**Chapter Seventeen**

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Sephiria sighed deeply, concentrated, and pressed a hand against the worst of her wounds. A wave of cooling energy ran down it, and she nearly *hissed* in relief, the bliss of pain vanishing almost more than she could bear.

Not ideal.

She did not want to use these powers. She didn’t exactly fear them anymore, not since meeting Sarevok, but she didn’t fully trust them. But the fact of the matter was, if she stayed here, all her friends were going to die. Sarevok would hunt them down with brutal efficiency, limitless resources, and an unrelenting hatred she barely understood. She needed to escape, and she needed to be healthy to do that.

*Because for whatever reason, however it may have happened, he is like me. But he’s been broken by it.*

***He is the strong. He has accepted the gift. You will fall to him unless you do the same.***

*Oh, do shut up,* she thought, flexing her arm experimentally, pulling to the end of the chain that held her to her cot. Limited range of motion, but no pain. *You made a mistake. You shouldn’t have let me see him. See how burned he was on the inside, see what it* did *to him.*

*I know my heart. I know who I am. And you can call me your monster all you like, but I am* nothing *like him.*

This power, whatever it was, was not from any goodly source. It could change who you were… but who you were could change it right back. She had never, not once, found any use to it other than healing. Caring. A force trying to tempt her into blood and carnage giving her the power to heal wounds was already something odd, but she had thought it might be some kind of trick. A trap to lure her into drawing on an energy that would eventually turn against her. But Sarevok had shown her something.

That whatever their shared power was, it had not made her a manipulator like Acherai, or a brutal killer like Sarevok. It wanted to, something inside her *craved* such darkness, but she had fought it back, and in doing so had changed it. Warped it. A power meant for death had become a thing of healing.

So she would not ignore her powers. She would not fight this thing inside of her. She would just always, *always,* use it to help. To heal. To give strength to the innocent and stand fast against the guilty. She was a paladin, a redeemer, and she would redeem the darkness inside her to become a tool of the light. For Torm the True, for Helm the Vigilant, for Tyr the Just, she would stand strong against all evils within or without, and any darkness inside her would be nothing more than the shadow cast by the light she would wield to this purpose.

Something in the back of her mind screamed in frustration, and she smiled. Coated in wounds, wearing nothing but bloody bandages, unarmed and chained to a bed, and she felt, somehow, better than she had in weeks. She owed Sarevok a debt for putting things into perspective, she supposed.

She’d repay him for that by seeing him face the courts for his crimes, of course. But still, it was something.

“Now,” she murmured. “Let us see what we can do about these chains.” She wasn’t entirely sure, but she had her suspicions. With a silent prayer to Torm and a gentle exhale, she touched the power inside her, willing it to come forth. Healing it brought, but more than that, she needed to be *better* than what she was. Stronger, the strong right arm of Justice that all paladins were meant to be.

Because that was what a paladin really was. It wasn’t about oaths she might never be able to take, it wasn’t about what was in her blood or what tried to change her heart against her will. It was about what she did, what she felt, and what cause she served. To protect the innocent, to guard the just, to be strong enough, to stand against all evil.

She pulled, the muscles in her arms tightening against her skin like steel cords, powerful enough to drive a blade through an inch of plate steel. But not enough. *Torm, please, there are people I need to save. Imoen, Jaheira, all those Sarevok seeks to destroy…*

*And even, if I can, the tainted souls of those who call me sister.*

Something inside her snapped, screamed, and recoiled in agony from that thought, that final connection. Sarevok had made it clear, and she had suspected even before, but accepting it in her mind was a step she had unconsciously refused for some time. Bonds of blood were the thing that had awoken her power for the first time. The need to sever those bonds were what drove Sarevok, and if she wanted to oppose him, she needed a different path.

Those bonds of blood would become bonds of family. She didn’t know how, she didn’t understand any of it, but she had brothers. And while they had to face the consequences of their crimes of the flesh, she *would* find some way to save their souls. Free them of the curse that consumed them.

Power, cool and gentle as it was *strong*, roared through her body, and the chains holding her right arm snapped. She smiled and began to pull them free, unlooping the bindings from the wood cot and standing up for the first time since she’d woken up in this pit.

*All right. Now I just need to open this cell, find a weapon, and get outside without being killed. I can manage that. Probably. Maybe.*

 *Let’s just hope that Imoen hasn’t managed to walk into a disaster just yet, hm?*

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“Well, this is a disaster,” Imoen said.

