**Chapter Twenty**

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The thing about Minsc, Dynaheir had always thought, was that he was not so chaotic as people believed him to be.

Oh, certainly, he wasn’t a bastion of order. He went on about hamsters, he screamed all the time, and if he saw something that he defined as evil, he would be charging to smash it down with three hundred pounds of muscle and steel before she even realized he was moving. Traveling with him had been damnably complicated, even *before* she’d gotten kidnapped by dog-men.

But the thing was, he was *predictably* chaotic. Once you knew him well enough, you could work out pretty easily what he would do in any given situation, and how that situation would be changed by his addition, i.e. it would immediately become louder, more hectic, and if it was evil there would most likely soon be a lot of blood. So as soon as they had realized the horrid man they had come up behind in the tunnels was firing arrows into the crowd of the Undercellars, she hadn’t even *tried* to stop Minsc from doing what Minsc did. She had just begun reacting the way one had to when Minsc was being himself.

As Minsc charged, because Minsc *always* charged, charging was his default behavior, she had begun by weaving a simple spell around him to protect him from arrows and other missile weapons. He was a large target and despite having the element of surprise, he was tended to spoil it by virtue of being extremely loud. So it was that when he screamed for his hamster to consume the eyes of his target (while she was aware that some hamsters did in fact have carnivorous tendencies, she was fairly sure Boo was not one of them based on the fact his general behavior in any given day was to eat his weight in seeds and then roll over), the archer at the door turned and loosed an arrow into his chest with the practiced skill of a trained killer. And that arrow, which might well have pierced Minsc’s fine armor and harmed him, bounced off a wall of magenta light. And when Minsc was charging, you really only got one shot at stopping him.

As her bodyguard crushed the man against the tunnel wall and then introduced him violently to about thirty pounds of sharpened metal while he was still stunned, Dynaheir took the opportunity to study the scene and determine where he would be charging next. It was not easy; smoke and flame abounded, the throng of people and far too many corpses littered the area, and the killers moved about like shadows in the madness. She thought she saw a the light of a spell go off on the far side of the chamber, but had no way of knowing who had cast it or why. Minsc might have chosen to charge for it, though, he reacted well to lights and bright colors, so she made a note of the location, and... Oh, no, never mind, there was only one possibility. There, in the center of the large corridor, just barely visible through the smoke, were two ogres coming to investigate

“*EVIL, MEET MY SWORD! SWORD! MEET! EVIIIIIIIL!”*

Yes, there he went. Well, she was fairly certain he could defeat one ogre, given that he was already nearly the size of it and even had a similar level of baldness, but two was a bit much for even him. She sighed, and drew herself into another spell. She didn’t want to start any more fires than were already burning, and she wasn’t so good at stopping a foe with other means as Xan was. Still, she did have a few tricks.

She shifted one hand into her robes, drawing a small pinch of spider web and casting her will into it, murmuring a spell as she did. She threw the pinch of silk in a gentle underhand toss as the spell was completed… and it flew like an arrow toward the further ogre, the one that Minsc had not yet chosen to charge at while screaming. He would get to it eventually, of course.

And the massive web that burst into life with the ogre at its center ensured the beast would still be standing there when he did.

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Viconia was a drow, and she survived. When she saw a crossbow leveled at her, she chose to survive at any cost, and preferably a cost paid by another. At this range, the bolt would go through her horribly crafted wooden surfacer shield, likely without so much as slowing. And so she dove, abandoning the fallen Silvershield and unconcerned with what may or may not have happened to her alleged party members if one of them happened to be behind her.

The bolt passed through the spot where her head had been half a second earlier, as she rolled and came smoothly to her feet with natural elven dexterity. Someone screamed like a young female child, which she assumed meant Edwin had been wounded, but she didn’t have time to confirm it. Even before she rose to her feet, she was already casting a quick, single-syllable prayer to the Nightsinger, one to bolster her own armor for the inevitable…

Impact. The first of the shapeshifting beasts struck her, its claws digging into her chainmail with a slash that took her in the shoulder and sent her spinning back to the ground before she’d even had a chance to come fully to her feet. Were it not for her Armor of Faith, the beast likely would have buried its hand up to the wrist in her flesh; as it was, she felt chainmail links break and flesh bruise with an impact like being clubbed by a giant.

