

Guts

"I loved you."

You stand in the wreckage of your words. Every scale on your body and all the spines down your back and tail, standing on end.

Loved.

Past tense participle of 'love'. To have *felt* deep affection for someone. Or to have liked and enjoyed them. Their company. Their warmth, the softness of their skin, the hitch in their breath as you take their hand in yours, softening them in a way that you swear only you would notice.

"You did?"

Her pitch rises slightly as she says it, leaning back on the chaise she had claimed when you entered, her claws twisting and tugging at a loose string on her viol.

You stay silent.

Instead, the clashing of goblets, the roars of laughter, and the easy chatter of people with simpler problems creep in to fill the space. The kind of tavern where a tiefling and a dragonborn slipping away to a back room doesn't warrant a second glance. The joys and merriment, only a door's width away.

You want to say something. Anything that elicits the same feeling from her that you have. The feeling that your heart is beating out of your chest, that she has taken your rapier and stuck you square with it. No.

It's too late. What would you even be apologising for? Your feelings? Having loved her? Loving her still? Would it even be true? Just say something, anything.

You don't.

She glances up for a second. The deep red of the velvet chaise, a dark canvas that makes her crimson skin glow in contrast. You catch a flicker of the orange embers in her eyes, your throat tightening as she holds you in her gaze. She looks at you the way you've seen her look at problems she's already solved, and something closes. Like you just confirmed something she'd already filed away.

"Do you have a problem with my performance, Kaelithra?"

You flinch. The name lands like ice, and you feel the heat that was rising in your chest falter for a moment.

"Don't call me that."

She traces the length of the neck of the viol, her long fingers finding the first peg and unwinding the string with the quiet patience of someone who has done this a thousand times before. You watch her hand wander, slowly loosening the first string and gradually pulling it away.

"Look, it's not that I didn't love you – don't love you." You correct yourself.

"Mhmm."

"But I mean—"

You wave your arms desperately as you talk, pacing the floor in front of her. It's stone flags cool beneath your feet, a welcome change to the burning sensation you can feel growing beneath your scales.

"You just stand there. You don't even look at me. I pour my heart out, and you don't – you won't –"

The word catches in your throat as you look up and see her attention still diverted by the instrument. She pulls the string away and tosses it to the floor.

"Even now!"

It comes out louder than you expect, and the tavern outside falls silent for a second. She doesn't even flinch, just reaches for a new string from her pack and continues securing it to the tailpiece.

"Kalyis!"

Your breathing becomes heavy, her name souring on your tongue as you mutter through gritted teeth.

"We shared our secrets, our dreams, and our innermost thoughts. It's just. It all feels like it matters more to me than it does to you."

She pauses for a second as she goes to unwind the next string but doesn't look up.

"Kaelithra –"

"Don't—"

"Fine. Dippy."

You catch yourself, your face contorting, each scale on your chest desperately trying to contain the orange blaze beneath as sparks form at the edge of your mouth.

"What is it exactly that you want from me?"

"I—"

Your feet move before you have time to realise what you're doing, the candlelight catching the slow curl of her tail as it drapes over the edge of the chaise. The only thing in the room that isn't perfectly still. Three steps. Maybe four. Then you're kneeling in front of her.

"I want you."

Your voice has dropped to a low whisper as you lean in closer, brushing the strands of short white hair away and tucking them behind her horns, revealing the soft skin of her neck and leaning gently into the crux.

"I thought I meant something to you, but, Kalyis, you're yet to show it." You whisper.

Even like this, as you hold her, taking her face in your hands, pulling her close enough to feel her warmth and catch the scent of cinnamon and myrrh, intense but with a sweetness underneath, there's nothing. She doesn't lean into your touch; there's no catch of her breath, no softening of her jaw.

She looks up at you, her eyes briefly landing on yours, steady and patient, the way she looks at everything. You find yourself looking at her mouth without meaning to. Looking for something. Anything. The way she used to-

She pulls the string away, dropping it to the floor with the first.

"If you're dissatisfied, it's hardly a qualm on my end if you want to seek other companionship."