“The lady isn’t wrong,” Angelo said, his tone far too cheerful for the situation. “But what else could you call the murder of a Grand Duke? By his own lieutenant, no less. Sad, but I imagine that’s why you could pull it off. He loved you like a son, he did, and you used it against him. What. A. Monster.”

“You *bastard*,” Scar hissed. “I knew you were crooked. I knew that. But I never thought you were bad enough to pull something like this until today. I’ll personally see you rot in every Hell there ever was for this, traitor.”

“Um, Scar, maybe don’t antagonize him,” Imoen muttered, looking around them to see all the many, many crossbowmen. “He has a *lot* of those bows. Aimed at us.”

“I don’t care. I’ll die if I have to as long as I take this piece of *trash* with me,” Scar said, a low growl under his words and his hand not relaxing its grip on his sword in the slightest, but at least he didn’t charge. Yet.

“The only reason you’re still alive at all, ‘Commander,’ is that Grand Duke Sarevok wants as many warm bodies on the gallows as he can get when he puts Sephiria of Candlekeep on trial,” Angelo said lazily, leaning against the doorjamb with an insolent smirk on his face. “You can live out the next week or so to join her, or die here. I truly don’t care.”

Jaheira narrowed her eyes. “Your master is no duke, worm.”

“Not yet, but he has a princely gift for the city that assures him the nomination now that a, ahem, space is open,” Angelo said. “Now, since you haven’t surrendered yet, and you *are* wanted murderers, I think you’re going to have to die now. Men, you may fire when…”

He stopped, his back straightening oddly. “Men,” he said quickly. “Do *not* fire.”

Imoen had to fight to hold in a squeal of glee as the reason why became apparent.

“That seems wise,” Sephiria muttered from behind him, on the other side of the doorway he had been standing in front of. She seemed shaky on her feet and one of her eyes was blackened, but she was *there.* Mostly naked for some reason, but still there, which was all Imoen needed.

The fact she had used the half-open door to slip the point of a stolen sword right against Angelo’s spine was a good sign too.

“How the Hells did you get out of your cell?” he snapped.

Sephiria coughed lightly.

***Five minutes earlier…***

“Heya,” the gnome said, sauntering up to her cell. “Heard the noise, figured I should meet the neighbors. You in here for murder too?”

“I… yes, though I am innocent,” she said with a blink. “How are you not in a cell, sir?”

“Oh, I can open all the doors. They aren’t as secure as they think. I actually have a tunnel to get outside, too,” he said with a shrug. “You know. Magic. Name’s Neb, by the by.”

“Ah…ha. I am Sephiria. If I could trouble you to open my cell, please? I have infused myself with some sort of magic, and I believe I might be able to pull it free of the hinges, but that would be even more noise, so…”

Neb shrugged, tapped the lock in three places, and inserted his finger into it, twisting slightly. The door popped open.

“… Ah. Well, thank you, sir. I am escaping, so I would suggest you come with me. These people will likely execute you, even though I am sure you are falsely accused as I was,” she said with a thankful nod.

“Hm? Oh, no, I’m guilty,” he said cheerfully. “Killed some street urchins. Their parents didn’t want ‘em, see, so I take care of them in my own way. More like adoption than murder, I’d say. They’re better off, really. Their souls sing for me every night.”

“You… you are a serial killer of… children,” she said.

“Aye. Hey, how about a game?” Neb said with a bright grin. “If you can guess how many, I’ll let you use my tunnel to get out of here! I’m not planning to leave yet, but it’s open in case I need to get home to the kids in a hurry. They’d be lonely without me.”

Sephiria blinked.

***The Present…***

“So I beat him to death with my bare hands,” she finished, “and found his cell. The tunnel was hidden by an illusion, but it faded when he died.”

 “Oh, for the love of all that’s *holy,* people. If I get out of this alive, I’m taking a finger from everyone on guard duty,” Angelo snarled. “There’s neglectful, and then there’s just *incompetent.*”

“Now then. I don’t want to kill anyone if I can avoid it, particularly since I do not wish to make that creepy, creepy little gnome happy in whatever Hell he burns in now,” Sephiria said. “So you, commander, are coming with me. As are my friends. And if any one of your men attacks us on our path…”

“Ka-stab!” Imoen declared.