That had actually happened to her, once. Cousin Mortisal had decided that Viconia’s mother might be amenable to adopting her into the main House succession if she was short one daughter, and had taken the almost charmingly simple tactic of pushing her elder cousin off the viewing platform into the slave pens while the merchants were offering a live surface ettin for purchase. It had been so ridiculously stupid that she hadn’t even considered it a possibility, and as a result it had come *very* close to working.

Fortunately, it had also taught her a lesson that most people never learned: sometimes the most dangerous enemy is not a brilliant schemer, but a violent, impatient, idiot.

Shar-Teel did not look like a killing machine, at first glance. She wasn’t particularly tall, and her features, other than the tattoo over her eye, were almost *cute.* Unlike Viconia herself, or that ridiculous half-giant woman Sephiria, she was not immediately identifiable as the greatest threat in the room from a first glance. The two dopplegangers split their focus, one slamming a blow like a sledgehammer into Kagain’s raised shield, and one seeking to pin Viconia to the floor and bite her throat out, ending the threat of the infamous drow before it could truly begin. And so they left themselves open to the worst possible thing to be with in close quarters like these: A violent, impatient, idiot.

Shar-teel was not a large woman, she did not *look* like a danger. Her armor was bulky and poorly maintained, and her weapon was a simple, unadorned blade. Compared to a drow, a dwarf warrior, a Red Wizard (if he really was one, Viconia had her doubts) she was the bottom of the threat hierarchy. And so it was that the dopplegangers did not realize until she was literally between them, having not seemed to move at all, that they were in trouble.

That armor might have *looked* bulky, but the material was actually mostly leather with some metal studs, and it didn’t weigh her down at all. What it *did* do was hide muscles like steel cords. And that sword might have looked plain and unadorned, but in a world of master smiths and great enchanted weapons, it was often overlooked that a blade didn’t have to be fancy to be damn efficient at cutting things.

With the speed of a striking scorpion, and roughly the same level of empathy, Shar-teel spun her blade in a brutal arc from one side of her body to the other, the blade hissing as it sliced through the air faster than a flying arrow. The doppleganger battling Kagain was struck from the front, and had time to raise a clawed hand to partially deflect the stroke; it lost two fingers and leaped back, hissing in fury.

The one atop Viconia was struck from the back, and never saw it coming. And would never see anything coming ever again, because what *it* lost was about half of its head.

In the hall outside, Slythe smiled at the sight, and dropped his crossbow. Reaching into the scabbard at his hip, he drew a blade that was not boring at *all;* forged of black metal, the weapon was nearly invisible in the darkened hallway save for a pale, blood-red glow that faded in and out around it every few seconds. “Well, this looks like it might end up fun after all. Let’s go, boys.”

His two remaining doppleganger companions, still in the stolen forms of Shadow Thieves, drew blades of their own, eyes glittering with hunger at the smell of blood.

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Sephiria pushed the dead assassin of her scavenged sword, and wondered if she should be regretting her life choices.

The chaotic mass of people had mostly dispersed or, if she had to be brutally honest with herself, mostly been massacred while she was helpless to prevent it, but that didn’t make things easier to navigate. The fire was spreading; the tunnels might have been stone, but they were filled with flammable material and had enough open space and tunnels to draw in air to keep it burning. She could barely see for the smoke, and the ground was littered with debris, much of it searing to the touch. And she, for what felt like the millionth time her common sense had tried to bring this up and been shot down, didn’t even have any *pants,* much less armor. Gods above, she looked like someone who should be *working* in the Undercellar, not someone who should be fighting for her life in it!

“Seffie! We have spellslingers,” Imoen chirped in her ear. “Follow me, and try to stay low.”

“GAH!”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to surprise ya. I forgot you’re a lumbering type,” Imoen said. “Anywho, I been scouting, and it looks like their last up-close sort just got a, y’know, blood removal from you. Khally and Jarry are moving to the south entrance, there’s a mage there who started the fires, and I figure we should hit north. Some guy chanting and shouting, but I think he’s a priest. You love killing evil priests, right?”

“Lead the way,” Sephiria said, fighting down the urge to yell at her sister for not treating this with the gravity it had earned, but now wasn’t the time and honestly she had worked out some time ago that insufferable cheer was just how Imoen reacted to tragedy. The fact it was also how she reacted to everything else didn’t lessen the fact she needed to cope somehow.

Besides, killing evil priests was almost literally her job, so Imoen had a point there.

