plans were always the best.

Where the plan fell down was the fact that the next thing Astarion heard was the sound of approaching footsteps, then a dry, raspy voice saying, "In Your name, Lord of Shadows, I have come to worship at the font of Your undying blood."

Astarion immediately forgot his earlier complaints and wished desperately that he could turn into a bat *right now*. Since he couldn't, he began creeping soundlessly away from the altar in what he hoped was the right direction. In the absolute darkness of the sphere, he had to test each step before putting weight on it. Even a pebble crunching could give him away.

He had a general idea of how large the sphere was, so he slowed even further as he approached what might be the edge. Now he had to lead with his head, since it would be extremely awkward if his hands and feet emerged in front of one of the mummies without him knowing it.

Between one instant and the next, the world filled with light. Astarion jerked his head back into the darkness, then, very carefully, inched forward again until one eye, his cheekbone, and the side of his nose broke out of the sphere.

He was standing a little above the level of the street. Ten feet away, rows of skeletons streamed by like ants. Some carried stones and tools, others weapons. None of them were currently looking in his direction, but there were far too many to even think about fighting.

He looked to either side. A pillar held a brazier of greenish fire a dozen steps away. If he could get to *that*, it would offer some cover from which he could peer out.

He slunk toward it through the magical darkness. Almost there ...

"Where in the name of the wretched living gods has the blood gone?"

The voice was horribly close. Astarion froze.

"Someone has stolen the sacred blood of Mask! *Find it!* Stop what you are doing and search for intruders!"

Astarion spent a brief moment wondering if he had at some point accidentally run down the avatar of Tymora with a carriage. *Surely my luck is too apocalyptically dreadful to be natural?*

He was pretty sure that the priest was standing less than ten feet away. Could it find him in the dark? Did it have access to extra senses?

He began working his way away from the voice, though he was moving at a speed that even a snail might find tame. When he dared to steal a glimpse outside, he saw that the skeletons had indeed stopped what they were doing and, in most cases, dropped what they were carrying as well. The street was littered with stones and pickaxes, and the nearest doorways were jammed with skeletons trying to go inside to search and others who had searched and were trying to come back out.

There was actually a clear spot not far away, the back wall of a building with no doorways breaking it up. The skeletons would see him, but if he moved fast, they wouldn't be able to grab him.

Astarion made a run for it.

Momentum carried him partway up the wall, and he slapped his hands against it and thought very hard about being a spider. His feet scrabbled at empty air, but a missing brick gave him a foothold, and he was up and over the wall in a couple of heartbeats. The second floor was mostly gone, and he could see skulls turning to look up at him through the hole in the floor. The remains of a balcony led to the remains of a staircase. Astarion skidded down the last few steps, landed in a pile of rubble, felt something in his ankle twang, and didn't dare stop. He snatched up a brick and flung it off to his left, where it hit something with a satisfying thud.

The skeletons on the road ahead all turned to look at the sound, which gave Astarion time to bolt past them, go up another pile of rubble, and leap to a nearby roof.

He sank down, his heart hammering. It wasn't safe here, of course, but since the skeletons couldn't talk, it might be a few minutes before the mummies figured out exactly where he was. He just needed to breathe and take stock.

"So you're the one who's been intruding in my domain," said a voice from behind him.

Astarion spun around on the balls of his feet to face the enemy. For a moment, he gazed across the cavern, and then his eyes dropped, and he saw the former servant of Mask, the priest powerful enough to raise an army of undead, the priest who ... only came up to Astarion's belt buckle?

"Yes, yes," the undead halfling said, levitating just past the edge of the roof. "You were expecting someone taller." A dark veil covered his face, but green fire flickered in the eyeholes. "Get it out of your system, I'll wait."

"I assure you, I had no plans to say anything so unoriginal." Astarion spread his hands and put on his most winning smile. "The Inquisitor, I presume?"

"I think it sounds better than 'the sole survivor.'"

"Quite, quite. I apologize for the intrusion. In fact, I was hoping to speak to you."

The priest tilted his head. Wisps of hair still clung to it, though the only truly luxuriant growth was atop his bare feet. He wore a black cassock embroidered with dark red, a pattern of swords and masks chasing one another in an endless procession around the hem. When he moved, Astarion caught glimpses of brightly colored motley underneath. "If you wanted to speak to me, there are easier ways than to destroy my creations. Do you know how long it takes to raise a mummy, if you want it done *right*?"

"That was the paladin's doing, not mine. Your creations threw me into a cell with him. I would have preferred a much more subtle exit myself." He let his face assume an appropriate solemnity. "I have often had reason to offer thanks to Mask ... Brother Shadow."

The priest's veil hid his expression, but a note of wariness crept into his voice. "You would claim to be a Shadowmaster?"

In point of fact, Astarion had never aspired to be any kind of clergy, although Mask might have been his choice had the matter arisen. No vows of poverty, for one thing. "Alas, no. I sought to enter his service once ... in early Kythorn, in the Year of Shadows. You can imagine how well that went."

The priest snorted at the reference to the Time of Troubles, when the gods had been cast to earth. "Indeed. So, what, then—you came here looking for instruction? Are you telling me you wish to become a servant of our god?"

"If such a thing is possible. You were the only remaining cleric that I could find." Astarion let his gaze travel across the cavern, as if admiring the priest's domain. Where the hell were the adventurers with his distraction? *This is an inspired story I'm spinning, but at this rate, I'll be ordained before they get here.*

Honestly, he was surprised that the priest had been willing to talk at all, but then again, halflings were a gregarious people, and the man had been trapped down here for decades with only skeletons for company. It was possible he'd made the mummies simply for conversation.

"Tell me why I should trust you," the priest demanded.

"I would advise you never to trust anyone," Astarion said in Thieves' Cant.

And then, because even if Mask was dead, it was possible He still had a sense of humor, an explosion rocked the cavern. Clouds of dust roiled up, and pebbles fell from the ceiling. In the distance, Astarion could hear a familiar voice shouting, "*For the Badger!*"

The adventurers had arrived.

Astarion did not bother with finesse. The instant the explosion distracted the priest, he flung himself off the roof of the building, clutching for the wall on the way down. His palms stung, but he caught himself halfway and crawled the rest of the way down at a slightly more controlled pace.

Another explosion shook the cavern, accompanied by the sliding crash of falling masonry. A high female voice drifted across the intervening space. "That's right! Nothing beats rock!"

"This is why I don't trust adventurers," Astarion muttered to himself. "They're all a few pints short of a bloodbath."

He reached the ground just as the female voice began laughing maniacally. Under normal circumstances, Astarion would have treated that laughter as a warning sign akin to a bull pawing the ground or a dragon mantling its wings and moved as quickly as possible in the opposite direction. It was a sign of the poor choices he had recently made that he was moving toward it instead.

He made it down a cross street before a group of skeletons rounded the corner, also heading toward the noise. With an oath, he turned to the nearest semi-intact building and went up the wall. When he looked down, he saw most of the skeletons were still running, though two had stopped and begun making half-hearted swipes at his ankles with their swords.

"Stop that, you ossuarial rejects." Astarion pulled himself onto the second floor of the building and fell over a decrepit windowsill. When he peered cautiously outside, he did not see a priest levitating furiously in his direction, which was all to the good.

It was clear that he was going to have to stay above street level. Astarion muttered to himself, took off his boots, and hung them by the laces around his neck. He really hoped that den Suriel didn't see him like this.

The second story of the ruined city was extensive and included a number of old bridges and walkways between houses. In theory, Astarion could have just walked along those connections.

In practice, every third cobblestone either was missing or wobbled alarmingly underfoot. Progress was slow. He had to test every step, usually twice. Astarion made it partway over one street before an ancient timber support crumbled into literal dust beneath him.

Fortunately, the sounds of falling rock and cursing elf were covered by another explosion. Astarion made a mental note to tell Lief that the crazed gnome deserved a bonus, but since he was clinging to the far wall by his fingertips, he promptly forgot it.

He went up walls and down walls. He dropped through floors that no longer fulfilled the primary function of floors—i.e., preventing people from dropping through them. On at least three occasions, with no other clear path, he waited for a break in the waves of skeletons and ran across the street. The occasional falling brick shaken loose by the explosions only added to the experience.

"Delightful," he panted to no one in particular. "I'm having so much fun." A skeleton raised its sword, and Astarion kicked it in the knee. The bone made a satisfying crunch. It hopped after him, but it moved rather more slowly. "Becoming a vampire had better be worth it."

When he stole glances upward, he saw the open air of the cavern etched with bolts of light the same sickly green color as the lanterns. The priest was trying to hit something that danced in midair, something whip-quick and hard to make out. Astarion didn't know what it was, nor did he particularly care. *Another druid trick, perhaps. Or maybe he's turned himself into a giant bat. More the fool he.*

"*For the Badger!*" rang through the cavern, accompanied by a flash of burning light. Astarion flung his hand over his eyes to shield them.

Wait a minute, he thought, blinking away afterimages. *Why is den Suriel all the way over there?*

He raised his head cautiously from his position on a broken piece of roof. The gnome's maniacal laughter came from the direction of the exit, but den Suriel was somehow a full third of the way around the cavern. *Why is he there? Is he looking for me?*

Is he trying to get himself killed?

Astarion had a sudden memory of the aasimar saying, *More like a blaze-of-glory wish.*

And if he gets himself killed here, then he doesn't break his oath, and he doesn't have to kill me, either.

The smart thing to do was to head for the exit anyway. There was not a doubt in Astarion's mind that he should take the blood and run.

He nevertheless seemed to be turning and climbing in the direction of den Suriel.

It'll be easier to loot the body and steal his wondrous elephant this way, he told himself as the light of Lathander blazed, brief and brilliant, against the cavern walls.

At last, after more walls and more skeletons and more falling bricks than he cared to contemplate, Astarion found himself at the outer ring road, near the prison cells. He could tell that he was on den Suriel's trail by the piles of collapsed bone left in the paladin's wake.

Why would he go back to the cells? What could he possibly ...

It came to him like a flash of light, or one of the bolts that the priest was flinging.

Oh Hells, he's after the mummy tanks.

Astarion put on a burst of speed.

There was a marvelously wide bridge going exactly where he wanted to be. Since Astarion was what was known in the literature as "a suspicious little bastard," he didn't trust it for a moment. He let himself down the side of the wall and examined the supports.

The beams *looked* sturdy enough. Astarion shifted his weight to one hand and touched the wood lightly with one fingertip. It came away covered in powder.

The bridge went *creeeeeeeeeaaaaak* and rained dust.

"Not today, Tymora." Astarion climbed the rest of the way down the wall, which was being supported by other bricks.

The door of the prison hung open, and there were more shattered skeletons around it.

Astarion wondered how often den Suriel could abjure the undead. He hadn't ever asked, and he hadn't counted the flashes of light, but surely the paladin couldn't keep doing it indefinitely.

He stuck his head through the door. No one had cleaned up the wreckage from the previous battle. An oily stain on the stones was the only evidence of the former jailor. That didn't mean that there weren't more skeletons inside. Astarion flattened himself against the wall, wishing briefly that he had Yousen's ability to fade into the rock.

He needn't have worried. By the time he was halfway down the hallway, he could hear metal on stone, accompanied by ... was that *singing*?

It was. Den Suriel was singing in a language Astarion didn't recognize, although you had to be somewhat generous with the term. The aasimar had a gravelly bass and attacked the notes as if they were sinners in need of smiting.

"What in the Nine Hells are you doing?" Astarion snapped, coming up to the cell bars.

"Smashing things," den Suriel said, bringing a hammer down on the edge of the cement tank. *Crack*. Chips flew. "Why, what does it look like?"

"It looks like you're nowhere near where you should be! Why aren't you with the others?"

The paladin paused, resting the hammer on his shoulder. "They had the situation under control. And this needed to be done."

"Yes, but ..." Astarion took a deep breath through his nose, let it out, and reminded himself that the man was just a useful tool, nothing more, and any apparent suicidal recklessness on his part was not Astarion's problem. "We need to get out of here."

"Give me another five minutes. This is the last tank."

"Then leave it!"

"And have them make more mummies? I don't think so." *Crack*. "You should go on ahead, and I'll catch up." *Crack*.

"What if more skeletons turn up? How many more can you possibly abjure?"

"Not a one," den Suriel said cheerfully. *Crack*. "Used the last bit on the pack outside the door. Did you see the bones?"

Astarion pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes. I saw the bones."

"Pretty good, huh?" *Crack*.

"I don't know why every skeleton in the place hasn't shown up, given that you're singing loudly enough to wake the dead. What was that, anyway?"

"Old work song." *Crack*. "My parents were human fisherfolk. They sang it to keep time when hauling the lines or pulling in nets." *Crack*. "You really should go and let me catch up when I'm done."

Astarion was about to explain why this was a terrible idea, an explanation he was rather curious to hear himself, when he saw den Suriel's eyes. There was a plea there that could not be voiced, perhaps not even thought.

"Fine," he muttered, and stalked away. Behind him, he heard the aasimar's voice lift in another assault on song.