It hits you like a punch to the gut. *Companionship*. The enjoyment of spending time with other people. Pleasant company. Something you offer a colleague or a stranger. You pull away, rising to your feet. Suddenly you're very aware of your limbs – your arms swinging lamely at your sides, claws digging into your palms.

"I can't believe you. Do you truly not care? Am I- were we? All those nights, all the-"

It comes out more defeated than you expect, and you're left, for the first time, without words. You exhale, your chest dimming and your scales flattening as the anger drains. She's looking at the damn viol again.

You stand in the silence. It swallows you whole, and you're left with this empty feeling in your chest as you watch her work. The third string loosens, her fingers moving expertly as she keeps the bridge in place while she pulls it away. You've both done this countless times before. One of you is distracted, the other desperate. You fight. You leave. You write. You perform for the crowds. Then you fuck. Rinse and repeat. You know that by next week you'll be in each other's arms again and—

"Can you grab the next string for me?"

Your thoughts are interrupted as you see her hand outstretched, reaching towards you and the fallen pack of strings at your feet. But this time you can't bring yourself to move. You stare at her outstretched hand, the callouses on her fingertips, worn smooth from years of playing, and the rosin dust settled into the creases of her knuckles. Her claws trimmed shorter than any tiefling you've met, neat and deliberate. You used to tease her about that. Then you understood why, and the joke became something you kept to yourselves.

Then it's gone. She rises to her feet, gently propping the viol against the back of the chaise before crossing toward you, not quite meeting your gaze. You grab her wrist before she can reach down, holding her there.

"Just look at me for once, will you?"

"Let go."

"No, Kalyis. Look at me."

A second passes. Maybe two. You can feel her pulse racing beneath your fingers. Fear, maybe excitement. You don't know which, or if it even matters. You've spent all night looking for proof of something, and here it is, under your thumb. Whether it's you or just the room or just the grip of your hand around her wrist. You don't let go.

She looks up at you. Her eyes on yours, and for once, nothing else competing for them. You don't know what you expected. A big romantic moment where her pupils dilate, she blushes at the sight of you, and you both fall into each other's embrace. The embers shifting, her face softening. Something to prove all of your doubts wrong. Something to tell you that this is landing somewhere real. But she just looks at you, and you look back, and the silence between you has a different quality now. Not empty, just waiting.

"I've never done this before, whatever this thing between us is. You know that right?"

She says nothing.

"The way I felt – feel – about you. I've never had this. I don't know how to do this."

"Let. Go."

"I'll let go when you tell me if this is as real to you as it is to me."

She leans forward, centimetres away, and you can't help it. Your eyes drop to her lips before you can stop them. The way her mouth curves when she's about to say something she knows will land. You've seen it on stage, watched it work on a hundred different people. You told yourself you were different.

"Let. Me. Go. Kaelithra."

She pulls her wrist away, snatching the strings from your feet.

You watch her find her place back on the chaise, the viol returning to her lap. Her fingers locate the fourth string. The last one. She unwinds it with the same unhurried patience as the first, the second, the third. Like none of this has touched her.

Kaelithra.

She knows exactly where to put it. How to make it strike best. You feel it settle somewhere low and old.

You stay where you are. You always do.

"So, I'm wrong then? About us?"

"I never said that."

"You may as well have."

"But I didn't, Kaelithra."

"Call me Kaelithra one more fucking time, Kalyis."

She doesn't look up, just threads the final string through the tailpiece with expert precision. Your breathing steadies, slow and measured in a way it hasn't been all night. You watch her turn the peg. Once. The string tightens. Twice. The sounds of the tavern seep back in. Someone laughing. A crash of someone dropping a goblet and the cheers that follow. The low thrum of people who will go home tonight, drunk and content. Unchanged. Three times.

"You're the only person. The only person other than my father that would-"

The string snaps. It catches her cheek as it does, and you both freeze.

You see the sliver of blood appear and grip the edge of your breeches to hold yourself back from tending to her. Neither of you moves as the thin line of red forms against her crimson skin, barely visible. You can't help but think how you would have reached for it without thinking. How you still want to.

"You're just like him." You whisper.

And her eyes find yours. For one second there is something there you can't name and don't get long enough to try.

She drops the snapped string to the floor.

You fall beside it.

[1822 words]