The two girls, staying low as they progressed like wraiths through the calamity (or, well, Imoen did, practically *dancing* through the debris and seeming almost like a part of the smoke herself. Sephiria tripped over a collapsed tent and fell face-first into embers, setting her hair briefly on fire before she was forced to literally rip a handful of it off her head), moved to what Imoen assured Sephiria was north. And over the crackle of fire, the moans of the dying, and the screams of Minsc apparently attempting to eat an ogre alive, she *could* hear something. A chant that rolled over her, feeling more oppressive and toxic than any smoke in her lungs could hope to be.

Cyric, she heard his name in the prayers and it made her hair stand on end. She wondered, vaguely, if the priest calling out to the current Lord of Murder realized exactly what his master was planning? He had to know, so deep was he in Sarevok’s cult, but he still prayed to Bhaal’s killer? Perhaps Cyric didn’t believe Sarevok could succeed, or he just didn’t care so long as enough people died in the process. He was the god of madness too, after all. He didn’t necessarily have to make sense.

And really, it didn’t matter. What *did* matter, as she burst through the smoke like an avenging deva, was that he’d be losing a priest soon.

She didn’t know for certain he had started the fire, but his prayers had suffused the Undercellar; what might have been a mere riot had become a massacre due to the fear and chaos he and his allies had infused upon the crowd with their magic. He saw her burst from the flame, sword in her hand still bloodied and reflecting the gleam, and for a moment she got to see in his own eyes the fear he had inspired in others.

She strangled down the urge to find this satisfying, an urge she had come to realize would plague her the rest of her life. The black flame burning on his bared holy symbol and the blood smeared across his face like war paint made this harder than usual.

The man was tall, able to look her in the eye, and he wore a suit of chain and carried a mace in one hand. The weapon was pure black, not reflecting any light from the flames around him, and just looking at it made her feel cold. She was, in contrast, wearing rags and carrying a blade that was both not enchanted and she suspected was not the finest quality.

He still looked afraid. This was wise.

He raised his weapon to deflect her strike, and she struck against his guard with muscles that could comfortably lift nearly triple her own body weight. His enchanted mace held, and her sword snapped against its haft, but that hardly mattered; he might have been tall, but he was a slender man and his stance had been an attempt to stop her dead, rather than parry her weapon. Magic weapon or no, with a strike of that magnitude his slim arms had just taken roughly a thousand pounds of impact. The man screamed as his weapon flew from his numb hands in a spray of shards from her shattering blade; if she had still been using Tazok’s enchanted weapon, the blow would have kept right on going through his guard to cleave his chest open.

As it was, it merely broke one of his wrists and left him fatally off-balance as her sister slid up behind him out of the smoke, so smoothly and flawlessly it was like she was shimmering into existence from thin air.

Sephiria knew as well as anyone that adventuring was a brutal career, and life on the road among the monsters killed innocence swiftly and surely. But the sight of Imoen sliding a dagger into a man’s neck was nothing she had ever wanted to witness.

Sephiria felt slightly cold as she watched the man crumple to the floor. Candlekeep and the little girl who stole her desserts had never seemed so far away.

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Tamoko looked over the battle, her spells lending clarity to her sight. “The druid and the warrior move to engage the last of the cultists. One of your ogres has fallen to that mad giant. I do not see the elf mage, which suggests to me that he is looking for us as we speak. Do you believe that your spells could turn this battle around?”

“Of course not!” Cythandria snapped. “They’ve killed almost all of Sarevok’s Chosen, and you think I have a spellbook to deal with that?! He didn’t tell us… he never said she was *like him.* I thought she supposed to be one of the weak, pitiful ones with none of Bhaal’s true power to their name. But this…!”

“She is a killer by nature, and she has gathered a formidable force to herself,” Tamoko said. “I saw what they did at the tower. Even Sarevok himself was struggling to stand against their combined powers. I had hoped that taking them by ambush while they were weakened would be sufficient to overwhelm them, but… this madness, the swirl of chaos and death, is where Bhaal’s children thrive. She rides the wave of blood without fear and strikes without mercy. All we have accomplished here is to slaughter those who barely lived to begin with; she will not fall in battle to such as we.”

“You might have said something to begin with! I’d have brought more tools to deal with her, or more likely *not have come,*” Cythandria hissed. “We need to go. Leave the zealots to die, Sarevok can always find more. He’ll want us to report to him…”

“Of our failure? He will kill you if you go back to him,” Tamoko said flatly. “You haven’t seen the rage he feels over the delays to his plan. He will kill anyone who angers him even slightly now. Even I would not be safe. I suggest you leave the city and never return.”