He didn't go far. It hadn't escaped his notice that den Suriel hadn't asked whether he'd found the blood. *As soon as he knows that I have the blood, our alliance is at an end, and he is supposed to kill me.*

Running would be sensible. But if he ran, there was a good chance that den Suriel would simply throw himself at the enemy until the enemy overran him, and that was unacceptable because ... because ...

Because I still want the option to bring him back to Cazador. Yes. Astarion nodded to himself to cement this excellent reason firmly in his mind, then went up the side of the prison, rolled onto the roof, and surveyed the cavern.

It was much quieter now. The undead priest had stopped flinging bolts, and the winged creature he'd seen in the sky was gone. *Perhaps they've killed each other?*

Another small explosion rocked the ruins. *No, apparently not.*

From his vantage point, he saw a knot of skeletons approaching. *There's only three of them. Den Suriel can probably smash them to fragments without even breaking a sweat.* Astarion rolled over to check the cavern's sky again. With a levitating priest in the area, one didn't want to take chances.

Because he was watching the sky, he missed one of the skeletons kneeling to set a trip wire. He noticed only when he heard "*For the Badg—urk!*" and watched den Suriel land flat on his face in the middle of the enemy.

The skeletons converged, weapons raised. Astarion scrambled down the wall, shouting, "*Hey! Stop that!*," which sounded desperately insipid in his own ears, so he tried insults, and he only realized he was yelling in Elvish when he heard himself say, "Your sister is as the light of the stars, which is given to all beings!"

None of the skeletons paid him any attention at all. Perhaps they were only children, or perhaps they simply didn't speak Elvish. Den Suriel managed to roll in time to dodge a skeleton's sword, and he let the momentum carry him into its legs. Its upper half fell atop him and took the blow that the second skeleton had aimed at the paladin's head. This apparently enraged the first skeleton, which grabbed for the weapon that had struck it. Den Suriel rolled again, but the skeleton didn't let go, so it ended up yanking its comrade off its feet and onto the paladin as well.

The third skeleton had a long spear and was hanging back, either waiting for a clear shot or unwilling to get involved in the melee. Astarion looked around wildly for a better weapon, saw where den Suriel's shield had fallen, and grabbed for it. It was like trying to lift a door. He could feel his shoulders grinding in their sockets as he hauled it upright and swung it around.

Den Suriel erupted from the pile of bones like a dog coming out of water, shaking off the enemy. The first two skeletons, still locked together, couldn't move out of the way, and the aasimar stomped down on their skulls.

The spearman thrust its weapon at him just as Astarion stepped up and dropped the enormously heavy shield on the back of its head.

Den Suriel made a noise of pain and surprise. The skeleton made a crunching sound. Astarion dusted off his hands.

"That was an extremely dramatic move," he informed den Suriel. "Please make a note of it."

The paladin did not appear to be impressed. He did not even appear to have seen. He was staring down at his right leg, at the spear that had slipped past the edge of his armor and driven deeply into his inner thigh.

"Oh dear," he said to no one in particular, and sat down heavily on the ground. Astarion's breath hissed through his teeth. He'd seen the spears the skeletons were carrying. The broad triangular heads were designed to do as much damage as possible when removed. If it hadn't pierced his femoral artery on the way in, trying to pull it out would turn that artery into ground meat.

Which meant that den Suriel had minutes to live, if that.

The paladin set one mailed hand on the shaft of the spear. He didn't look upset so much as puzzled.

"Don't touch that!" Astarion snapped. "It's the only thing keeping your blood in. Heal yourself, for the gods' sake!"

The aasimar looked up at him, wearing a shadow of his usual rueful smile. "Unfortunately ... I seem ... to have ... run out of spells ..."

"Idiot! What were you going to do if you got injured?"

"Hadn't ... planned ... that far ahead." His voice was growing rougher. Blood was pulsing out of the wound, filling the air with the scent of copper.

Astarion realized that his mouth was watering and swallowed it back, trying to keep his fangs under control. "There's a healing potion in your bag," he said. "You said there was. Where is it?"

A weak frown crossed den Suriel's face. His sword slid from nerveless fingers, and he patted at his belt. His skin had gone almost as pale as Astarion's as his blood continued to pump out across the stones. "Sorry ... here somewhere ..."

"You absolute ass." Astarion saw the bag of holding and yanked it loose. He jammed his arm into the bag up to the shoulder, feeling for the bottle he'd seen last night and hoping the paladin wasn't in the habit of keeping bear traps inside. He felt something smooth and narrow and yanked it out hopefully, only to find that it was the trunk of the wondrous elephant.

"Doubt ... that'll help ... right now ..."

"I'll use the trunk as a tourniquet if I have to." Astarion came up with a handful of pamphlets and flung them aside. Distantly, he was aware that he was kneeling in blood and that if any more skeletons showed up, he would be easy prey. He didn't care. His entire world had narrowed to his fingertips scrabbling frantically through the infinite clutter stuffed inside a small leather sack. "*When* was the last time you cleaned this thing?"

"It's ... all right." The aasimar's eyes had drifted closed. "This way ... die with my soul ... intact ..."

"No *dying*," Astarion told him. "I've done that, and I can testify it's not worth the—*aha!*" He pulled out the bottle. Red liquid swirled and shimmered inside, a shade lighter than the blood pooling on the ground. The stopper was sealed with wax. He clamped his teeth down on it and yanked it loose, feeling a fang scrape across the glass.

Den Suriel was barely conscious. Astarion grabbed his chin and tilted his head back, dripping the potion between the aasimar's lips. Even the man's gums had gone deathly pale.

"Come on ... come on, drink up ..." *Please, gods, don't let him have bought a fake potion from some swindler on the street. That would be just like a paladin.* Astarion upended the bottle, pouring the last of the liquid down den Suriel's throat.

For a minor eternity, nothing happened. The blood soaking into Astarion's trousers began to cool.

Den Suriel's eyelids fluttered.

Astarion dropped to hands and knees and grabbed the spear shaft. There was so much blood that he couldn't see whether the wound had begun to knit. All he knew was that the aasimar had no chance of healing with the spear point still inside him.

"I never wanted to be a healer," he informed the paladin, or the gods, or perhaps the priest, wherever he was. "I do not enjoy the sight of other people's insides. To say nothing of the waste of blood. Here goes."

He yanked the spear free.

"Gaaaaah!" Den Suriel sat bolt upright, turned gray, and collapsed back against the wall.

Astarion clamped his hands over the wound in the man's thigh, trying desperately to stop the bleeding.

"Fuck," he said to himself in a little singsong. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK, fuck. Also, fuck."

He was crimson to the wrist, as if he'd been feeding straight from the pig without a napkin.

His hair had fallen into his face. He tossed his head to try to get it out of the way, to no effect.

He was afraid that if he lifted either hand to push it back, the wound would reopen, and there would be no more hope at all.

Gauntleted fingers lifted, trembling slightly, and moved the wayward curl aside.

Astarion looked up into pain-glazed white eyes. "You're alive," he whispered. Beneath his hands, he felt the hot pulse of blood slow, then the skin began knitting together, the ragged edges of the wound pulling closed and growing smooth.

"Looks that way," den Suriel croaked, and, without thinking, Astarion leaned in and kissed him.

It was a gentle kiss at first. Having just saved the man's life, Astarion felt it would be in poor taste to knock him unconscious. He brushed his lips across den Suriel's, then pulled back, already imagining the aasimar's protests.

Instead, an armored hand cupped the back of his head and pulled him back down.

Triumph and desire tangled in Astarion's heart. If he chose to deliver den Suriel to Cazador, things had just gotten a great deal easier. And if he took a little pleasure along the way, who could blame him?

The kiss deepened. The aasimar's tongue flicked across his lips, and Astarion responded in kind. He had enough presence of mind to keep his fangs retracted even though the scent of blood was filling his nostrils, but the blood was also part of the desire, a torment that promised untold ecstasies, if only he were allowed to touch them.

Gods have mercy, he could have let den Suriel take him right there, on the red-slicked ground, and it would probably have been the best sex of his life.

He drew back, breathing hard. Den Suriel was grinning, though weakly. "I should be dragged back from the brink of death more often."

"Thank you, *no*," Astarion said testily. "Once was stressful enough. In fact—"

"If you're *quite* finished," the priest said from behind him, "I believe we still have some business to attend to."

Den Suriel, being a paladin, immediately tried to shove himself in front of Astarion. This would have worked much better if he could stand up. The healing potion had clearly not been able to replace all that lost blood, which meant that den Suriel made it to his knees, swayed, and would have pitched over backward if Astarion hadn't braced him up.

"Just give me my sword," the aasimar gasped.

"If I do that, you'll probably fall over on it. Perhaps we should consider diplomacy?"

"You've killed several of my lieutenants, stolen a relic of my god, and destabilized half my cavern," said the priest. As if for emphasis, dust fell from the remains of the bridge over his head. "I fear that I'm not feeling very diplomatic. In fact, I'm planning on killing both of you." He tapped a finger against his mask. "Although the big one would make an excellent mummy. That might be some recompense for the trouble I've suffered."

"I see the problem," Astarion said, eyes darting frantically as he tried to spot something that would give him an edge. Three soap mummies loomed behind the priest, and a milling line of skeletons was assembling behind them. They wouldn't have been able to fight their way out even if den Suriel weren't out of the action. "*What* relic of your god?"

"Please don't play stupid."

"No, no," Astarion lied. "This is the first I've heard of it. What did it look like?" A plan had come to him. It was, even by his standards, remarkably foolish. He shifted his grip on den Suriel, one hand sliding down the man's arm while the one hidden from the priest's sight scrabbled across the floor.

"Get ready to throw," he said under his breath. "I'll help."

The priest was shaking his head. "I can literally sense the god's blood on your person."

"Oh, *that* relic." Astarion's fingers closed over cool ivory. "Sorry, I didn't think blood really counted as a relic. But come now, I've stolen the blood from under your nose. It was an extraordinary heist. I had to be turned into a bat *and* learn to fly. Don't you think Mask would approve of that?"

He wasn't really expecting the priest to listen. He was just letting his mouth run while his hands did the important work. But the undead priest actually stopped, and the green light in his eyes pulsed slowly. "*That* is actually an interesting theological question. Normally, an epic act of thievery would earn you induction into the Gray Ribbon. But these are hardly normal times ..."

"Now," Astarion breathed, pressing the ivory figurine into den Suriel's fingers.

The paladin was almost too weak to throw, but Astarion gripped his hand and flung his arm upward. The figurine made a beautiful arc overhead, and den Suriel croaked a word in a language so old that even dragons had forgotten it.

The priest waited politely for a moment, then said, "If that was another bomb, I'm afraid you mis—"

The sound of furious trumpeting drowned out his final words.

The wondrous elephant appeared atop the ruined bridge. Whether the dry-rotted timbers would have held the beast up to begin with was questionable, but with their structure already weakened by the earlier explosions, they shuddered, crumbled, and finally collapsed.

For an instant, the elephant posed in midair, trunk raised, as stones rained from under its feet. Then it, the bridge, and most of the surrounding buildings came crashing down.

The undead halfling had just enough time to look up.

It is notoriously hard to kill the undead, but dropping several tons of live elephant and several more tons of masonry on one's head was certainly a good start.

The cavern ceiling groaned in sympathetic agony. Grit stung their faces, and dust roiled upward, blocking the scene. Astarion didn't wait for it to settle before getting den Suriel to his feet. We may not be able to run, but maybe we can manage a decent hobble ...

Plink ... plink ... plink ...

The elephant figurine rolled out of the dust and came to rest at their feet.

"Poor Stompy," den Suriel said as Astarion scooped up the figurine. "I always worry this life is traumatizing him."

"Of *course* you named the elephant." Astarion got his shoulder under the paladin's arm. "I don't know why I'm surprised."

"I wish I knew how to make it up to him. He doesn't eat, so I can't bring him treats. Is the priest dead, do you think?"

"That," said Astarion, "is a question of some theological complexity." He began half dragging the aasimar toward the exit. "I suggest we hurry. If the priest isn't completely dead, I don't want to be here when he digs himself out."

"I approve of this plan. But Astarion?"

"Yes?"

"What on earth happened to your shoes?"

It took several subjective eternities before they reached the exit. The only saving grace was that once their creator had been incapacitated, the skeletons stopped moving. But it was still a long, slow walk, moving at the pace of a man who was not quite mortally wounded, and it was made no easier by the crowds of skeletons standing frozen in their tracks.

Astarion's shoulder ached from being wedged into den Suriel's armpit, and his neck ached from twisting it to keep an eye on the silent skeletons. He felt as if they were moving through an exhibit put together by some morbid sculptor. Sometimes they had to take a roundabout path to avoid coming into contact with the skeletons, but Astarion didn't begrudge the effort. It seemed horribly plausible that if he actually touched one, the whole crew would suddenly come rattling back into motion, and den Suriel was in no shape to fight. He might no longer be bleeding to death, but he was still deathly pale, and the effort he expended to hobble along on his injured leg must be excruciating.

To their credit, as soon as the adventurers saw the pair limp out of the shadows, they rushed to help. The barbarian woman practically picked den Suriel up, and the druid began chanting the words of a healing spell. Astarion rubbed his shoulder. Acting as the aasimar's crutch had been more painful than any of the scrapes he'd picked up in the cavern.

