

The Nettles were slick and muddy with the muggy summer rain that ran down in heavy sheets over Flint. The verdant plants that sprouted along the dirt roads in clusters of tangled greens were no doubt enjoying themselves, but Lisandra's carriage was not. It pulled to an abrupt stop on the hill that lead to the abandoned house she was seeking and she could just make out the driver's curses over the sound of rain against the leather roof.

"Sorry, miss!" his bald head appeared under the shelter of an umbrella, though his uniform was heavily soaked. "The road is too wet, they horses are just gonna start burying us if we keep moving. I'll have to turn us around and head back in."

Lisandra checked her watch and squinted out at the cloud-filled sky with a reluctant grimace before she grabbed her umbrella from the opposite seat.

"It's alright... I can make it on foot," she told him, pushing out of the cab and offering him some coins for the trouble.

"... you sure, ma'am?"

"Don't worry, darling... I'm not made of sugar," she smirked, slipping out under the shelter of her own umbrella. The smirk faltered slightly as she felt her boots sink a little in the mud. "... I'll be fine!"

Eager to get his carriage out of the Nettles, the driver didn't argue. He thanked her for the fare, wishing her luck as she gathered her skirt to avoid the mud starting off up the hill as fast as she could manage. The rain was warm and heavy, and by the time she'd made it into view of the old granary her skirt was speckled and she'd long since decided to stop wrestling with the umbrella against the wind. Though the dull mist she could see a lantern hanging in the doorway and she bolted across the field towards it. As she neared, a familiar figure leaned on the doorframe to the old silo.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, her arms were around him, lips locked to his like their warmth was the only thing that mattered. Damp curls clung to her cheeks and water dripped from her lashes and nose, soaking through her lover's shirt as he steadied them both against the support beam in the center, chuckling pleasantly between their lips meeting.

"I almost thought you weren't gonna show..." he murmured, brushing the wet curls back with his thumb as he grinned down at her.

"What's the matter, Connor?" she grinned, leaning in to kiss him again. "Miss me?"

"Course I blood missed you," he murmured. "But I was more worried you'd be stuck indoors with than old man all day."

She could see that look on his face already... the one where he thought more about where she was when she left than her being right here.

"I told him Lady Valcourt was having some trouble and I couldn't refuse a visit," Lisandra's fingers reached up to coil in his dark curls fondly. "Eustace always seems to want to keep her husband happy, so he didn't mind. I have a few hours to spare..."

Connor grimaced slightly at the mention of the old man's name, but as her nails drew circular motions against his scalp, he sighed, lowering his face until their noses touched.

"I suppose we should make the most of it, then?"

A cheshire grin spread across her painted lips and she lifted them once more to his.

Eventually the rain outside had calmed and the soft pin drops of water were barely heard against the tin roof over their rapid breaths. With a pleased sigh, Lisandra tugged at her tousled chemise and settled down on the picnic blanket with her lover, resting her head on his shoulder. Any more content and Lisandra would have been purring. Tilting her head up, she planted a soft, appreciative kiss against his jaw.

"I guess I kinda missed you too," she murmured, giggling softly the the afterglow.

Connor wrapped and arm around her, tucking the other arm behind his head to angle a grin down at her. "Mm, I might have caught a hint of that somewhere between all the tangled limbs, I think."

"Oh, how perceptive," she poked him in the side before settling in and letting a content silence fall over the silo.

Connor's fingers gently combed through her curls as the pair listened to the rain gentle falling and the distant sounds of the Nettles on a bustling afternoon. This was her favourite part of the week and not even a downpour would stop her from being here. She smiled contently, breathing in the earthy scent of him. Nothing like the perfumed noblemen. Connor smelled like hard work, saltwater, Nettles dirt and soapnut, and she loved it. He smelled like home. It was a strange thing to miss.

As that gnawing feeling of homesickness threatened the warmth of her afterglow, Lisandra sighed and tilted her head towards Connor.

"So, how's the old man doin'?" she asked, a little hesitant to burst their little bubble back into reality.

"The new medicine is actually helping," he replied, "We found a healer in the Nettles who mixes him a tincture that helps with his pain and a smoke blend for his lungs. She's a little cheaper than the last guy. Better, too."

"Is Lissa helpin' out?"

Connor's brow creased and he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, "... Lissa's not actually at the house anymore."

"What?" Lisandra sat up, shooting him a concerned scowl. "What happened?"

With a reluctant sigh, Connor adjusted his smallclothes and pushed himself up to sit on the picnic blanket beside her. He offered an awkward shrug, "Otis kinda kicked her out after she brought fey pepper back to the house. Saph found it when she was cleaning and thought it was something the healer left. When she gave it to Otis, he flipped his lid... almost coughed up a lung he was so worked up. I heard Lissa moved into a brothel down near the Pines with her dealer."

"Oh, shite..." Lisandra wilted a little. She'd never gotten along well with Lissa, but the crew was family, the irritable half-elf woman included. She'd never heard of anyone getting kicked out before. "I really am missing so much, aren't I?"

Connor angled a hesitant look in her direction, "You could always come home..."

Lisandra glanced up at her lover with a reluctant frown. It wasn't the first time Connor had made the suggestion, but neither of them had a sure-fire solution to cover the herbs Otis needed to stay healthy. She sighed as Connor's fingers reached out for hers and let them interlace as he continued.

"You can find a new con... I'll keep hustling cards," he suggested, "I could even take up another job in one of the factories to help cover the costs. We can find another way to make more coin that'll let you stay with us instead of your needy old wallet in North Shore..."

"We'll both bust our arses off and what... let Saph look after all the little ones?" she frowned, "She's just a kid, Con... that ain't fair. Eustace is an easy gig. He likes to show me off and feel like his old missus is still around and he pays more than enough to keep Otis comfortable, and help keep the kids fed."