The mage whirled on her, pretty face smudged by sweat and smoke, the gleam in her eyes having far more to do with hatred than firelight. “And leave you the only person at his side, just like you’ve always wanted? I think not, harlot. What you’ve never understood is that the power he offers is worth the risk. *Any* risk. And besides, you’re our *commander,* aren’t you? The blame for this falls on you more than me, and I-”

Without another word, Tamoko spun, and with a single smooth motion slammed her mace home against Cythandria’s temple, sending the frail, young woman spinning to the ground with a sickening crunch. Tamoko was fairly certain the sound had been her skull shattering and the first blow had been fatal, but it was always best to be certain; she brought the weapon down on Cythandria’s head three more times as she lay prone. By the third one, the mage’s pretty face no longer resembled anything human, much less attractive.

Tamoko took a deep breath, fully aware she had just taken a step she could never go back from. Sarevok would not forgive this; he cared nothing for Cythandria, but she had been his creature and he would view her murder as stealing from him. He never forgot or forgave a trespass. “For what it is worth,” she said to the body, “I did offer you the chance to flee.”

Calling upon her gods, she chanted the words to a spell to purge illusions. The elf mage, gleaming sword in hand and an almost comical expression of shock on his face, stood less than twenty feet away. He had clearly been preparing to stab her in the back under a cloak of invisibility (which her upbringing informed her was dishonorable, but considering she had just murdered one of her own allies by ambush, she didn’t feel she could judge), only to find his plans thrown off somewhat by one of his targets smashing the other’s skull in.

She nodded at him, and threw her weapon to clatter to the floor at his feet. “I would speak to your leader. You may consider me your prisoner, please.”

“I… that… what?” the elf said.

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Coran turned a corner, Skie Silvershield following hot on his heels somewhat against his will. “I really wish I had paid more attention to the layout of your home on our way to find you,” he admitted.

“You have really pretty ears. Are all elf ears so pretty?” she asked. “That other elf didn’t have ears as pretty as yours.”

“Not helping, dear. You could direct me, you know? Trying to find the guest room, remember? Lives at stake?”

“I told you, we have five of those!” Skie protested. “Do you want the north guest room, the west guest room, the northwest guest r-“

Coran sighed, turning another corner and finding what appeared to be the third closet of cleaning supplies this damnable place had. Honestly, who would *ever* need to live in a house this large? Twisting hallways and at least twenty rooms that all looked alike; it would have been the bane of his existence if he’d had to sneak in for a dalliance with the owner’s wife. And he probably would be doing that later!

And then he heard, faint but audible, the sound of something snarling followed by metal impacting metal, which was usually a pretty solid hint. Since starting to associate with this group, he had come to realize pretty quickly that if you heard someone trying to kill someone else, it was probably his ‘allies.’

Maybe after this he should consider staying on with the Silvershields. They’d need new guards, the girls were prettier than Shar-teel, and there weren’t any drow. But for now, it was time to get back to the awful people and make sure they weren’t killed by people worse than them.

“All right, dear,” Coran murmured, keeping his tone low enough to not carry as the sounds of battle grew louder. “We have the chance to ambush them here, so please do not…”

They turned the corner, and saw the battle in the guest chambers.

*“Daddy!”* Skie screamed at the sight of her father, crumpled on the floor, before rushing headlong into the fray with only a dagger.

“… be yourself,” Coran finished.

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Edwin was quite displeased with the performance of this group.

For starters, it had women in in it and neither of them had noticed his stunning good looks, marking them as idiots. But more than that, he felt like the none of them, either the foolish wenches who didn’t know what they were missing, nor the inbred barbarian dwarf, nor the prissy ridiculous forest elves, respected his contributions to the group.

(A more sensible person would note that he had not, in fact, *made* any contributions to the group, and was in fact endeavoring to cast as few spells as humanly possible whilst in their company because they did not deserve the sweat of his noble brow. As a result, most people would have said he had no right to question why he was being unappreciated, because the reason was obvious. Most people weren’t Edwin.)