“Yes… yes, Immy, I was… implying that,” Sephiria said with a sigh.

“And I *helped*, like always! I’ll even help ya find some pants later, because we’re that close.”

“… I apologize for her,” Sephiria said, clamping a hand down on Angelo’s shoulder to direct him, even as she also dug her blade a little deeper into his back, enough to draw a drop of blood. “She has always had an overabundance of personality.”

“Cold, Seffie. Cold.”

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Acherai sat across from Duke Entar Silvershield and sipped from a goblet of deep red wine, smiling warmly. “So, how did your meeting go.”

“I owe you a debt on two fronts, it seems,” the man said with a pained sigh, running his hands through his graying hair in obvious exasperation. “Besides finally lending some closure to the case of my son’s…loss… I confirmed your other story quickly enough. The guards searched Skie’s room and found a dozen letters from that rogue, all honeyed words about how he would deliver her from me to a life of ‘freedom and adventure.’ Talk of marriage and life on the road as a traveling performer!”

“A simple way to gain a valuable hostage, if you’re the sort of villain who would consider such a thing,” the elf said smoothly. “Particularly after he took the time to ensure she was your sole heir.”

Silvershield laughed bitterly. “Would you like to know the worst part? She met him in person *once,* reading poetry at a fair outside the city. One roll in the hay with a peasant performer*,* and she was ready to abandon her family! For the murderer of her own brother! Honestly, I knew my girl was somewhat sheltered, but until today I had never considered she might also be an *idiot.*”

Acherai’s smile widened. “I’m glad I was able to help, milord. I know you must be quite tired from your stressful day, of course, but I was hoping to breach another matter, now that you know my intelligence is trustworthy. Something quite dark is going on in this city, involving some quite powerful people, and I believe that you can help me uproot the problem, so to speak.”

“I’m too furious to sleep, truly, even after slitting the fiend’s throat myself,” Silvershield said. “You may as well talk.”

Acherai’s jaw dropped.

“Oh come now, lad. You knew what I was going to do to an assassin who took aim at my family.”

Acherai blinked. “Well, yes, but I didn’t think you’d just *say* it. Plausible deniability and all that. Are you quite sure you’re a politician? Because I’ve met thief guildmasters who’d look askance at being so open about such things.”

“HA! Good, good, I like a little open honesty. Don’t see it much, running a city,” Silvershield said, refilling his own wine goblet. “I am the wealthiest person in this city, young man. I did not become so by being pleasant to those who attack me. And I also did not become so by failing to spot a fellow pragmatist. You have made an ally of me this night, and I can be a *very* generous ally. I trust you’re not fool enough to turn me instead to a well-funded enemy.”

“HA! Oh, I *like* you. No, milord, no, you are not wrong at all,” Acherai said. “Rather, a man after my own heart.”

Silvershield raised his goblet to his lips and took a sip. “Good. You’ll be paid, very well, for delivering Mr. Kron to me as you did. And as you’ve proven a trustworthy contractor on one matter of great import, I see no issue with keeping you on retainer for another. Finding my family beset by kidnappers and assassins has left me paranoid enough to believe you know what you’re talking about when you speak of conspiracies, so this is as good a time as any for you to share.”

Acherai let his smile widen further. “So tell me, milord, how much notice have you paid to the business ventures of the Iron Throne?”

“Enough. They’ve cornered me out of the market in metals and metal goods of late, which is aggravating, but that was one of my smaller operations so the loss hasn’t been severe. I made it up by opening a route for Moonshae wines to...”

“So you never picked up that the iron crisis was their doing, then. Good to know,” Acherai said, trying to disguise in his tone that he really didn’t care about the man’s trade routes.

“… A dark accusation. Young Sarevok is the most popular man in the city these days. He reacted to his father’s death by ensuring the Fist was fully equipped to find the murderers, *pro bono.* Then slashing prices on all iron and steel weaponry and armor to help ‘private citizens secure their homes,’ in a time when his company’s arms are some of the only ones reliably worth buying. Making any charge stick on him will require incontrovertible evidence.”

“And yet you don’t sound surprised, or even doubtful.”