"Do you require healing?" the druid asked Astarion when den Suriel had a little more color in his face and was standing up straight again.

"Thank you, no. / try to make a point of not getting hit. But why did you let him go off alone?" He tried to keep the anger out of his voice, with mixed results.

The gnome snorted. "Didn't realize he had. Birdie here"—she jerked her thumb at the barbarian woman, who looked sheepish—"thought a building was looking at her funny and tried to headbutt it."

"I was *berserk*. And it had the windows arranged, you know, sort of like eyes ..."

"Anyway, by the time we got her pointed in the right direction again, your knight friend was gone."

Astarion was still furious, but he bit his tongue. He wasn't the one paying them, and it would be far too easy for the trio to decide that he and the wounded paladin didn't really need to survive the experience. Also, he could see how the intelligent thing to do would be to hold the exit and hope den Suriel returned. *Fine. I understand it. I don't have to like it.*

The gnome, who was still fiddling with something that smelled like fireworks, glanced up at him. "Are you sure you're okay? Your eyes are awfully red."

was

"Terribly unfortunate, isn't it? I cataloging a friend's wine cellar, and of course you know that excess light is simply death to good wine, so I acquired a potion of darkvision to make things easier. I simply assumed that it should be used as eyedrops, as would have been sensible,

and, well ..." Astarion spread his hands. "The healers assure me that it will wear off in a month or two."

Den Suriel gave him a look. Astarion gave it right back. There was no reason these three needed to know what he truly was.

"You do lie when it suits you," the paladin murmured once they were on their way again and the adventurers had taken the lead.

"If they knew the truth, they might well be in danger. My master doesn't like questions. Or loose ends."

"Are you telling me you're lying out of the goodness of your heart?"

"If it makes you more comfortable, you may tell yourself I'm lying because I'm fundamentally lazy. Killing those people would be *effort*."

Den Suriel shook his head but couldn't quite hide a smile.

"I'll tell you something absolutely true, though, my dear paladin. I'm dreadfully tired of all these wretched little passages. I feel as if I have done nothing for the last tenday but stagger about, stepping on broken bricks and getting dust all over my clothes."

"It will be good to see the sky again."

"Forget the sky. I want to see a hot bath. With *bubbles*."

"Bubbles?"

"Don't say it as if it's a wasting disease. What, are paladins not allowed to have bubbles?"

"Tyr and Lathander have been curiously silent on the subject."

"What about the Badger?"

"He's more of a symbolic ideal. I can't say that bubbles came up much in seminary, though."

"I would personally refuse to worship any deity who did not allow their faithful to take the occasional bubble bath."

"We're very punchy, aren't we?"

"It's been an extremely long evening."

The evening, as it turned out, was nearly over. By the time they reached the river stairs, it was nearly dawn.

"The sky's lightening already," den Suriel said. "Can we get to the Rat's Run in time?" "In time for what?" asked the gnome.

"We must be at the Rat's Run by dawn." Den Suriel glanced at Astarion, clearly struggling for an explanation. "It's ... err ... complicated?"

Astarion studied the soft gray smear of light just visible behind the rooftops. "It will be awfully close ..." He turned to the druid. "I don't suppose you can wild shape into a horse?"

The druid looked annoyed. "I can wild shape into any animal I've seen. That doesn't mean I want to be ridden through the streets."

Astarion opened his mouth to say something either mildly offensive or mildly obscene, but den Suriel was faster. The paladin put a hand on the druid's shoulder and said, in that magnificent golden gravel voice, "I know you serve nature, but to serve nature is to serve life, is it not?"

The druid rolled his eyes and allowed that this was so.

"If you allow this, you will be saving both a life and a soul. I will owe you a debt, my friend, and my people do not forget their debts."

Stronger men than the druid would break under that voice. "Very well. If it's *that* critical that you reach the tavern by daybreak ..." He stepped away from them and shook himself, his body rippling, and then he was a tall dappled horse reared up on his hind legs. His front hooves clattered when they struck the cobbles.

Astarion flung himself at the animal's back and got a leg over. No saddle. No bridle, either. He took two handfuls of mane and hoped that the druid didn't intend to leap any walls.

"Thank you," he heard den Suriel say, and he turned just in time to see the barbarian woman give the paladin a boost onto the horse's back. "It's been a long time since I rode without stirrups."

"My pleasure." She slapped the druid's rump. "Now, get moving!"

The druid put his ears back at that, but he broke into a rapid trot. Astarion clung to his mane, and den Suriel clung to Astarion, and the druid eased into a canter and tore through the sleeping streets of Baldur's Gate.

Had Astarion not been in imminent danger of turning into a pile of ash, he would have gotten off and walked. Riding bareback was uncomfortable at the best of times, let alone with a man in plate mail clinging to you. It was better than being burned alive, but only just. He bent low over the horse's neck, wincing with every stride.

No more pleasant for the horse than for me, I imagine. There had to be all manner of metal bits digging into the druid's hide, even if the armor didn't have a ... *What would you call that, anyway? Butt plate? Ass plate? Something like that?*

The horse took a corner at a brutal pace, driving all thoughts of terminology out of his head and causing den Suriel to clutch frantically at Astarion's waist. The druid snorted irritably.

"Hey! You can't ride in the city!" shouted a Flaming Fist mercenary as the druid nearly ran him down.

"Apologies!" den Suriel called back. "Paladin! Matter of life and death!"

"Fucking *paladins* ..."

They raced the dawn from district to district until at last the horse came to a skidding halt outside the Rat's Run. "Good boy!" den Suriel said, patting the animal's neck. "Good horse!" He rummaged through his pockets. "I'm sure I've got a sugar lump in here somewhere ..."

"I have a *name*," the horse said, shrinking back into the shape of the druid. "And I do not eat sugar lumps."

"I'll buy you a drink, then." "I don't drink alcohol."

"Err ..." Den Suriel held the door open, and Astarion dove into the shadowy interior. "I'll make a donation in your name to the church of Mielikki?"

"That would be acceptable, yes."

"I suppose it takes all kinds," the paladin said when he caught up to Astarion.

"Does it, though? Really?"

The Rat's Run was quiet at dawn, or at least as quiet as it ever got. The sailors had mostly either passed out or been dragged back to their ships. The remaining patrons were either professional drinkers or had just gotten off work. Astarion rarely saw the place at this hour and was grateful for the griminess of the windows. Sunlight oozed in like a viscous liquid rather than stabbing like a spear made of flame.

Astarion tossed a coin to one of the bartenders. "Food and hot water sent up to the room, if you please. I believe I have priest splatter on me."

The bartender's lip curled. "That is a remarkably disturbing phrase."

"It's a *remarkably* disturbing sensation."

They reached the room. Both men sank down onto their respective beds and let out nearly identical groans.

"Badger's balls, but I hurt," den Suriel said, mostly to the ceiling.

"My arms feel like I flew for an hour, then climbed about fifty walls, then carried a man in plate mail."

"It's half plate. And I walked, more or less." "That's not what my shoulder says. Are you calling my shoulder a liar, sir?"

"Depends. Is your shoulder going to challenge me to a duel?"

Astarion pretended to consult it. "It says its seconds will call upon yours. I think it means my knees."

"It's out of luck there. I'll be lucky if my knees can get me to the bathtub."

Someone tapped on the door. Both men groaned again. "Come in!" Astarion called. "If you wait for us to open it, we'll all die of old age."

It was Lief, carrying a tray. She set it down on the desk and surveyed them both. "You two look like death warmed over."

"Am I warm?" Astarion asked vaguely. "I don't feel warm ..."

"Chivalry requires me to stand when a lady enters the room," den Suriel said. "You're going to have to give me a minute."

The goliath laughed. "I'm no lady."

"It's the principle."

Principle got den Suriel sitting upright. The smell wafting from one of the cups on the tray actually got Astarion to his feet.

It was more pig's blood, but at the moment, it was ambrosia. Astarion drank it down in one long swallow and wiped crimson drips from the corners of his mouth. "You may not be a lady, but you are most certainly a saint."

Lief grinned. "You know I was a pirate, right?"

"Doesn't matter. You can be the saint of pirates." Astarion didn't dare sit down again or he wasn't sure if he'd be able to get back up. "Your people performed admirably. Please tell your mistress all debts are paid."

"Good to know. I'll assume you were successful, then?"

"Indeed. Undead cult leader slain, relic found and placed in safekeeping. It's all over but the shouting."

"Try to keep the shouting to a minimum. My staff is trying to sleep." Lief nodded to them and slipped out the door just as den Suriel got to his feet.

The paladin staggered to the desk, sat down, and applied himself to another bowl of fish stew the way a starving wolf applied himself to a lamb. He polished off the bowl and wiped bread around it. Astarion pushed his bowl over.

"Do you not eat?"

"I can and do, but not much. And the cook here thinks spice is what you add to cover the smell." The cup of blood had been far more filling than any food, but he wasn't about to say that. He took a slice of bread instead, slathering it with butter.

"Mmm." The aasimar got through the second bowl as well, though he slowed down toward the end. "Why did you lie about stashing the relic somewhere?"

Astarion raised an eyebrow at him over the slice of bread. "I trust Lief insofar as I can predict her, but once a pirate, always a pirate. That blood could be worth a fortune to the right buyer. I'd rather not let her know that it's within her immediate grasp."

Den Suriel grunted. After a moment, he said, "Wise, but cynical."

"Throw in *devilishly handsome* and you'll have described me perfectly."

Pale eyes lifted to meet his. "Then why did you save my life?"

There was a bottle of wine on the tray. Astarion poured some into his cup to buy himself time. *So we're doing this now, are we? Not even time for a bath first?*

"You could have left me to die," den Suriel said when he didn't answer immediately. "You know I'm sworn to kill you. You'd have gotten away free and clear, and no one would have blamed you for leaving a man with a mortal wound, if they even knew."

"You're not wrong."

"So why did you do it?"

Astarion sighed. "Have you ever seen something—a piece of art, say—that was large and dramatic and unwieldy and nothing you'd ever hang on your wall, but you were still rather glad it existed?"

Den Suriel looked blank. Astarion tried again. "There was a stained glass window on the temple of Ilmater in Silverymoon. The artist clearly wanted to depict suffering and succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. It was twenty-five feet high, so every time you turned down that street from anywhere in the city, you could clearly see that you were walking toward a god who was having one of his legs flayed while his other foot was burning in hot coals and some nefarious individual was sawing one of his nipples off."

"This is starting to seem like a very unflattering comparison."

"In that case, yes. But you see, even though the art was bizarre and deranged, it was perfect. And everyone in the city loved it because it was theirs. I'm told it got smashed during the Time of Troubles, and when I heard that, I felt genuine grief. The world felt smaller and colder because this absurd, ridiculous ... *thing* ... was no longer in it."

Den Suriel had tilted his head to one side as Astarion began. By the time he finished talking, the paladin's ears were nearly parallel with the floor. "I have never been so simultaneously moved and insulted."

"Possibly I picked the wrong example." Astarion considered for a moment. "All right. So there's a carving of a kuo-toa eating a gnome ..."

"No, please, stick to Ilmater." The aasimar lifted his hands in surrender. "Very well. I am a large, ridiculous, and apparently garish piece of art."

"Precisely. Letting you die would have been a crime against aesthetics."

"And I have come to see how you value aesthetics."

His eyes were warm, and they held Astarion's a little too long. His gaze didn't drop until Astarion licked his lips, and then the effect was almost electric. Den Suriel rose to his feet, and the space between them seemed suddenly small.

And then, of course, the hot water arrived.

Astarion went first again. The damage to his hands from climbing all those walls had already started to heal from the pig's blood, and they didn't sting at all when he lathered them with soap. That was good, given what he planned to be doing with them over the next few hours. As much as he would have loved a good soak, he suspected that giving den Suriel time to stew was a poor idea. So he cleaned off quickly and thoroughly, then emerged, wearing the emerald green dressing gown, to find that den Suriel had already shed his armor. Astarion sat on the edge of his bed, drying his hair, aware that he was being watched and reveling in it.

The servants came with fresh water, and the paladin disappeared. Astarion finished with his hair and considered his next move.

Truly, there is only one way that this can end. And if I wait for the man to pick up on subtle clues, even I will die of old age before then. Perhaps the time for subtlety is over.

So when den Suriel emerged, clean and only slightly dripping, he found that Astarion had already slid between the sheets.

Of the aasimar's bed. With the lover's oil on the table next to him.

Astarion heard a sharp inhale and looked up with a lazy smile. "Well?"

Den Suriel took three long steps toward him. Astarion sat up, letting the blankets fall away. And waited.

He didn't have to wait long. "The gods have mercy," the paladin said, and sank down beside him, closing his mouth over Astarion's.

The gods might have mercy, but Astarion did not. He might have been gentle with a dying man, but not with one who was no longer dying. He slid his hands into that wealth of metallic hair and plundered den Suriel's mouth until the aasimar pulled back, gasping.

"I shouldn't want a vampire," den Suriel said when he had the breath to speak.