And so, when the going got tough, with two of the shapeshifting monsters pressing the dwarf’s defenses, the lead assassin matching the insufferable barbarian woman blow for blow, and quarters too closed for most spells anyway… Edwin chose to run away. In a dignified manner, of course. Not out of fear. Out of *disdain.*

It wasn’t like he could help, really, he reminded himself. This was such a messy, brutal, close quarters rout that magic was next to worthless. Fireballs and lightning bolts would just end up killing everyone, and summoning monsters in such a place? There was simply no *room.* And so when the lead assassin had pushed the barbarian wench back into the room, engaging her and the drow simultaneously with the sort of lethal skill that Edwin chose to never, ever allow himself to be nearby. So when the door appeared to be clear for even a few precious seconds, Edwin chose to take advantage of this.

Frankly, it was for the best. His extremely important mission from the second undersecretary to the aide of the aide of the Zulkir of Illusion’s second-cousin (… silence, he was a *very important* official in one small city about sixty miles southwest of the capital) was, after all, to assassinate a deadly Rashemi witch. He couldn’t die here, lest he fail in his mission. He was *very brave*.

He made it about ten feet when he encountered a young woman running the other way, screaming and brandishing a knife. He prepared himself to surrender without regret and then summon up a spell to blast her in the back of the head when she stopped paying attention to him, because he was a strategic genius. He opened his mouth to fake sincerity.

 She stabbed him in the chest and ran past him, still screaming. Something about her father.

*I hate everyone,* he thought mildly as he fell against the wall, pressing a hand against his gushing stab wound. It didn’t hurt terribly, he just felt terribly cold and had no strength in his limbs. That was probably not a good sign, when he stopped to think about it.

“Sweet Sehanine, that woman is more dangerous to *us* than she is to the people trying to kill her family,” the second elf, the more flighty one, said as he knelt next to Edwin. “She may have nicked your heart. Hang on, I have potions.”

“Haste would… be appreciated,” Edwin said, which was the closest thing he could manage to saying ‘thank you.’

“What spells have you that might help?” Coran asked, unstoppering his first potion. “I assume you were getting some distance to attempt weakening the foe, or filling them with confusion and fear?”

“… Yes, that is what I was planning.”

“Good man! I can get to like you.”

“(As if your approval is anything to me other than the buzzing of an insect, forcing me to waste my sorcerous might in defense of fools and barbarians.)”

“What?”

“Nothing! Another potion, please,” Edwin said, wondering if he had any spells that actually *would* help without, for instance, killing the entire party and inspiring an irritating elf to stab him in the back. He tended to prefer grand, elaborate balls of flame and destruction that properly showed off the power of Edwin… er, the power of Thay. That wasn’t ideal for fighting the foe in a room the size of a cigar box and surrounded by people he would be executed for killing...

Huh.

He reached into the pockets of his robes, and withdrew a handful of scrolls that he had discretely stolen from the libraries of the mine overseer, Davaeorn. He had been, of course, meaning to keep them for himself, but hadn’t at the moment the skill to cast them from his spellbook… erm, that was to say, he had not had *time to copy them,* yes. And they were… *interesting.* A bit outside his usual specialization, but they could be worked with.

And, well, if they killed everyone, at least he could claim it was by *accident.*

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Kristin giggled at the sight of the burning tree. It would normally not amuse her in the slightest to kill something that couldn’t scream, but in this case, it was worth it. If there was one thing she liked more than killing (and there honestly *was* only one thing) it was seeing her Slythe happy as a clam, and nothing made him happier than getting to drive a sword through some poor defenseless thing’s eye. “Trapped, trapped, trapped like rats,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Poor little Entar, his home is his tomb. My baby is gonna be sooooooo sweet on me for this…”

“You know,” whispered a voice in her ear. “A spell of invisibility only helps so much when you’re too psychotic to stop from talking to yourself.”

She spun with the speed of a striking snake, her dagger slashing through the night sky. All this amazing display of killer instinct and reflex accomplished was to ensure the elf’s own blade entered her side, rather the small of her back.

Kristin wasn’t a fighter like her husband, she was just a killer. She didn’t derive the same joy he did from a victim that fought back; she attacked from ambush, always, and fled long before any survivors could attempt to strike back at her. As a result, all of her gear and spells were designed to kill as quickly and hopefully painfully as she could manage. She wore no armor, nor even any magical equipment that might have stopped a steel blade going through her thin clothing.