“Because it’s too easy to believe. A merchant group making a sudden, absurd profit through dirty dealings is nothing special. Stockpiling grain because you’ve gotten advance notice of a locust swarm, selling weapons to both sides of a civil war. I wouldn’t think twice about that. But Sarevok is in a perfect position to make that sudden profit, and he’s giving it away instead. Spinning tales of Amn murdering his father. Why would Amnish assassins target a merchant lord? It would have no purpose beyond provoking a war they’ve shown no signs of wanting, and wouldn’t even be the best way to do *that!* But the people believe it, of course, because the Iron Crisis has ruined their lives, and they want to blame someone.”

Acherai took a deep breath, because this was the tipping point. He had pieced together the majority of the plot in his mind, but Sarevok *was* where it all fell apart, at least if you approached it logically. “Well. I know that Rieltar was the primary instigator of the iron crisis. His goal was to create a massive shortage and then step in to alleviate it, selling stockpiles of ore and goods at exorbitant prices. He had a hidden mine in the Cloakwood, I’ll be happy to sell you the location for your own use if you like. You stand to make a fortune from it.”

“Sensible, and appreciated. We’ll negotiate a price for a map later. At the moment, however, Rieltar is dead, and if he was truly behind the Crisis it actually does make sense someone would contract the Shadow Thieves to collect his head. Sarevok does not seem to be pursuing his plan, instead building political support for himself and enflaming the public against Amn. So it would seem your conspiracy is collapsed already.”

And here’s where things became speculation. Dammit, hopefully correct speculation, please. “Because Sarevok is not interested in the original plan, and most likely killed his father himself. The war *is* what he wants. Everything else is a stepping stone to that.”

Entar raised an eyebrow. “For what reason?”

“I can’t be sure of that. But I know that the accused murderer, Sephiria of ‘Amn,’ is a native of Candlekeep, and Sarevok placed an illegal bounty on her head some months ago. Far from her being a hired assassin, *he* has been trying to kill *her.* I don’t know why, but it’s very important to him. And as you’ve seen, he cares nothing for obvious wealth. He wants that girl dead, and he wants to start a war. Those are his only two priorities.”

Entar blinked. “For what… *possible* reason?”

Acherai sighed. Because this was something he just *could not* reasonably explain. He didn’t know the full truth of it himself. “I cannot be sure, but the evidence supports it. Consider this: Rieltar’s death at the hands of the ‘Amnish’ operatives. Not only do they not benefit from it, but what Shadow Thief would make an assassination through the front door, in broad daylight? Has anyone actually interrogated Sephiria other than the Flaming Fist, who recently, I am led to understand, experienced a shakeup in their command structure and are not communicating with outside organizations?”

“She was found, at the scene, her sword embedded in Rieltar’s back,” Entar countered.

“Which, yes, is not exactly a *glowing* character recommendation. But we still have no witnesses to the actual murder other than Sarevok and several of his direct employees. Further, since taking over the Iron Throne, you said yourself he has not exactly been a model businessman. Rather, he seems to have devoted himself to tearing down his own organization and giving away his own inheritance. What sort of person engages in an elaborate plan to gain monumental wealth so they can *give it away?”*

“The sort to whom it is a stepping stone,” Entar admitted. “He’s trading his wealth, it seems, for popularity. I’ve paid to have people like me too, and when I did it I was seeking my dukedom. He may be making a similar push. Perhaps… painting Amn as the amoral aggressors, and he the only man who can protect the people from them. He wouldn’t be the first to seek political power through fear.”

Acherai blinked. “Oh. I confess I was thinking more along the lines of a magical ritual of some sort, but that actually makes quite some sense.”

“HA! Ah, the young… do not bother playing at elven wisdom, lad, I *know* you’re younger than me. You leap to the dramatic when the mundane holds far more weight. Yes, yes, I can see this being the case. Rieltar sought wealth, but young Sarevok seeks power. He wants to *rule.* But why here? There is no place for him. Four seats for four Grand Dukes on the ruling council, and all are filled.”

Acherai blinked again, less in befuddlement this time and more in thought, before a Very Bad Thing occurred to him. “Sir Silvershield. This strange shake-up in the Flaming Fist’s command. What caused it?”

“Duke Eltan, alas, has fallen… suddenly… ill…” Entar said, slowly trailing off as the thought occurred to him. “Suddenly. Severely. Ill. It can happen, surely, but…”

 “But it seems unlikely given the timing. We should get to him immediately and get him away from… everyone. Keep only people you trust absolutely near him,” Acherai snapped.