"I shouldn't want a paladin who's sworn to kill me." Astarion could smell his soap on den Suriel's skin. It felt unexpectedly intimate, as if he'd marked the other man in some way. *Can I keep him, Father? I've already handled him, and now the god won't take him back...*

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Everything. This. Us."

The paladin huffed a laugh and rested his forehead against Astarion's. "What do we do?"

"I can't go anywhere until the sun sets. Do you suppose we could set aside the killing until then?" Astarion slid one hand down the back of the aasimar's neck, over his collarbone, and down his chest.

"That—ah!—sounds like a *very* good idea."

"Oh," Astarion said, loosening the knot on the other man's dressing gown, "I think you'll find I'm *full* of good ideas."

As it happened, Astarion had never bedded an aasimar before. Everything seemed to be correctly shaped and in the right places. The markings scattered down his chest and shoulders glittered like gold leaf in the candlelight.

He was a trifle startled when den Suriel knelt and took him in his mouth. Somehow, he hadn't expected the other man to do that with such ease and enthusiasm. His body, well-trained beast that it was, knew what was expected of it and responded.

What a picture we must make, he thought, threading his fingers through den Suriel's hair. *Like an allegorical painting. Vice Seducing Virtue. Hedonism Having His Cock Sucked by Nobility. Gods, what I wouldn't give for a working mirror.*

The image was enough to bring him to the edge. "Gods!" he hissed as the heat of the aasimar's mouth slid along his length. "Gods, Hells—*fuck!*"

When he opened his eyes, den Suriel was already reaching for the wine. "I must take back everything I said about seminary. Clearly it had its uses."

Den Suriel laughed. "It definitely taught us ways to amuse ourselves."

Astarion dropped back onto one elbow, watching the other man move around the room with careless grace. For a moment, he couldn't imagine why the paladin had picked up his dressing gown, but then den Suriel draped it over the window, adding another layer to the curtains. "Hopefully this will keep out the light for a bit."

"One hopes. It's your turn now, and I would hate to suddenly burst into flames."

"That *would* put a damper on the mood."

"Indeed, I—hold on. What is that on your back?"

"Oh." Den Suriel reached over his shoulder and scratched lightly at the offending area.

"Another gift from my grandfather."

"May I?"

"Certainly. They aren't terribly sensitive. Though they do itch sometimes if my armor presses on them wrong."

Astarion stroked a hesitant finger across the line of small feathers that sprouted from each of the aasimar's shoulder blades. They were soft and downy, not stiff like a bird's flight feathers. On den Suriel's angelic ancestor, they would have been full wings.

"Pity you can't fly. I could have avoided being a bat entirely."

"I will go out on a limb and say that the priest might have noticed a man in armor flapping around the cavern, carrying an elf."

"That is a fair observation." Astarion let his hands slide downward past the feathers, onto warm skin. "But enough about the priest. He is *not* who I wish to be thinking about right now."

"Ahh ..." Den Suriel turned and picked up the bottle of lover's oil. "As to that ... if you're willing ... ?"

"Very much indeed."

It took a little time, as such things always did. The aasimar went slowly, taking his cues from Astarion. The sword calluses on his palms were the only roughness about him, but he was strong rather than gentle, which suited Astarion fine.

"Tell me if I hurt you," den Suriel murmured as he entered.

"You'll have to work harder than that," Astarion said, then bit back an exclamation as den Suriel took him at his word.

It was good. They found a rhythm, a slow, hard slide inside him that made Astarion buck his hips helplessly against the mattress. Den Suriel murmured things in his ear, filthy things that no good paladin should know, and the trained beast responded with a will.

It was good. And if it wasn't quite what Astarion wanted, it was still all he knew how to do.

Astarion climbed to his feet and took a moment to locate his boots. He shoved his feet into them, not bothering with stockings.

"What time is it?" den Suriel asked from the bed.

Astarion gave him a languid smile. "Not dark yet. Go back to sleep. I need to use the privy." He pulled on a dressing gown, the pink one this time, and picked up the hem so he didn't trip over it.

"Mmm ..." The paladin watched him but clearly didn't think that he was going anywhere without his clothes—or the silk-wrapped vials placed so carefully on the nightstand. Astarion bent down and kissed the aasimar on the cheek.

He closed the door gently behind him and padded silently down the hall, dodging beams of light that came in through cracks in the ceiling. First to the privies, as he'd said, and then to the attics, where the Rat's Run stored things for certain select customers.

At the top of the staircase, he paused for just a moment. There was still some daylight. He could go back to the room, slide into bed next to den Suriel, and warm himself at the aasimar's hearth fire a little longer. Pretend for a few minutes that he was someone else, somewhere else, and that nightfall wouldn't bring on death and ruin.

But it would only be a pretense, and there were too many illusions in Astarion's life already. He entered the attics, found the correct chest, and pulled on the clothes he kept there. The vials of blood he'd palmed slid neatly into his inner jacket pocket. Den Suriel was going to be quite surprised when he opened the silk package on the table and found his bottle of lover's oil in it.

Astarion hoped, in a distant sort of way, that the paladin would be furious. It was so much easier to be furious than lost in despair.

He'll have his god, which is more than I got, Astarion told himself, and slammed the lid of the chest with more force than was required.

He found Lief at work in her office. "Going, then?" the goliath asked.

"Yes. The paladin is going to be very distraught when he realizes I'm gone. I'd like to leave him a note."

Lief pushed a sheet of foolscap across her desk. Astarion wrote a single line and signed it with a dramatic flourish.

"Doubt that'll make him feel better," Lief said, not even pretending that she wasn't reading the note upside down.

"I would rather he feel like a jilted lover than a mark."

Her dark eyes were entirely too knowing. "And which one is he?"

Astarion gave her a rueful smile but didn't answer the question. "I suppose the smuggler's door in the cellars is still there?"

The goliath nodded. Astarion bowed and swept out of the room.

Lief picked up the note he'd written and read it again.

I didn't want to be the one to break you.

—A

The smuggler's tunnel came out at a cove west of the city. Astarion waited there until night had fallen, then made his way up the steep hillside and began the long slog back to Szarr Palace.

No one bothered him. He knew that a few people saw him, but they were presumably smugglers and had their own reasons for keeping hidden. One or two footpads drifted after him, but they were smart enough to recognize a bigger predator and eventually went off in search of easier marks.

He chose less traveled paths, even though they took him somewhat out of the way. The fog was beginning to creep in, cutting down visibility, and by the time he reached Bloomridge, the streets were quiet. The cafes had closed, and the district was too genteel to host taverns like the Rat's Run.

He made his way along the staircases on the lowest terrace, with only a stone wall between himself and the sea. Not much farther to Szarr Palace now. He almost felt like whistling, except that he was skulking, and obviously you couldn't whistle during a skulk.

Possibly that was why the throwing knife that hit the cobblestones in front of him came as such a shock.

Astarion wasted a precious second looking down. There were so many things it *could* have been—the contents of a chamber pot, a rock falling off a roof, an owl pellet—that it wasn't until he saw the glint of steel that he knew he should have been diving for cover.

"Turn around, brother," Violet said from behind him. "Very, very slowly."

Astarion turned around.

Violet always looked a bit feral when she wasn't doing her little-girl act for Cazador's benefit. At the moment, however, she appeared one step up from a stray cat stalking rats in an alley. Her bloodstained clothes looked as if she'd been sleeping in them for days. Gray wisps of hair darkened by moisture glued themselves to her forehead, and her eyes glittered feverishly underneath.

The crossbow she had slung from her shoulder, however, was in perfect shape, and the steel point—*gods, please* let it be steel—was aimed directly at him.

"Violet," Astarion said, in much the same tone as one might say *ringworm*. "What are you doing here?"

"Following you. *Obviously*." She gestured with the tip of the crossbow, and Astarion controlled a flinch. "Give me your vials."

"Vials? Whatever do you—"

"Don't play coy with me, *brother*. I know Dalyria gave you hers."

"Or what?" Astarion put his hands on his hips, a gesture that allowed him to drop a dagger from his forearm sheath. "You know you can't kill me outright. The old man forbids it."

"A bolt through the crotch won't be fatal, though, now, will it, brother?" Violet's smile was as thin and pointed as a cactus spine. "And once you're down and screaming, I can cut off anything I like and toss it to the fishes. Good luck growing *that* back." Her eyes gleamed.

"Now give me your vials."

Astarion knew Violet well enough to know that she wasn't bluffing. He also knew that he would risk a bolt rather than give up the prize he'd worked so hard to earn. Fortunately, there were still options.

He sighed heavily and moved toward the stone wall overlooking the bay. Violet's crossbow followed him there. "What do you think you're doing?"

"They're in my boot," he lied, leaning against the stone. "I don't think you want me to fall over and break them."

He reached down with his left hand, letting his right brush casually against his jacket. Violet was still watching his left hand when he turned slightly and thrust his arm out over the water.

"And now," he said pleasantly, showing her the vials, "if you shoot me, I'll drop them, and no one will get any blood." He glanced over the edge of the wall and saw dark winged shapes, presumably bats, swirling above the river. "My, what a lot of running water."

Violet hissed like a teakettle. "Bastard! I should have killed that pet aasimar of yours when I had the chance!"

Astarion's heart most definitely did not twinge. Certainly not. Anything resembling a twinge was simply the stress of having a loaded crossbow held on him by the person who hated him most in the world. He shrugged. "Since I have the blood I wanted and don't need his as backup, I can't say it would have mattered."

"I could still go kill him right now."

"Feel free. He's on the second floor of the Rat's Run, or he was as of a few hours ago. Do you need me to draw you a map?"

"You're bluffing," Violet said, though a note of doubt had crept into her voice.

Astarion stifled a yawn with his free hand. He highly doubted that den Surriel had stayed at the seedy tavern after discovering Astarion's departure, but even if he had, the staff knew better than to let Violet wander around the premises with a loaded crossbow.

The crossbow in question wavered, probably because Violet was trembling with rage.

Astarion eyed it warily. Violet's impatience was the only advantage he currently had, but if she accidentally put a bolt through his heart, he wouldn't be around to take pleasure in what Cazador would do to punish her. Still, if he could goad her into acting rashly, she did only have one shot, after which her crossbow became a very expensive club.

"I hate you," Violet said conversationally. "I really, truly hate you."

"How odd, dear sister. I do my best not to think of you at all."

"I can't understand why *you're* his favorite."

Astarion rolled his eyes. "Because you're too easy, Violet. You want his approval so desperately." He tensed, knowing that the next words might send her over the edge. "You're almost as pathetic as Yousen."

She inhaled sharply. He saw her eyes glitter in the starlight. Then she said, in a voice like cracking ice, "I suppose neither of us is going to be made a vampire, then," and shot him in the hand.

One of the vials exploded. Astarion snarled in pain as the bolt embedded itself in his hand, accompanied by shards of glass. Black blood ran down his fingers, mixing with his own. He tried to keep hold of the intact vial, but the damaged tendons no longer worked, and the vial slipped free and fell toward the waiting sea.

Gone. The blood he'd worked so hard for, the chance at becoming a vampire ... *gone*.

He rounded on Violet, ready to murder her one-handed if that's what it took. His sister smiled sweetly at him. "Bet you're thinking of me now, huh?"

Astarion lunged. She danced out of range, laughing, then took to her heels. He might have caught her, but she went up the side of a building like a squirrel. Astarion couldn't have matched her speed even if there wasn't a bolt sticking through his good hand.

He clutched his wrist and slumped against the wall, the sound of her mocking laughter still echoing in his ears. He couldn't think of a curse brutal enough for the situation.

One day left. One day to find something comparable to the blood of a god.

First things first. There's not a great deal I can do with a bolt stuck through my hand.

The point was fitted against the shaft, so at least it wouldn't cause any more damage on the way out. Even closing his fingers over the bolt made the shattered bones in his hand grate together. Astarion took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and pulled.

He didn't scream, but only because he didn't want to give Violet the satisfaction. He fell against the wall, nauseated with pain. He needed blood to heal, but he wasn't sure he could catch even a rat in his current state.

Maybe one of the bats, or owls, or whatever they are. How do you attract a bat? I bet that druid would know. He tried to remember being a bat. Unfortunately, he didn't usually carry live moths on his person.

He should probably go back to Szarr Palace. There was always blood there. Go back, heal up, think of what to do next. But there was so little time left, and what was he going to do about the competition?

Den Suriel.

He could pick up a fresh vial, find the paladin again, perhaps drug him, and open a vein. *Pity I didn't have the forethought to do that while he was bleeding all over me. I suppose I could wound him and get the same effect, but ...* He shied away from the logical extension of that thought—that it would be far easier to drain blood from a dying aasimar than figure out a way to drug him. There were undoubtedly good, solid, self-centered reasons not to kill the man. He could probably think of them if his hand didn't hurt so much.

He pushed himself up with his good hand. Blood first, definitely.

Air ruffled across feathers as one of the winged shapes settled on the wall next to him.

Astarion froze, his fangs already sliding into place. If he could just catch the creature unawares—

"Ere," said Rooftop Henry, setting a familiar vial on the wall. "Mister Zombie, in't? Looks like you dropped this."