She felt the cold fire pierce her unarmored side, and she knew from inflicting more than one such wound herself that her liver had been struck. The elf wasn’t an expert, though. He could have put his dagger into her spine and paralyzed her, but he had spoken, warned her, tried to be *dramatic*. She was probably going to die from this wound, but not immediately. She could still *move,* and if she could move, she could *kill.*

Fighting through the weakness in her limbs, letting the pain *infuriate* her, she lashed out like a wild animal, ripping her dagger across Acherai’s face. And that was her second, and final, mistake.

The elf hadn’t held on to his dagger. He had stabbed her and jumped back immediately, leaving the weapon in her side while he got distance, and that was when she understood he hadn’t been being *dramatic.* He hadn’t been totally certain where she was, and he had been luring her into making an offensive action that would dispel her invisibility. And now it was well and truly purged, and he was already twenty feet away from her, fast as a damn snake while the rest of the world seemed to slow down around her…

And he was holding a wand.

He smiled, and spoke the activation word, and the chill in her limbs was burned away by lightning roaring through her body. The last thing she saw before it all went black was something glowing, poisonous and gold, behind his eyes, and she had to admit it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen since the only time she had gotten to witness Sarevok taking a life with his own hands. It had been like an apprentice sculptor watching a master at work as he produced the finest work of his career.

She’d told Slythe afterwards that she’d have offered herself to him freely at that moment, with the blood coating his arms and the golden fire behind his demonic eyes, and she wouldn’t have cared if he’d rutted her or murdered her, just so long as he’d touched her with his hands still warm and dripping. Her husband had grinned and admitted he would have done the same thing. They’d made love that night, ferociously, the cooling corpse of the innkeeper still in their room after they killed him just for the sheer joy of the act.

Kristin smiled as she died, content with a satisfying life.

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Kagain wasn’t happy, because he was never happy unless he was drinking a flagon to celebrate a vast sum of gold falling into his possession. But now he was not happy because he somewhat suspected he was going to die.

The man, just a damn human sellsword as far as he could tell, not even a monster like the others, had turned out to be possibly the most skilled fighter he’d faced in twenty years of mercenary work. He was armored in leather only, and carried no shield, but it didn’t matter because Kagain couldn’t *hit* him. He moved like a wasp, just barely outside the edge of every attack aimed his way, until he saw even the smallest of openings… at which point he stung, his blade slipping between armor plates to pierce veins with precision that Kagain would have called impossible if he didn’t have the bleeding wounds to prove it had happened. As much as he hated to admit it, the drow’s prayers were the only thing that had kept him from bleeding out after the bastard had gotten one absurdly perfect stroke at his throat, slipping that damn blade in the millimeter between his shield and the neck of his armor.

A dwarf warrior, and the only reason he was still alive was that he was being constantly bolstered by a dark elf’s prayers to a human goddess. If he’d been one of those fanatical Clangeddin-loving types, he’d have died on the spot of shame. As it was, he was just annoyed that he seemed poised to die anyway, with the bitchy one now fending off three shapeshifters and the mage having made a run for it.

And then things went a little weird, which was Kagain’s proof that he’d grown from this whole sorry adventure. Because a year ago, he would have found this *extremely disturbing,* but at this point it was basically business as usual.

First, a human woman, he’d have pegged her as young but it was hard to be sure because they all looked the same, scrawny beardless things, ran into the room screaming and waving a knife. This caused basically everyone to immediately turn to her, because it was the sort of thing where if a battle was going on, you had to assume she was here to join the other side or risk getting stabbed in the back. In this particular case, it wasn’t entirely clear *who* she was trying to help, but Kagain could live with that, because who she *did* help was whoever was losing, which was them.

And this was because, just before she attempted to stab Slythe and was consequently murdered by a ruthlessly efficient, lightning-fast counter, she tripped over her own feet and slid under his strike, the blade skipping off the top of her scalp instead of slashing her throat open. She shrieked and tumbled, most likely knocked out of the fight immediately despite not dying… and turning her into a hundred-pound missile aimed directly at Slythe’s legs. The man, as always, dodged flawlessly and with inhuman speed.

Which sad for him, left him off-balance enough for Kagain to slam the edge of his shield into the man’s kidney from behind. He would have preferred the hammer, but his shield arm was closer and lighter, and he knew that even a half-second delay might let the bastard dance away again. Not having any of that.

The human gasped in pain as something snapped in his torso, biting back a scream. To his credit, he didn’t fall, and even spun on Kagain to strike at the dwarf’s head with that wicked blade. But the strike was slower, lacking the fluid grace of his normal blows, and Kagain ducked beneath it, bending at the knees… and then using that posture to lunge. Head-first.