“Agreed. Better paranoid and foolish than complacent and dead,” the Duke said, standing and walking to a speaking tube set up in the corner of the office. “Galcian? Please prepare the coach, immediately. I’ll need to travel to the Flaming Fist’s compound in the merchant district, with all haste.”

Silence.

“Galcian? I pay you twice what any other groom in the city makes because you do your job very well. Don’t make me regret that,” the Duke said flatly. “Dammit, is this thing…”

“Oh, dear,” Acherai murmured. “Where does that connect? Who is hearing it?”

“The stablemaster’s quarters. He has his own room, close to the rear entrance, so he can get to the stables and prepare the carriage quickly when needed. He should be there at this time of night; he knows to be within easy reach when I’m in a meeting.”

“He’s dead,” Acherai said flatly. “Stay close to me, we need to get to the guest rooms.”

“Wh-“

“What’s better than being Duke?” Acherai asked. “Being the *only* Duke. Duke Eltan’s ‘fallen ill,’ and *you’re* about to be ‘killed by Shadow Thieves.’ We need to get to my group.”

“My household guards are-“

“Infiltrated? Dead? We don’t know anything other than the fact someone got into your manor. Do they have a map? Schedule for the security rounds? For all we know one of your guards opened the back door for them and pointed out exactly who to kill to make sure you wouldn’t have easy access to a horse.”

Entar scowled. “My guards know the policy. Bring to me evidence of a bribe, and I will double it. They have no reason to be disloyal.”

Acherai hissed in frustration. “If I kidnapped your wife and sent you a package with her finger in it, along with orders to be followed or the next container would hold her head, would money seem terribly important to you?”

The Duke’s jaw dropped. “I… see. Very well. Your group. We need to go down one floor and over to the east wing. Not far, in distance…”

“But distance doesn’t matter so much if we take a crossbow bolt in the back getting there. Speaking of,” Acherai held a hand against his own heart, murmured a few syllables while tracing a line in the air with his other hand. As he ended the spell, a veil of pale violet light hummed in the air around him. “There. Protection from Arrows is the name, but it also works on quarrels and thrown daggers you might see in a battle through narrow corridors. If anyone takes a shot at us from down the hallway, stand behind me.”

“You never mentioned you were a mage. And couldn’t you have cast your spell on me?” Entar muttered as they stepped into the hallway, Acherai turning his head both directions and seeing nobody.

“No, this spell targets only the caster. And even if I could have, I have only one casting per day and value my life more than yours.”

“… That blunt honesty I found refreshing earlier has lost its sheen, young man.”

The elf and the human took off down the hallways, slowly enough to not reveal their footsteps to those on other floors.

Someone unseen moved behind them, barely disturbing the dust with her passage. She smiled through none could see it, running her finger along the edge of an invisible dagger as she thought, *Ooooh, Slythe baby, you’re gonna be so jealous when you see what I found first.*

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“You’re going to die, you know,” Angelo said warmly as Sephiria marched him down the street; Jaheira in front of them and Scar behind. Flaming Fist operatives, or at least the closest thing that was left since Angelo’s rise to power, flanked them in the alleys on either side. At least one crossbowman in light armor was leaping from roof to roof above them as well, Imoen had spotted him early on.

“If so, I pass on to Torm’s hall with peace in my heart, knowing I died facing great evil without fear,” Sephiria replied calmly. “You’ll not intimidate me. I have faced far worse than you.”

“Oh, you *think* you have. But trust me, some assassins and a gormless half-ogre thug don’t hold a candle to what the law can do to a person, when properly motivated. And I *am* the law in this city. Every beggar, every orphan, every petty sneak thief who wants a favor for the next time he’s collared. They’ll all be looking for you, a thousand eyes on every alley. Each one of them wanting to buy their way into my favor. Put you on the gallows so they never end up there themselves. The Fist isn’t the only army I have, nor the most numerous. You’re going. To die.”

Sephiria sighed, and dug her sword in a little deeper. “I’ve faced Sarevok. Looked him in the eye. Do you think anything *you* can say will scare me after that?”

“… No. No, I think you have plenty to be scared of without me,” Angelo said softly. “If you’d given up, things would have been quick. I would have made sure of it. Beheading is fast, if you have the right axe. One solid swing and it’s over. Now *he’s* after you. He’ll come himself, in person. He has to, he hates you too much to let go, too much to trust it to anyone else.”

“I know. I’ll stop him,” Sephiria said.