Astarion had gone his entire life without hugging a bird. He had no intention of breaking that streak now, but he came very close.

"Has anyone told you that you are a veritable paragon among waterfowl?"

Rooftop Henry's eyes narrowed. "If they did, I'd shit on their head. Why? You caught someone gossiping?" He spat. "Wasn't a pigeon, was it? That damn Light Feather's always insulting me, thinks I won't notice."

"Errr ... no." Astarion slid the precious vial into his jacket, somewhat awkwardly since he had to use his left hand. "Never mind. Thank you, Henry." He bowed as theatrically as he would have for Cazador, and with rather more sincerity.

The gull shrugged. "Nothin' to it. Grabbed it out of the water thinkin' it might be a bat."

"A ... bat."

"Yeah, the little buggers around here fall into the water sometimes."

"Please eat all the bats. Nasty little beasts." Astarion shuddered at the memory of his time as a bat.

"Eh, there's good eatin' on a bat." He cocked an orange eye at Astarion. "'Course, they're better with sauce ..."

"I shall bring you a bottle of sauce as soon as possible," Astarion promised. "Unfortunately, I'm dripping blood at the moment."

"Doesn't bother me."

"No, but it might bother the staff at the fish and chips shop."

Henry made a polite scoffing sound as he took to the air. "This is Baldur's Gate, Mister Zombie. You think you're the first toff to walk in and order food while you're bleedin' out?"

Astarion stifled a sigh. "You are," he admitted, "entirely correct."

"Do you have the blood?" Dalyria demanded.

"Only one vial." Astarion set down the goblet of blood he'd been drinking, feeling the ache in his injured hand begin to recede. "Violet smashed the other one."

Dalyria shook her head. "It will have to do, I suppose." She held out her hand.

It took a moment for Astarion to realize what she was getting at. "This one goes to the old man. I'm not giving up being made a full vampire so that you can experiment, my dear." "If my research bears fruit, neither of us will have to be vampires at all."

"And if it doesn't, we may be trapped under the heel of both Cazador and Petras." Astarion turned his back and took another sip of blood. His sister was silent for a few moments, then sighed. "I suppose that's a valid point."

"Darling Dalyria, I promise you that if I'm made a vampire, you'll have all the research material you need."

"I'll hold you to that," the doctor said to his back. "Yes, I will very much hold you to that."

The head of Cazador's Staff, Antwun Dufay, was technically a spawn, but Astarion never thought of him that way. He rarely saw the man, and Cazador did not drag him into his family "amusements." The chamberlain had simply been so competent that the vampire lord had turned him rather than find a replacement. Good help, even for the immortal, was hard to find.

Astarion's impression of him was always one of dusty shadows, no matter how immaculate his clothing was. Dust seemed etched into the man's very soul. When Dufay appeared in the doorway of the great hall, Astarion half expected him to exhale a cloud of fine powder. "Have you returned with your offering, Master Astarion?"

"Indeed, I have."

The chamberlain nodded. "Would you care to place it in Lord Cazador's ritual room for safekeeping?"

Astarion's immediate response was to refuse. He wanted to know exactly where the blood was at all times. But that meant that it was vulnerable, particularly if Violet came after him again.

She was not, however, allowed into Cazador's ritual room. It was the safest place in the palace in that regard. Even if Violet cornered him and poured molten silver down his throat, the blood would be safe.

Dufay escorted him to the door of the ritual room and went inside, then returned with a small velvet-lined box. There were two other vials inside, and space for three more. Astarion set the god's blood beside a vial that looked like perfectly ordinary blood and one that had an unpleasant greenish tinge.

"Can you tell me who brought those?"

"I cannot," Dufay said. "Lord Cazador has instructed me not to divulge that information."

Astarion hadn't expected an answer anyway. "Ah, well."

Dufay closed the box and shuffled back inside the room. When the chamberlain returned, he examined Astarion's appearance—battered, bruised, bloodstained, and smelling vaguely of chip sauce—and said, without inflection, "Shall I arrange for a hot bath for you, Master Astarion?"

"Dufay, you are a gem among household staff."

"Very good, sir."

Astarion came out of his trance to find that there were still hours to fill before Cazador's deadline arrived.

It was a little past noon, which made leaving the palace unwise. It would be the height of irony for Astarion to be on the cusp of becoming a vampire, only to accidentally go up in flames because he tripped on a flagstone and fell into a sunbeam.

That left him with the amusements available in Szarr Palace, most of which he had exhausted a century ago.

He took another luxuriant bath, this time with bubbles. Lifting a handful, he pictured den Suriel saying that Tyr and Lathander had been silent on the subject. It made him smile a little. He wondered what the paladin was doing now. *Probably either brooding or tearing the city apart looking for me. I don't think there's any middle ground.*

Astarion supposed that it was just barely possible that the aasimar would find his way to Szarr Palace. It would be a death sentence if he did. Not that Astarion cared if the man died, but ...

Fine, I do care a little. The man is so perfectly what he is. There is so little beauty in the world that one hates to see it wasted.

He climbed out of the tub, water streaming over his dead white skin, and pulled on a dressing gown. The fabric was the same inferior silk damask as the one that den Suriel had loaned him. He'd had far better ones when he was still alive, but he did not wish to attract Cazador's attention to his clothing. Even the cheap silk slid nicely under his fingertips as he belted it, though.

Speaking of clothing ... there was something he could do while he waited. The clothes he'd worn into the Undercity were still at the Rat's Run, but the outfit he'd worn during the confrontation with Violet had not come away unscathed. The laundry had managed to remove the bloodstains, but the cuffs had suffered from the flying glass.

He picked up the jacket and his sewing kit and went to Dalyria's lab.

When he opened the door, his sister spawn spun around, her eyes wide. For a moment, Astarion thought that she had simply been startled, but she took a step back, then another, and her usually expressionless face held unexpected fear.

"Dalyria?"

"I needed it!" she cried. "You don't understand!"

"What did you need?" he asked, even as his gut clenched. *She wouldn't. She couldn't have.* The lab was usually neatly organized, but today, it was a mess. Glass flasks were scattered across the counters, powders were smeared on the wooden surfaces, and open books littered the room.

And on one particular counter, he saw one particular vial, empty except for a few black drops puddled at the bottom.

A serpent of ice thrashed inside Astarion's rib cage and coiled around his heart.

"You stole the blood." His voice was calm, profoundly calm, calm enough to shatter suns. He reached out and picked up the vial that held all that remained of the blood of a god. "You went into Cazador's ritual room and stole it." Of course Dalyria had access to it. She was so often the one to help with his rituals.

He'd been so busy thinking of Violet that he hadn't even considered Dalyria would betray him.

He picked up the vial. Three drops, if that. Three drops could not possibly be enough. "I went through hell for this, and you took it."

Dalyria was still backing up. "You wouldn't have known it existed if I hadn't told you."

Astarion stoppered the vial. If nothing else, he could present it to Cazador and tell him who had stolen the rest. He slipped it back into his jacket just as Dalyria's spine hit the wall.

"If I had been made a vampire," he said, gliding toward her, "I could have gone back and acquired all the undying blood that was left. I could have left this city and brought you a live unicorn if you so desired. I would have remembered that you helped me, and I would have been generous."

He was close now. His eyes bored into hers. Dalyria swallowed hard.

"Your experiments are never going to work," he told her, his voice as soft as a lover's murmur. "I humored you because you were useful to me, but I have never believed that you would find a cure."

"I *will*."

"Darling Dalyria." He gave her a bladed smile. "You won't. You're simply not clever enough. You have had the finest lab in the city and years of uninterrupted time, and you have accomplished *nothing*. And you never will."

She tried to protest. He set a finger over her lips.

"And if, someday, someone else finds a cure—a smarter, better doctor—I will have you killed before you taste a single drop."

It was clear that he hadn't known Dalyria half as well as he thought he did, but Astarion could still read her eyes and see that she believed him.

He thought about breaking her fingers, or perhaps her neck. But that was only pain, and it would heal. Everything physical healed.

The poison he'd whispered into her soul, though ...

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the laboratory, slamming the door hard enough to send glassware shattering across the floor.

In a strange way, the trip to Baldur's Gate with Bajia was not unlike the trip from the vineyard to Lady Erikinia's estate. He was older and angrier and despairing, and yet the weather was fine, and Bajia was still a merry traveling companion. They slept rough instead of staying at inns, but Astarion would often wake to find a rabbit sizzling on a spit over the fire.

"What will you do after we reach Baldur's Gate?" he asked one day, shuffling through the papers that Lazlo had given him. Gods, he even had a fake birth record. Lazlo had been so thorough that Astarion wondered if the man had made up new identities before.

"I don't know," Bajia admitted. "I haven't thought that far ahead. Lady Erikinia told me to go back to my people, but ..." She shook her head. "It's been a long time. I don't know what kind of welcome I would receive."

"You could stay with me."

He said it quickly, before he had time to think, because if he'd thought about it, it would have gone permanently unsaid. The words dropped to the road and squatted there like toads.

Bajia was silent for so long that he wondered if she was simply going to pretend that he hadn't spoken at all. Perhaps that would be for the best. The upswept tips of his ears burned.

"It is a kind offer," she said finally. "Under other circumstances, I would be happy to. But now I think perhaps the Ancuníns hold too many memories for me."

It was a graceful rejection. Astarion was able to smile and say, "You can hardly blame me for trying. Who else will be able to commiserate about the old lady with me?," which made her laugh.

He had loved Bajia since he was a child, but as he'd grown older, he'd begun to notice how magnificent her thighs and hips were and to admire the way they gripped the horse under her, and how her skin was still flawless, despite the years that had passed. Impressive, really, given that she was human. She didn't seem to have aged a day.

Not a single day, in fact. And that was more than a decade ago. A suspicion began to coil in the bottom of Astarion's mind.

He waited until that evening, when they sat by the fire. He dredged up his memories of that long-ago journey and compared Bajia then to Bajia now.

She hadn't changed. At *all*. Not a thread of silver in her hair, not a suspicion of crow's- feet, not even a hint of the cosmetics that some used to stave off the years.

"Why haven't you aged?"

"Hmm?" Bajia was mending a bit of harness leather. "What was that?"

"It's been fifteen years, but you haven't aged a day."

"You're sweet."

"No, I'm not."

"Ah, well, you know." She laughed, not entirely convincingly. "Sazarac's Skin Lotion. And clean living."

It was on Astarion's lips to say, "Are you really a human?," but he realized that she would lie to him again, and he did not think he could bear it. He closed his eyes, rolled over, and pretended to go to sleep.

Two days later, something attacked them on the road. Bajia was riding a length or two ahead of him, and all Astarion saw was a wave of claws erupting from the woods beside the road.

The primeval owlbear slammed into Bajia's horse, knocking the animal sideways. Bajia herself vanished in a welter of sharp beak and flailing legs.

Astarion's horse screamed and reared, and he fought to keep his seat. His only coherent thought was that Bajia was dead, and his great-grandmother was dead, and in a moment he, too, would probably be dead. *How unbelievably stupid that it should come to this.*

And then massive wings shot out to either side of the monster's head, huge and metallic. For an instant, time hung suspended, and Astarion saw the sun gleaming off each individual scale as something vast and reptilian appeared in the space where Bajia had been.

Oh, he thought.

The copper dragon opened its mouth, and acid poured out. Astarion caught a glimpse of flesh melting away from the owlbear's skull, and then his horse had had enough and turned and ran.

Bajia found him before long. He saw copper wings circling overhead, but they dropped below the tree line before his horse could go berserk with dragonfear. Perhaps a quarter of an hour later he saw her, human-shaped again, walking down the road with her long, easy stride.

She stopped a few feet away and held her hands up as if to reassure him. It would have been more reassuring had he not known that she could bite him in half. "Astarion?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Just coming to terms with the fact that at the age of twelve, I had a crush on a giant reptile."

She winced. "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

He shrugged. She had never told him that she was human, so there was no reason he should feel so betrayed. No reason. None.

Ironically, if she had told him when he was twelve, he would have thought it was amazing.

Now, at twenty-seven ...

It turned out that however good you were at finding loopholes in the law, you couldn't find them in your own emotions. Gods, he'd actually propositioned her! He didn't know whether to be horrified or horribly embarrassed. She was probably more than a thousand years old. He must have seemed like a precocious toddler.

No wonder she'd stayed in service to his great-grandmother. She'd probably been the only person old enough to provide decent conversation.

"Astarion ..."

"I'm fine," he told her again, even though they both knew it was a lie.

With the exception of Dalyria, the spawn had drifted to the hall long before Cazador appeared. Astarion had been the first to arrive. He'd handed the pitiful remains of his offering to Dufay, then gone to the hall to work very hard on getting drunk. It wasn't easy when you were a vampire spawn, but he was willing to try.

Aurelia was the next to arrive. "Are you all right?" the tiefling asked as Astarion slammed down a glass of blood and chased it with a glass of brandy.

"Dalyria stole my vial of blood for her experiments."

Aurelia winced. "I'm sorry."

"I assume you'll win now."

"Possibly."