Kagain wasn’t a battlerager by any stretch of the imagination, and honestly had no respect for anyone so kill-crazy. But he had seen one or two fight in his day, and he couldn’t deny they did some good work. For example, it wasn’t until a dwarf saw one of his kin headbutt an orc until its head split open that he realized how very *hard* his own skull actually was. Particularly wrapped in a helmet.

With horns on it.

The man’s leather armor was clearly enchanted, because even propelled by Kagain’s impressive leg muscles, the metal spikes didn’t pierce it. But he was still being hit in the stomach by three-hundred pounds of dwarf condensed into two points the size of arrowheads. For the second time in as many minutes, something made a sickening crack within his body, and Kagain smiled. Humans were fragile, they could only afford to have so many things break in there. The man leaped back with the impact, blood leaking from the side of his mouth, and one hand wrapped protectively around his midsection. Kagain saw the hate in his dark eyes, and it brought a glimmer of warmth to his greedy heart.

Even better, the shapeshifters were starting to lose their nerve as well; they still surrounded Shar-teel, but she was not so pressed as before. Their attention was divided between her and their failing master, and she wasn’t the sort of woman who one could afford to be distracted from. One of them was already missing an eye, and a second had enough grey ichor flowing down his body that Kagain had to assume only adrenaline (or whatever they used) was keeping the bastard upright.

“Drow. Throw yer prayers to the wench, I got this one,” he said gleefully, raising his shield and hammer before him in a marching guard stance…

And Slythe, his eyes glimmering with madness, unwrapped his arm from around his torso to reveal a potion in a fire-red bottle that seemed to gleam within, a pale yellow light filtering through the glass. Kagain’s eyes widened, because there was *no* good coming of something that so clearly wanted to explode in quarters as close as these…

And then Edwin ‘helped.’

 (\*)

 Acherai entered the manor again, wondering vaguely if this was the wrong choice. He heard the screams the first floor, and while none of them *sounded* like his team, because none of them sounded even remotely human, he had to wonder what was going on.

The monsters were dopplegangers; he hadn’t ever seen one before, but he’d read of them in books more than once. They were certainly more dangerous than an unarmed human being, but their true danger was in their ability to shift their form and copy the memory of their prey. Trained warriors like Kagain and Shar-teel, in a defensible position with mage and cleric support, should have been able to handle the few that an assassination squad would have available. He had even sent Coran back to help while he went outside to scout out their planned escape route.

Skie had gone too, and that probably had made things worse, but at least if she was gazing goggle-eyed at Coran, she wasn’t smashing wooden objects into Acherai’s face.

In any event, he had gone outside to find their planned escape route on fire, and gone back *inside* to find something releasing inhuman screams that, upon further inspection, actually sounded more *furious* than in pain.

*One of them did something. Viconia would focus on keeping herself alive, her spells tend to be low key. So… Edwin. I haven’t had much chance to check his spell repertoire, given his intense desire to be of no use whatsoever. I have no idea what he can even-*

He turned the corner, to see three dopplegangers, two of them missing at least part of their arms, and all of them foaming at the mouth and ripping at their own flesh, smash through the *wall* and come running directly at him, though they clearly didn’t actually *see* him; he dove for cover through an empty door, and one of the dopplegangers ran right past it, howling madly at nothing in particular. The second tried to follow suit, but did not make it as far… because the third, behind it, leaped on its back and, in a blind rage sunk its jagged fangs into the back of its own partner’s neck. As Acherai watched through the open door, the creature tore a fist-sized chunk of flesh and bone from its fellow and spat it against the wall. The fallen doppleganger did not even attempt to struggle, just flopped bonelessly on the ground while its killer rose and let out a mindless howl, turning to smash its fists into the nearest wall; fighting some vision only it could see, or simply so maddened it needed to smash anything and everything, Acherai couldn’t have said.

*… ... Huh. I guess he actually is a wizard after all. I confess, I was starting to wonder if he was faking it,* Acherai thought numbly. He took a step backwards and pushed the door as closed as it could get with a corpse in the way, while the monster raged outside, tearing chunks out of the plaster and screaming mindlessly.

He could afford a break, after all. The team *seemed* to be doing all right.