She felt his thumb that stoked the back of her hand pause abruptly, "As long as you stay in his house at his beck and call."

"Well... yeah, it wasn't ideal" she admitted, "But at least he ain't a letch like Judge Valcourt. Eustace just likes to brag and show off to make himself feel young again. It's harmless."

He rolled those beautiful green eyes of his in disbelief and she reached up to tilt his face towards her, "... and one day I'll have enough saved up to set us up real nice and we won't have to worry so much."

"... and until then, I get to be your dirty little secret in the Nettles," he pulled away a little and tugged his linen shirt back on with a frown.

"C'mon, Connor... it's just a job," she pleaded gently, "The only thing it means is a nice, steady stream of coins. You of all people should get that..."

"Yeah, well I don't shack up with rich guys for coin," he retorted, reaching for his leather pants and turning his back to her.

Lisandra's lip curled and she got to her feet.

"... you know that sounds mighty close to callin' me a whore," she bit, and narrowed her eyes on him warningly as he glanced back. "You might wanna think *real careful* about what you mean."

"He pays you to be at his side, to dress you up, parade you around. Not to mention have you dote on him in place of his dead wife, Ly..." he drawled miserably, throwing his hands wide in a defeated gesture. "You might not be screwin' the old guy but you're out there fulfilling his fantasies... if it quacks like a duck..."

Lisandra's jaw dropped as she stared at him incredulously. After a few false starts as a response, she snatched up her summer dress. "What the hell is wrong with you? You're bein' a right arsehole today..."

Connor ran his hands through his hair, resting against an old hay bale as she dressed.

"I... just want you to come back home!" he growled, frowning we can figure out the rest later. I don't want you going back to his gilded cage, drinking your fancy wine and rubbing elbows with all the socialites when your family needs you."

"*This* is the best way I can help, Connor," she gestured to the finely beaded sundress that was the new brand for her these days. Well, minus the mud splatter on the hem. "The whole damn world runs on bloody coin. So does the Old Man's health. I can't just walk away from it without a better offer!"

"And that's the real reason, isn't it?" he scathed, crossing his arms. "It's *better*. You like living up in North Shore with him. You don't wanna come back home to the mud and the scrapin' by. You're comfortable."

"That's not-" she began to protest before he cut her off.

"You know what, I don't care..." he amended, hopping up from the hay bale. "Just forget I asked about it. I just didn't think that you talking a few nobles out of their gold was goin' to end up with you living with one of them. Why don't you just marry the guy and then you can take his entire fortune when he finally drops?"

Lisandra's fist balled up, nails digging into her palms.

"Ye know what? Maybe I should!" she snapped, feeling her eyes begin to prickle as she snatched up her umbrella and shook it. "Eustace may be dumb ol' fool but at least he appreciates the bloody effort I make. It might be smoke and mirrors and pretty words, but it's nice te have someone say 'hey, thank ye for everything yer doing for me' instead of always tryin' to diminish it!"

She wheeled on him, ignoring the slowly forming look of guilt on Connor's face as angry tears streaked her cheeks. "Yes, I left ye all! I can't come back whenever I like, and don't ye think that kills me too? I do it cos I gotta, and I'll keep doin' it until I don't anymore cos without the old man we'd all be dead in a damn alley, or locked up. I do it cos I fucking care and if ye can't get that through that jealous fucking skull of yours then I..." her voice cracked and she turned away with a frustrated sob. "Then I'm just gonna stop wasting my damn breath!"

She was out in the rain before Connor could get a word out. He stood there, deflated in the doorway watching her bolt across the small field that lead back to the roads and when he found his tongue again Connor swore. His hand dipped into the packet of his trousers, pulling out a silver ring set with a tiny sapphire.

"Well, shit..." his fingers curled around the humble bauble. That had *not* gone to plan.

It was after sunset when Lisandra snuck in the servant entrance of Eustace's townhouse, damp and splattered with mud, carrying her boots in hand. Unfortunately, she barely made it to the staircase up before a well-dressed gentleman with his salt-and-pepper hair tightly braided down his back turned the corner.

"Miss Lisandra?" he asked, looking aghast. "What in the Seven Kingdoms happened to you?"

Lisandra let her expression fall into one of embarrassment as she looked over her ruined dress.

"Oh, Pierre... I have had such a ghastly day," she began, stalling to think up an excuse for her horrendous appearance. "I was having tea with Armandine and she mentioned this secret little roadside merchant in the Nettles of all places who was selling the best apricots in Flint. I wanted to get some for Eustace on the way home, but my carriage had a mishap and I'm afraid now all I have is a fightfully messy outfit."

"Yes, you do look quite the mess..." he frowned, looking her up and down. The majordomo was always difficult to read, but if he suspected her lies, he had never once called her out on them. "Shall I tell the master you will not be joining him for dinner this evening?"

"Please let him know I returned with a headache, and have taken a bath," she nodded, looking sheepish under his gaze. "I will join him for a nightcap after I have rested."

"And no longer look like a puddle of mud?"

Lisandra would have appreciated the man's sass if it wasn't so often pointed in her direction.

"I'd appreciate it if you left that part out, Pierre," she frowned. "No need to cause Eustace any concern."

"Very well, Miss Lisandra... I will see to it the message is passed along," Pierre dipped his head before sauntering past her. No sooner than he'd reached the doors to the kitchen, Lisandra was up the stairs in a beeline for her quarters.

She ran a bath and left her muddied clothes for housekeeping to pick up, but as she soaked in the perfumed waters, it didn't feel the same.

You're too good for us now. You like living up in North Shore with him. You don't wanna come back home to the mud and the scrapin' by. You're comfortable.

As Connor's words clung to her. She couldn't help but wonder... what if he was right?