"You're far too modest, darling." Astarion dropped into a chair and gazed moodily into his brandy. "You can't tell me that you haven't sourced something exquisite and arcane."

"For all that may matter. If he *does* plan to turn one of us into a vampire, you can't tell me he hasn't already decided who." She reached out and stroked the air above his arm, close enough that he could feel the coolness that poured off her cold skin but not so close as to actually touch. "It may be that nothing any of us does will change the outcome."

"Hmmp." If she was right, and Astarion had gone through all that for nothing, he was going to ... to ...

Do absolutely nothing, of course. What other option do you have?

He took another slug of brandy. *At least I had a paladin suck my cock. Not everyone can say that.*

He was spitefully glad that he hadn't dragged den Suriel back to the palace. If Cazador didn't make someone a vampire, there was no point in wasting a really spectacular victim.

Unfortunately, Violet arrived before he could make much of a dent in the alcohol supply, and his sense of self-preservation kicked in to stop him from going further while she was there.

She was clad in a dress with little puffed sleeves and bows that made her look much younger than she was. It made him want to kick her out a third-story window, but so did everything else about her.

"Awww. Are you pouting, 'Starion?"

"Sister dear, I would not dream of it. Your failure more than makes up for my mere lack of success."

She smiled sweetly at him. "I should have shot you in the groin, like I planned."

"Who's getting shot in the groin?" Petras asked from the doorway.

"Don't worry, Petras, you're perfectly safe. Violet can't hit that small a target."

"You think you're so amusing." Petras rolled his eyes and picked up his own goblet of blood.

"How much longer do we have to wait?"

"As long as he wants us to wait," Aurelia said, folding her hands in her lap.

"I was afraid of that."

Fortunately, for all their sanity, Cazador arrived ten minutes later. Dalyria came in behind him. When she saw Astarion, she straightened her back and tried to snap her usual cool, imperious expression back into place.

So that's how you're going to play this. I see. Astarion, for his part, simply pretended she wasn't there. *If I am successful, you will pay, dear sister. And if I'm not successful because of you, you will pay even more.*

"My children." Cazador was in an expansive mood tonight, his hooded eyes bright in anticipation of the feast. "I do so look forward to your gifts. It will be interesting to see what you think that I would like ... and what you are capable of acquiring."

Dalyria hid her flinch well, but Astarion saw it and was pleased.

Dufay entered the room holding the small velvet-lined box and presented the vials to his master. There were five of them now, shining like jewels, except for the nearly empty one in the middle. Dalyria hadn't even thought to smash the other vials when she stole his. *Damn the woman.*

Cazador stroked his fingers across the glass. "Lovely. Such colors ... mostly." He tapped the nearly empty vial and frowned.

"If you will leave mine for last, Father, I will explain all." The words flowed smooth as honey off Astarion's tongue. It was possible he might still pull this off—if three drops were enough, if no one else had stumbled across an even better offering, if the old man was in a good mood, if, if, if.

"A mystery," Cazador said. "How ... intriguing."

Astarion bowed slightly and prayed hard. Since he had given up on the gods, it was more of a nonspecific cry into the void. *Please, please, let this work!*

"Very well. You shall be last, then." The vampire lord picked up the first vial. It was an intense oily green, and when he broke the seal, the smell of rotting garbage flooded the hall. "Gaah! What is *this*?"

"Otyugh?" Yousen said hopefully.

"Why in the Nine Hells would you bring me the blood of a creature that feeds on filth?"

"I ... erm ... thought it might be interesting ... ? I couldn't try it because they're sort of intelligent, you know ..."

"It smells foul."

"So do some very good cheeses? Sir?"

Cazador put his hand to his forehead in clear despair. "Only because you are my beloved son, Yousen, would I do this." He touched his fingertip to the open vial, then, very tentatively, licked it.

His expression said more than words. Yousen faded into the wall. Cazador resealed the vial and held it out. "Take this somewhere and burn it, Dufay. And fetch me something to kill the taste."

Dufay shuffled out of the room and returned a moment later bearing a golden tray with a single jeweled goblet on it. "The blood of an elven child, my lord, mixed with some of the Ironfell Eighty-Four."

Cazador took a long drink and sighed with pleasure. "That's more like it. I trust that none of the *rest* of you have any such surprises in store?"

The other spawn murmured denials. It occurred to Astarion, very belatedly, to worry about the taste of Mask's blood.

The next vial was an ordinary crimson. Cazador sniffed, rolled the blood around his tongue, then drank it down. "Ah," he said. "Winged kenku, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Petras said, clearly trying to hide his disappointment. "A priestess of Quorlinn."

"Respectable, if somewhat pedestrian." He set the vial down, clearly dismissing it from contention. Astarion, despite being a bundle of nerves, took a moment to revel in the set of Petras's lips. *After all, if you can't enjoy seeing your rivals humiliated, why even let them live?*

"Now, Violet, what have you brought me?" Cazador lifted another crimson vial.

Violet shot a dagger-edged look at Astarion, then clapped her hands together in her best little-girl impression. "You'll love it, Father, I'm sure."

"An animal, I see." Cazador sniffed. "Is that ... bear? Owlbear, perhaps?" He frowned slightly and tasted it. "No, just bear."

"But it's a very special bear, Father. It had a moon on its chest, and it was kept in a very expensive menagerie."

Cazador sighed. "I'm afraid that no matter how exotic it is, bear still tastes like bear, my dear." He set the mostly full vial on Dufay's tray.

Violet bared her teeth. "It would have been better, but Astarion wouldn't work with me."

"You dropped a thunderstone on my *head*. If that's your idea of teamwork, it's no wonder you were always picked last for games in school." Astarion had no idea if that was true, but by the way Violet glowered at him, he knew he'd hit the mark. "Oh my. You *were*, weren't you? Even after the children who couldn't throw a ball and the ones who ate worms? How utterly unsurprising."

"Children," Cazador said, caressing the penultimate vial. "Don't make me send you to your rooms."

Astarion bowed slightly and moved away from Violet. Violet made a rude gesture at him when Cazador wasn't looking.

Aurelia's vial was red-gold, with brilliant highlights that seemed to drift beneath the glass. The tiefling stood, calm and silent, as Cazador unsealed it. The smell was subtle, and yet there was something familiar about it. Astarion inhaled, trying to place it. It reminded him of something ... someone ... a perfume, perhaps? *No, don't be absurd. Who wears blood as a perfume? Although if someone managed it, I suspect I'd take a second look. Probably a*

third, too. Though you'd also have carrion flies landing on you, and that would quite ruin the effect. "Oh, what a lovely figure, shame about the plague of insects."

"Oh, this is marvelous." Cazador sipped from the vial and closed his eyes in pleasure. "Full-bodied, vibrant, just a hint of acid. Dragon, is it? But what color?"

Aurelia bowed. "Copper, my lord."

Astarion bit back the exclamation he might have made. There were many copper dragons in the world. There was no reason for him to think it might be the one he'd known, or to care if it was. Bajia had lied to him and then abandoned him. In more than a century, she'd never come back to see how he was doing. It would serve her right if she'd run into Aurelia in a dark alley.

He wondered where the hell Aurelia had gotten the dragon's blood, and whether she would tell him if he asked.

"And that leaves you, Astarion. Last, and, it seems, least." Cazador lifted the final vial and sat back in his chair. Oily blackness trembled in the bottom of the vial when he tapped the glass. "What have you brought me ... or failed to bring me, as the case may be?"

"The living blood of a dying god," Astarion said. "But it was full when I gave it to Dufay. Your daughter Dalyria stole it from your ritual room for her experiments."

"I see." Cazador's gaze lingered on Dalyria, who flinched as if in expectation of a blow.

"Daughter, is this true?"

She muttered something inaudible. Cazador's eyes hardened.

The silence in the room thickened until it was almost visible, like smoke. The other spawn drifted away from Dalyria. Yousen flattened himself against the wall until he almost disappeared. Everyone knew what would happen next.

When the creak of the door broke the silence, it came as a painful relief, like a joint cracked back into the socket. Godey came in, bones rattling with every step, and executed a short bow to Cazador.

"See that our daughter understands why she does not steal from her father."

"Of course, Master." Godey started toward Violet, who skittered out of the way.

"Not me! Dalyria did it. Tell him, Father!" "Huh," Godey said when Cazador nodded. "Well, that's a turn up for the books, and no mistake." He closed skeletal fingers over Dalyria's shoulder. "Come now, child, and let's see what makes you sing, shall we?"

Dalyria's eyes sought Astarion's, so he turned away and studied the vial in Cazador's hand until the door shut and the rattle of the torturer's bones could no longer be heard.

"A pity," murmured Cazador. "Hardly anything left worth tasting, is there? Still ..." He unstopped the vial and let three drops fall onto his tongue, the last drops of the blood shed by the dying god of shadows.

Astarion's nails cut into his palms as he waited. Cazador had closed his eyes, but he made no sound, no pronouncements, as he had for the others. He did not so much as move.

Gods above, have I accidentally poisoned him? Idle fantasies about exploding aside, Astarion had never considered that the blood might harm Cazador in some way. He didn't know whether that would be a good thing. If their master died, they would all be trapped forever as spawn, but their minds would be their own.

"Father?" he finally asked.

Cazador turned his head only a fraction, but it was enough to set the torchlight glittering across his cheeks.

Cazador Szarr, ancient vampire lord, servant of Mephistopheles, infernalist and ruler of the night, was weeping.

"Oh shit," Petras said under his breath. For once, he and Astarion were in total agreement. None of the spawn had ever seen such a thing. The others retreated as far as they could, sinking into the few available shadows, each one of them trying to make themselves into as small a target as possible.

Astarion stood alone in the center of the room, clasping his hands together to hide their trembling.

If he looks like he's going to kill me, run for the door. If he looks like he's dying, run for him and open a vein. If he says something, apologize and beg for mercy. No, apologize and say Dalyria must have done something to it. Then beg for mercy. None of the plans were good, but that didn't matter, because a good plan wasn't possible at the moment. All Astarion could do was stand there and wait for the explosion.

"To die ..." Cazador pressed the heel of his hand against his eyes. "To die and lose all that ... that magnificent *life*. To be *so much*, and then to know that it was ending ..." He wiped unashamedly at his tears. "Oh, my boy. My sweet Astarion. What a gift you've given me." Astarion's mouth was so dry that he had to swallow before he could answer. "Of course, Father. It was my pleasure."

Cazador held out his hand. Astarion approached the chair and sank down onto his knees, turning his cheek to fit into the ancient vampire's hand. He couldn't believe that this was happening. Had it worked? Had he *won*?

Miserable gods, am I finally going to be a vampire?

He knew better than to hope, but he could feel it rising in his chest nonetheless, a crazy, wild joy that felt as if it might explode outward and take his rib cage with it.

"Dear Astarion." Cazador gazed deeply into his eyes, and Astarion did not have to fake his shiver of anticipation.

Now? Is he going to do it now? Let me drink his blood and finally, finally, be free?

The old man leaned forward. Astarion closed his eyes.

Dry lips brushed his forehead. "For a full vial, I would have turned you this very night. But when I finally *do* make a vampire," Cazador whispered against his skin, "you will be the first, my boy."

Oh.

I see.

Of course it would be something like that. I knew better than to hope, but I did it anyway.

But he knew his role, and he knew better than to ever show weakness. Astarion said, "Thank you, Father," and bowed his head, still kneeling at Cazador's feet, with the wreckage of all his recent dreams around him.

"I knew it was just another mind game," Petras said. "I knew it."

"You did *not*," Violet said crossly.

Astarion took another slug of blood-mixed wine.

"I damn well *did*, you little—"

Aurelia set her cup down with a sound like a judge's gavel. "Enough," she said. "Truce. For tonight, anyway."

Everyone, even Violet, was a little frightened of Aurelia. "Truce," the other spawn muttered. Astarion grunted into his wine.

Cazador had left to see how Dalyria was faring in Godey's skeletal hands. The remaining spawn huddled around one end of the table in a little knot.

"We *all* knew it was probably a mind game," Aurelia continued, "but can any of you say you weren't hoping?"

No one met her eyes, which was admission enough.

"Where did you get the blood of a dragon, anyway?" Petras asked.

Aurelia shrugged. "I called in a favor."

Astarion was about to ask if the favor involved a woman named Bajia, then throttled the question. The name hardly mattered when a copper dragon was involved. And if there wasn't at least one somewhere in Baldur's Gate right now, playing at being human, he'd eat the fabulous hat that was still somewhere in his bedroom.

"And where did *you* get the blood of a god?" Astarion set down his now-empty cup and wondered if he should get another. He wanted one, but he had almost managed to become inebriated. Much more, and Violet could follow him down the hallway and make sure he tripped and fell on something pointy and silver. He had no illusions that Aurelia's truce would hold for long.

"Astarion?"

He blinked blearily at Petras. "Right, right. The skeletons in the sewer were worshipping it."

"Oh, *them*," Aurelia said.

"Why does everyone say it like that?"

"There are skeletons in the sewer?" Petras looked mildly appalled. Astarion took some comfort in the fact that at least Petras hadn't known about them, either.