(\*)

The Undercellar was gone, for all intents and purposes. The place had been a pit long before it burned, and the people within it had been the scum of the world, depraved and sinful; they had spent their nights in this hole, losing their minds to chemicals and sating their lusts on women and men so desperate to survive that they sold themselves, because it was the only thing they had.

Sephiria still felt deep in her soul that they hadn’t deserved what had been done to them. If a place could be said to be a Hell on Toril, that place had been it.

“Khalid. Jaheira,” she said hoarsely, her throat burning from the smoke and the dry, burning air. “Did…”

“If any of the enemy survived, they are running for their lives. The engagement is done. We should move,” Jaheira said flatly. “Go with Khalid, flee through the sewers. Try to get out of the city, I will find the others and follow you.”

“That isn’t what I was going to ask,” Sephiria growled. “The people. Did anyone at all…”

Jaheira sighed. “I do not know, child. Sarevok’s acolytes were using the crowd to spread chaos, and between them and the fire… I believe Scar was trying to save who he could, but in that madness, I do not even know if he survived, much less if he managed to organize any sort of evacuation. I’m sorry.”

Sephiria clenched her hands into fists, the handle of her borrowed sword cracking under the pressure. “Damn them. Damn *him!* How could he… why would he do a thing like this?! Me, I could understand, but all of these people! They were *helpless,* no threat to anyone, there was no *purpose* to it, no…”

“There does not have to be a purpose beyond death, with him. Not anymore.”

She spun, blade raised, to see an armored woman of darkened skin and unusual features; a Kara-turan, she thought, a few had made the journey to Candlekeep over the years she had lived there, despite the distance from their lands. She wore full plate, a suit of beautiful make, but her weapon was strapped to her back and Xan stood behind her, a wand raised and pointed at the back of her head. She smiled slightly.

“I understand your first instinct is most likely to kill me. It is a part of who you are,” she said. “However, I have surrendered to your ally and seek to do you no harm. I wish only to parley, Child of Bhaal.”

Sephiria’s eyes narrowed, something dark and burning roaring up in her heart. “If you know who I am, that means you belong to Sarevok. You came here with the others. Tell me why I should not *tear you apart* for what you… *monsters* did here?!”

Tamoko smiled sadly. “What Sarevok has done is crime against man and gods alike, and I have aided him willingly time and again. I deserve death, and I do not doubt my soul is forfeit to whatever devil cares to claim it when I find it. I am not the first person to damn themselves for love, I’m sure.”

“You are not helping your case,” Jaheira said, stepping forward to stand next to Sephiria. “And we need to make haste. Explain why we should not kill you and have done with it?”

Xan coughed. “She *did* kill one of her own allies, and surrendered to me…”

“So she is a traitor as well as a murderer?” Jaheira asked.

“I am loyal to Sarevok. *Not* to Bhaal Reborn,” the woman said calmly. “I act in his best interests, and I feel he no longer knows what they are. I want to save him from himself, before the monster he has become consumes him to the point even his soul burns away in Bhaal’s flame and all that remains is Death Incarnate. Do you understand me, godchild?” she locked eyes with Sephiria, and the young paladin felt the fury inside her flicker at the sensation. It was… uncomfortably like the woman was gazing into her mind and what she saw there pleased her in some way. “I have some knowledge of your condition. I know the impulses you feel. The fact you control them, even if not fully… it speaks greatly of you. All I ask is that you help another soul with your curse do the same, if you can.”

“You see why I brought her. She has a lot of interesting things to say,” Xan said dryly. “Besides, lady druid, I have to point out that Greycloaks do not traditionally execute unarmed prisoners without a trial. And to be perfectly blunt, given how *absolutely outmatched* we are by the resources of our enemy—which might I remind you include the city’s entire army?—we could use any allies we could gather, however distasteful you find them. That we might live another few days, at the least. Perhaps even weeks!”

“Your friend is not wrong,” Tamoko said softly, but her gaze never left Sephiria’s and behind her gray orbs was nothing but iron, as cold and determined as her tone was gentle. “Particularly not when I can tell you, right now, what Sarevok plans to do and where he plans to do it. In return, I ask your oath of assistance.

“Do we have a bargain?”

And Sephiria, feeling very much like she was reaching out to a Devil, even as the Hells burned just down the sewer corridor… nodded once, sharply, and turned to walk away in the direction Jaheira had indicated without another word.

The path ahead looked very dark, but at least she was still moving forward. That would have to do for now.