"I had to break into a menagerie," Violet said sourly, "and kill two zookeepers *and* a bear."

"Don't tell me you didn't at least taste the bear on the way out," Petras said.

"Oh, I did. It was amazing. But you can't believe how that thing smelled."

"Don't talk to me about smells." Yousen shook his head gloomily. "I had to burn my clothes after the otyugh."

"How did you manage that, anyway?"

"A tannery just outside the city uses one as a garbage disposal. Do you know how bad something has to smell if it makes the tannery smell better by comparison?"

The other spawn grimaced.

"Really, though," Violet said, "even you can't have thought he'd like otyugh blood."

Yousen shrugged. "I thought he might not have tried it. And he said he was tired of normal blood."

"No one's *that* tired of normal blood."

The gnome sighed. "I suppose not." He scratched absently at his chest. Astarion could see the edge of a bruise showing above his collar, in a curious shape, almost like a cloven hoofprint.

Did he ...?

No. No, tonight is horrible enough without picturing that.

They all sat in silence, staring at their respective drinks.

"Do you think he'll ever make one of us a vampire?" Petras asked finally. He tried to sound cynical, but it came out plaintive instead, like a small child asking if he would ever grow up.

"He says he will," Violet said uncertainly.

"Why would he?" Astarion looked at Aurelia as he spoke. "When he's got all of us doing exactly what he wants, whenever he wants it? What use is another vampire to him, compared to an immortal slave?"

The tiefling's eyes flickered at his words. Even through the haze of wine and disappointment, Astarion knew she agreed with him.

"Why do any of us bother trying, then?" Petras asked bitterly.

"Dear brother, how do any of us have a choice? You know what happens if you don't go along."

Another silence, this one longer and bleaker. Petras reached out and snagged another cup of wine.

"Everything under the sun dies eventually," Aurelia said. "And everything changes, one way or another."

"Was that meant to be encouraging?" Astarion got unsteadily to his feet.

"Merely an observation." The tiefling rose and pushed back her chair. "You should all go to bed before you pass out on the table and Dufay uses you for a centerpiece."

"Yes, *Mother*," Petras said snidely. Aurelia gave him her cool red gaze, and he looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

Astarion picked up a last cup, saluted her with it, and went to bed while he still knew where to find it.

If Mask's blood had not bought him vampirehood, it had certainly bought him grace. Astarion found himself moved into the favored consort chambers next to Cazador. He did not appreciate that, but he pretended to, both so the old man would not become irate and because it made Violet mad as fire.

When Dalyria finally emerged from Godey's kennels, she walked with a limp. A day later, she tapped on Astarion's door.

"If you've come to apologize, darling, don't bother," he said. "I wouldn't believe you, and I wouldn't forgive you if I did, so there's no point in wasting our time."

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to break my leg."

He put an eyebrow up at that. Dalyria pulled up one trouser leg to reveal a calf that twisted grotesquely halfway down. Astarion made a noise of mild disgust.

"Godey made certain it healed up like that," Dalyria said. "I have to break it and set it properly now." She sounded more annoyed by the prospect than anything else. "At any rate, I know you're angry with me, so I thought I'd offer, in case it would make you feel better."

Astarion stared at her for so long that she looked away. "You can say no," she said.

"No. Get Yousen to do it." He massaged his temples wearily. *She hurt me, so she thinks that if I hurt her, we can go back to the way things were?* He wondered if there was any point in holding a grudge against someone who clearly understood so little about anything outside her laboratory.

Perhaps there wasn't, but he didn't feel like letting that grudge go just yet.

Dalyria no longer had a limp the next day. Astarion noticed this as he sipped wine in the alcove where he was least likely to be discovered. Cazador probably noticed as well but didn't see fit to comment.

It was another evening like so many thousand evenings before, then suddenly it wasn't.

Dufay entered the room, moved toward the throne, and bowed. Cazador looked up. "Yes?"

"Someone is storming the gate, my lord," the chamberlain announced in his dry, dusty voice.

"Storming ... the ... gate," Cazador repeated slowly. He marked his place in his book and set it aside. "Dufay, I was not aware that Szarr Palace currently had a gate that one *could* storm."

"Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he is storming a small side entrance, my lord."

A knot of dread suddenly pulled tight in Astarion's stomach. Surely it wasn't ... but who else could it be?

How did he find me? He can't possibly have followed me from the Rat's Run. Did someone tell him? But who would have done that?

"Go and see what he wants, Dufay."

Astarion drained his cup of blood and leaned against the wall with studied nonchalance. None of the other spawn seemed to be paying much attention.

The chamberlain returned some minutes later. "He is a paladin of something called the Argent Badger, my lord. He wishes to—and I quote—'pull your den of wickedness down around your ears.'"

Cazador shook his head. "Paladins. They would almost be a nuisance if they were not so foolish. Very well, have him killed and drained—"

"Wait!"

Astarion briefly wondered who had said that until he saw that every eye in the room had fixed on him.

Oh.

Oh, I see.

"You've got something to add, my child?" Cazador's eyes were hooded, but there was enough amusement in his voice to keep Astarion talking.

"Why, yes. Yes, I do." *And I wish to the gods I knew what that was.* Astarion smiled languidly, trying to assemble a story and failing utterly. His mind was blank of anything but the truth.

"As it happens, I know this paladin. He was a useful tool in acquiring the god's blood.

Ironically, his order specializes in hunting the undead."

Cazador chuckled at that, which gave Astarion a glimmer of hope.

"I'm not sure why he's here. Certainly I did not tell him where I lived. Nevertheless, if we kill him, the rest of his order will eventually come looking for him. It's entirely possible that they will tell other paladins as well. It could lead to ... questions."

The vampire lord frowned, as Astarion had expected. If there was one thing the old man hated, it was questions. "Do you have a different suggestion, then?"

"Blood is only briefly on the lips. To destroy an enemy's soul, though ... that lasts forever."

Astarion let his smile grow, showing his fangs. "If you will allow me, Father, I believe that I can rid us of this guest in such a way that none of his order will ever look for him again."

"Hmm ..." Cazador tapped a long finger against his lips. Astarion tried to look as if the outcome did not concern him at all. *Was that enough? Too much? Should I have tried to go a different way entirely?*

All the best lies are true. Cazador nodded benignly. "You intrigue me, child. I will allow you to try."

"Excellent." Astarion bowed deeply. "I require only one or two simple orders, sir. And then I suspect you will find it quite amusing."

Den Suriel was pacing the room like a caged tiger when Astarion opened the door and slipped through. The aasimar spun on the balls of his feet, lifting his sword, then recognized him and lowered the blade. "It's you."

"I'm surprised you found this place." It wasn't the palace proper, just one of the many entrances scattered throughout the city, but even so, it was hardly the sort of thing you'd stumble on by accident.

The paladin shrugged. "It's amazing what you can do with a location spell. Wherever this door leads is heavily warded, as I'm sure you know, so I walked the city until I found one of your brethren and followed him back here."

"Ah. That would be the actual Petras, I expect." Astarion allowed himself a small smile. "He was never terribly bright."

Den Suriel looked exhausted. There were gray hollows under his eyes, and his patrician features were drawn and frayed. *Less a statue*, Astarion thought, *and more a death mask*. Den Suriel's pale gaze roamed over Astarion in turn. The vampire wore a loose white shirt, open at the throat, and stood barefoot on the stones. He bore no obvious weapons, and his hair was tousled as if from sleep. If the aasimar was looking for a threat, he would see nothing but vulnerability.

The silence stretched out between them, agonizing and intolerable. Den Suriel ran one hand through his hair, fingers clenching as if he wanted to rip it out.

"I've come to kill your master," he announced in that ringing paladin's voice.

"I know." Astarion's own fingers itched to reach up and push the paladin's disarrayed locks back into place, the way that he might straighten a painting that had tilted to one side.

"Are you going to try and stop me?"

"Not exactly." Astarion's sigh came from the depths of his toes. "He bade me to give you a message."

"He did?"

"He did. He will open the door behind me when I am dead."

Den Suriel blinked, his voice becoming more gravel and less gold. "What? What does that mean?"

"It means, my dear paladin, that you will have to kill me to get to him. As long as I live ..."

Astarion lifted his hands, palms up. "... the door remains barred to you."

"Is this some kind of trap?"

"It's too simple to be a trap, I think."

Frowning, den Suriel reached beneath his tabard and pulled out his holy symbol. Astarion braced himself. He was certain that he'd read the man correctly—well, *almost* certain—but if the paladin tried to turn him, all bets were off.

But den Suriel did not try. He bowed his head instead and murmured a few words, and then the air became dense in a familiar way, and truth came and squatted on Astarion's tongue.

"Is everything you've told me true?"

"Everything I have said in this room is true." Astarion's half smile was a masterpiece of rue.

"Obviously I lied when I said I was just going to the privies."

Den Suriel exhaled, long and slow, and clawed at his hair again. "Why would your master do this?"

Because I told him to. Astarion pushed the words aside and offered, "He has a reason for everything he does. I don't always know what it is." He laughed, soundless and bitter. "No, it would be truer to say that I *usually* don't know what it is."

"What if I break the door down instead?"

Astarion looked at the door. It was made of iron, and he knew for a fact that there was an iron bar on the other side. "To begin with, I'd be very impressed."

"What if I find another entrance?"

"I would be even more impressed."

Den Suriel's growl would not have been out of place on an actual badger. "If I knock you unconscious—"

"The door stays barred."

"Are you going to fight me?" The aasimar's hand tensed on the hilt of his sword.

Astarion shrugged. "I probably will, if you try to kill me. Since I don't have my daggers, I'm not sure how successful I'll be. I suppose if you gave me long enough, I could take the wire in the seam here and twist it into something that could give you a savage poking." *And please don't ask about other weaponry, or any contact poisons I may be concealing on my*

person. "I am under no orders to attack you, if that's what you're asking. If you go inside, my master will most certainly kill you and drink your blood, but that won't be much consolation for me."

Den Suriel groaned and sheathed his sword. Astarion reflected that truth spells were practically useless in the hands of honest men.

"I'll go to the authorities," the paladin said. "I'll tell them there's a vampire lord in the city."

"It won't work. My master has been here for many centuries, and his family is old and respected. You're a stranger, a knight of an order no one has ever heard of, and you don't even know his name."

It was a painful thing to watch a paladin try to be shrewd. "What's his name?"

Astarion touched his throat. "You won't get that from me. I am not allowed to reveal my master's name to his enemies."

"Fine. If they won't help me here, I'll find a temple of Tyr and—"

Astarion was already shaking his head. "Do you think it hasn't been tried?" He leaned against the wall, trying to look smaller. "If you don't bring enough, you lead them all to a slaughter. And if you do somehow find half a hundred paladins and figure out where you're going, he'll know about it long in advance and be a thousand miles away. Although, yes, you might well manage to kill everyone he leaves behind. Including me."

Den Suriel put his forearm against the wall and leaned his head on it, covering his eyes. His voice emerged slightly muffled. "What would you have me do, then?"

"Leave," Astarion said, keeping the triumph out of his voice with difficulty. "Leave and forget this place ever existed. Forget that I ever... no. No, that isn't true, I see." He didn't have to feign the rueful chuckle that followed. "I don't want to be forgotten."

The aasimar tilted his head, and one white eye gleamed at Astarion. "You *truly* don't want me to come back here with an army and kill your master?"

"If I thought it was possible you would succeed..." *Then I still wouldn't, because then I'll be a spawn forever.* He kept his mouth closed and though the spell tugged at his tongue, it couldn't compel him to speak.

"I knew I couldn't, but I thought I'd try anyway," den Suriel said.

"Why? Do you genuinely have a death wish after all?"

The aasimar closed his eyes. "I've outlived everyone in my family," he said. "I saw my youngest sister's children die of old age. They were all human, and I was the cuckoo in the nest. I haven't actually seen another member of my order in decades. For all I know, I'm the last one."

He might have stopped there, but the truth on his tongue was pushing him, and he had less experience with falsehood than Astarion. "I don't crave death, but gods, some days I am so very tired of living."

There was so much weariness etched into every line of the paladin's body that Astarion had to look away. If he could see his own reflection, he thought, it might look a little like that.

So that is why we were drawn to each other. Underneath the wit and the lust, they had recognized some terrible kinship of exhaustion and despair.

Den Suriel could not help him, but perhaps he could help den Suriel in some small way. "I want you to live," Astarion said with perfect truth, "and not forget my name."

Den Suriel pushed himself away from the wall. He was a hundred years old, but his face looked, briefly, very young. "Astarion ..."

"You are, I suspect, sorry that you ever met me. But I'm not sorry that I met you." Astarion looked away. "I have always been a very selfish person."

The aasimar drew himself to his full, towering height and stepped forward. Astarion had to tilt his head back to meet those pale, anguished eyes.

Den Suriel kissed him.

It was a last desperate kiss, the kiss of a soldier going to battle or a prisoner to the gallows. The aasimar's lips were hard, and Astarion could almost taste the anguish on them. It mingled with the triumph growing in his chest, sweet as poison, bitter as truth.

When the kiss ended, den Suriel pressed his lips against Astarion's forehead. "May all the gods help me," he whispered. "I can't do it."

Astarion had put his hands flat on the other man's chest at some point, so he felt the exact moment that the paladin broke. A shudder and a silent snap went through him, like a bone breaking, unheard but excruciating. Den Suriel caught his breath in a sob and stepped away. Astarion noticed absently that the aasimar was no longer glowing.

"That's that, then," den Suriel said. He tried to straighten up, but even then he seemed smaller, the metallic gleam of his hair dulled. He searched Astarion's face for a long moment, then turned away.

"It's not the end of everything," Astarion said. "There are ways back, aren't there? You can go to a cleric of your god and do penance, and then you'll be fine again, won't you?"

Den Suriel paused with one hand on the door leading away from Szarr Palace. "No," he said, "that only works if you're sorry for what you've done."

He let himself out into Baldur's Gate, and Astarion waited for a few minutes, staring at nothing in particular, then tapped on the door to let Dufay know that he had dealt with the paladin.

Bajia left him on a bluff half a mile from Baldur's Gate, overlooking the river. He gazed into the eyes of his old teacher and mentor and friend, who had taught him how to throw a knife and pick a lock, and did not know what to feel.

"Astarion..."

"Thank you for the escort," he said. "It was appreciated." He recognized his own voice as the one he used when speaking before a magistrate: calm and measured and remote.

Bajia wrung her hands. He turned away, one hand on the horse's reins, and she said, "That's the worst of this. You take the shape thinking it's a game, but then you meet people, and you get involved in their lives, and you learn to love them, and you start to forget..."

"I wouldn't know."

The horse jerked violently, and behind him, he heard the sound of wings.

He waited for a time, until the horse had calmed, then turned. Far across the river, he could see a dark V, much larger than any bird, flying toward the sea.

He reached into the breast pocket of his tunic and took out the skeleton key. He turned it in his hand, seeing the places where it had been rubbed shiny by a child's nervous fingers.

It vanished from sight long before it hit the waves.

He turned his attention to Baldur's Gate. It was far larger than Silvermoon, with shantytowns built up along its walls. Even from here, he could see the differences between districts, the contrast between grimy docks and shining stone.

A big city. Big and vibrant and filthy and alive. A city of silks to be touched and laws to be circumvented.

Astarion Ancunin touched the letter of introduction still in his pocket, took a deep breath, and started down the road to his new life in Baldur's Gate. And *this time*, he vowed, *no one* would take it from him.

It would be another dozen years before the irony of that vow caught up with him, and more than two hundred before he was finally able to keep it.

Time passed, as even the gods could not stop it from doing. Days flowed across the sky and turned to night. A tenday later, Astarion judged it safe to return to the Rat's Run.

The clothes he had left behind were waiting for him, neatly folded, with his daggers on top. They would need laundering, but most of them were salvageable. Third from the top was an absurdly pink silk dressing gown.

Astarion lifted it in his hands. The silk was still slippery under his fingers. It smelled faintly of soap and even more faintly of spice.

He smuggled it into Szarr Palace that night and put it in the secret hiding place where he kept velvets and far superior silks.

Cazador's victims came and went. He had never bothered to remember most of their faces, but now they became a blur of open mouths and hungry eyes, as if he were walking through a gallery of painted screams that hung still and silent on the walls.

A month or two later, Cazador carved a poem onto the back of each of his children, using a silver knife that burned like acid and left complicated scars in its wake. It was agony, and Astarion screamed until his voice was raw, then listened to the others screaming as well. He might have gloated over Dalyria's and Violet's pain, but by the end, he was so wrung out that he could not bring himself to feel much of anything at all. The pain was bad enough, but knowing that it lay on him like a brand, his beauty marred by the marks of Cazador's ownership, was somehow even worse than the two round scars on his neck.

The first person who commented on his back did not make it to Szarr Palace at all. After that, he joined Aurelia for a few tendays, clubbing men over the head in dark alleys. The violence helped a little, even if their blood smelled like glory forever out of reach. Cazador said nothing about the change, but Violet moved back into the favored consort rooms, and Astarion returned, with great relief, to his own.

One night, when it was pouring rain and no one would be in an alley for any reason, Astarion and Aurelia played dragonchess at a private table in the Rat's Run. She beat him handily twice, to his minor annoyance.

"You'd think I'd be better at this game," he muttered. "I've been playing it for nearly two hundred years."

"Your strategies are too complicated." Aurelia picked up a rook that he had sacrificed early on. "You make these elaborate plans that would work on someone who was also making elaborate plans, but they're useless against straightforward assaults." She paused, studying the piece as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. "That's why Violet gets the better of you sometimes."

Astarion paused with his glass of wine at his lips. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"You're much smarter than she is, and far more patient. But she still gets the better of you now and again. It's because you plan for a hundred assassins, not one berserker at the gates."

Astarion started to argue the point, then remembered the thunderstone. He would never have thought that *anyone* would do something so careless and so likely to get herself caught

or bring the cavern roof down on both of them. But she had, and he hadn't been prepared at all.

He drained his glass. "It pains me to admit it, but you might—*might*—have a point. What a lowering thought."

She smiled faintly. "You'll catch Petras every time, though."

"I suppose there's that."

He pulled the privacy screen back to signal for another drink. The sailors were drunk, and someone was trying to get a sea shanty going. He could see at least three likely targets, and the thought of going after any of them was so exhausting that he wanted to lay his head down on the table.

"Do you never get tired?" he asked.

Aurelia waited until the fresh bottle of wine had been delivered. "I *am* tired," she said.

"Sometimes I think I've been tired my entire life."

He raised a glass to that and drained it. He did not feel the need to be so cautious about his sobriety around Aurelia. She would not kill him for her own reasons, and if Cazador required it, she would simply walk up to him and cut his throat in the middle of the great hall. It was as close to trust as a vampire spawn could ever have.

Sometimes Astarion wondered if he was like den Suriel in some respects and Aurelia thought that he made the world more decorative, or more interesting, or something like that. Most of the time, he had no idea what she was thinking at all.

I suppose it's possible that she has been playing a long game for two hundred years and will someday betray us all spectacularly, but if so, she's played it well enough that she deserves to get away with it.

"The copper dragon," he said abruptly.

Aurelia paused in the middle of setting up the pieces. "Yes?"

He shouldn't care, but he asked anyway. "She's not a woman named Bajia, by any chance, is she?"

"That's not the name I know her by." Aurelia set up the pieces again, one by one. "Odd you should ask about her, though."

Astarion searched her face. Aurelia never said anything without a reason. "Odd how?"

The queen slid into place with a soft ivory click. "When I met her, she was standing over your grave."

Astarion's eyes dropped to the board so that Aurelia could not see how she had shaken him. Probably she knew anyway.

Bajia had come back to check on him. Too little and far, far too late, but she had remembered him.

He did not ask any more questions. He did not dare. She must think he was dead, and that was almost certainly for the best. But the knowledge quivered under his heart like a blade, and he did not know whether it was cutting him open or lancing a wound.

He drank too much, as he had been doing lately, forcing himself into something like drunkenness. She saw him back to his rooms. On the threshold, which she could not pass, they both paused.

If he had been sober, he would have said something light and wry and amusing. But he was not sober, which is why he turned and put his arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder.

Aurelia was clearly startled. She would have been within her rights to throw him across the room, and at another time, she might have. But instead, her arms came up around him and held tight, and it was by the strength of her grip that Astarion realized he was trembling.

He did not cry. He had lost the knack somehow, somewhere along the way. But his head ached with wine and the tears he couldn't shed, and his voice came out muffled. "Tell me this will end someday. Lie to me if you must."

"I don't have to lie about this." She moved her hand over his back, slow and soothing, as if he were a child and not the one person who had suffered at Cazador's hands nearly as long as she had. "This will end. I don't know how or when, but someday, this life of ours will end." She made a soft sound, half serious, half amused. "You and I have already outlived several immortal gods, have we not? And if they can die, surely we can as well."

Surely Cazador can as well.

The words hung between them, not needing to be said. Astarion's breath went out in a deep sigh. He allowed himself another moment, then stepped back. Aurelia did not try to hold him. She had always been very good about that.

He did not apologize. She had clung to him in just such a fashion after her drawings burned, and again after Cazador had imprisoned her underwater for nearly a month to see how long it would take for a spawn to stop drowning when they tried to breathe. Astarion had gone to her after the year in the mausoleum. So long as they never acknowledged it, it could not be used against them.

Instead, he said, "Good night, sister," and I went to his bed, tired and wretched and lost but comforted that someday, somehow, this desperate half-life would end. Whether he lived or died, became a vampire or stayed a spawn, it hardly mattered. All he had to do until that day was endure.

And try to look good doing it, he thought, and laughed at himself against the pillow.

A little ways from the palace, past docks and taverns and watching eyes, the River Chionthar flowed on, carrying the blood of a dead god. It slipped and slid through the currents, neither dissolving nor breaking apart, a single black tendril finding its way, inevitably, toward the sea.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Raise your hand if this happened to you—you hit Act 3 of Baldur's Gate 3 and were summarily dumped by Astarion because you'd missed that one encounter in the keep. And then—no, keep those hands up—you tried to make it work but were so annoyed that you went back to an earlier save and replayed half of the second act just so you could keep your favorite snarky vampire around, and not just because your character didn't have any points in lockpicking.

... Not just me, I see.

This is the first media tie-in novel I've ever written, and when my agent said, "Do you want to write a book about this video game character named Astarion?" my response was "YES YES FUCK YES AHAHA ASTARION FUCKING YES" or something similarly understated and dignified.

To be clear, in no way did I have time to write this book. I had five books due in 2026 already and it was a terrible idea to take on another one. I did it anyway. (At the time of this writing, I've handed in two. I'm sure it will be fine. Absolutely fine. Leave me my illusions.)

It wasn't *just* Astarion, even though his acid commentary and amazing voice acting won my heart long ago. It was the Forgotten Realms. As a child of the late eighties and early nineties, I grew up on those books. You finished Valdemar or got tired of waiting for the next Wheel of Time, and lo, there they were, a whole shelf's worth of Drizzt Do'Urden and Azure Bonds. And then you got a D&D group together or you played a lot of SSI games because even if the graphics were primitive, they ran on your Amiga, and the Realms was all just

there, this whole big complicated *interesting* world, and suddenly you're a person with opinions about THACO.

And now I get to write a book set here? And do all the things I always kinda wanted to do, and write down all the observations I've made? Hell yeah, sign me up.

Speaking of Forgotten Realms video games, my adult career is kinda based on one, specifically *Neverwinter Nights 2*. The male love interest in that game—sorry, developers—was the worst-written paladin I had ever encountered, and I got up on my high horse and yelled, "That is not how you write a paladin! *I will show you how you write a paladin!*"

The result was *Clockwork Boys*, one of my first adult novels, and its sequel, *The Wonder Engine*, which led to more books, which eventually culminated in a series of novels just about paladins, the *Saint of Steel* series. In a way, with den Suriel, I feel like I've come full circle back to D&D.

So thanks must go, belatedly, to the people who wrote Casavir's dialogue in NWN 2. Sorry. I know this probably isn't the accolade you wanted. (Sand's dialogue was *great*, though, which is why there is a suspiciously familiar moon elf selling potions in the Guild.)

Writing a tie-in like this isn't always easy, because you must end the book before the game starts. Since Astarion has a tragic backstory, this meant no triumphant, neatly wrapped ending. Things have to stay bad. That was a challenge for me, since, as longtime readers will know, I'm a sucker for a happy ending. But sometimes surviving is as good an ending as you're going to get.

The bit where den Suriel offers bread and salt to the unknown god and asks it to endure was based on an elegant and kind bit of microfiction from O. Westin. He graciously allowed me to make it the basis of the scene, for which I am grateful. He writes as @microsf on many platforms, and his work is lovely, the fiction equivalent of those people who can carve a grain of rice into the Taj Mahal.

Thanks go, as always, to my agent, Helen, who brought me the project, Alex and the crew at Random House who suggested me for it, and Serra, the very nice woman at WOTC who was probably not expecting me to come to the first meeting, slam down two pages of questions, starting with, "Okay, does Astarion have Spider Climb or not?" and touching on such diverse topics as the Spellplague, the mathematics of Cazador's victims, and whether I was allowed to make up my own religious order.

And of course, I could not possibly have written this without years spent gaming with my beloved party of weirdos: Tango, Amy, Jen, Natasha, Liz, Mike, and, of course, our almost-forever GM, my husband, Kevin. You are all delightful, regardless of which side of the screen I'm on.

Weasel Invicti!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T. KINGFISHER, aka Ursula Vernon, is the author and illustrator of more than fifty books at last count; and her works include the Hugo Award-winning webcomic *Digger* and the novels *Nettle & Bone*, *What Moves the Dead*, *Snake-Eater*, and many others. Her work has won multiple Hugo, Nebula, Dragon, Mythopoeic, and Locus awards. As Ursula Vernon, she wrote the bestselling *Dragonbreath* and *Hamster Princess* series for children. T. Kingfisher is the name she uses when writing for adults. She lives in New Mexico with her husband, cats, and garden.

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