“Heh. If you had the slightest idea…” Angelo said with a chuckle.

“That I’m his sister?” Sephiria asked.

Sephiria tried not to smile at the reaction this spawned. It was petty of her to enjoy springing a surprise in such a way, and she’d have to pray to Torm for absolution later, but she had earned a little bit of fun.

“Seffie! What the five flippin’ flamin’ flyin’ Hells does that mean?!” Imoen squeaked.

“The Anchevs didn’t have a second kid. What are you getting on about?” Scar asked.

“Oh, whatever gods still listen to me have mercy, *that’s* why he wanted you dead so badly?” Angelo muttered, going terribly pale.

Jaheira said nothing. This was probably the most telling reaction of all.

“Immie, there are *nine* Hells,” Sephiria said by way of clarification, enjoying for once that she’d worked out something ahead of everyone else. That didn’t happen very often.

“*Kinda not the point!*”

“Oh, with this family it isn’t too far off,” Angelo said. “Look. I… clearly underestimated what Sarevok was asking me to hold onto, here. I’m not one of his acolytes, I don’t kneel at the altar of the Dark Lord. But I know damn well that he’s something to fear. You mess with him, you’re dead no matter how much muscle you have or how many allies you can buy. I’ve killed more men than most folk have met, but I knew he was something different from the moment I first saw him hold a sword. If he’s about to go on the warpath, and *you’re* about to stand in his way, and you two are the same thing, then I want *out*. I want out of this city, out of this whole damn *region.* I need to start running and never stop.”

“You’re going to die here, on a chopping block, and I’ll be holding the axe,” Scar said flatly. “Don’t worry, it will be a sharp one, just like you said. Quick. I’m a copper, not a monster.”

“Oh, *shut up,* Loggerson,” Angelo hissed. “You’re in so deep you can’t even see the surface anymore. A mercenary that thinks he’s a watchman that thinks he’s a hero. If anyone’s not going to survive what comes next, it’s *you*. I’m talking to the person who has a prayer of living through the week here.”

“And you are doing it very poorly,” Sephiria said.

“Then listen to me doing one better. I’ll tell you everything. Everything I know, and who might know more. And in return, you forget you ever met me. I leave the city and never come back,” Angelo said flatly. “Sarevok never told me what you *were*. I thought I had a shot at getting out of this, but if he finds out I let *you* escape, he won’t care. Even if I give him your head on a pike this very evening, he’ll never forgive this. I’ve seen him when he’s *really* angry, and even Tamoko can’t calm him. He’ll kill whatever set him off and nothing short of an angry god will stop him. Except *maybe* someone just like him.”

“Talk, then,” Sephiria said.

“Oh, no. Not that easy. You get us away from my men, then we *start* to negotiate. My main concern is getting out of this with my head, and as soon as I tell you what I know, you lose any reason to let me have it.”

“I am a paladin. You are a corrupt official. One of us is more trustworthy than the other,” Sephiria said mildly. “And you can tell your men to stop following us at any time, if you worry about them.”

“Bullshit. I don’t care about them, they just know if I die they lose their meal ticket, so they’re following us looking for a chance to break me out,” Angelo snapped. “But they also know that if I turn traitor on the boss, putting an arrow in me is their best way to stay employed. So they’re in my way right now. We need to lose them or kill them.”

“You’re a piece of work, bastard,” Scar growled. “Listen to him sell out his own people without a thought, just like he sold out his commander. You can’t trust a word this animal says. Cut his throat, and then we run while they’re in shock.”

“He is an evil man,” Sephiria said firmly. “And his soul will burn for it one day. But Sarevok is a threat to thousands of lives. If what Angelo knows can help us stop that, we must learn it.”

“Oh, a pragmatic paladin. It’s so nice to meet one of you willing to talk sense… I suppose the family has something to do with that,” Angelo said with a chuckle. “Now, plan?”

“I don’t have one. Jaheira seems to, though,” Sephiria said, causing the druidess to tense up instantly. “She’s been totally silent this entire time, leading the way. I assume this has been for some reason.”

“I have been… thinking,” she said softly. “And I think I have much to share with you, that I perhaps should have shared earlier.”

“I suspect I will agree. But…”

“But yes,” Jaheira admitted, “I have been also considering how we might lose our pursuers while keeping our hostage. And I came to a conclusion, about nature. You see, the great mother has a place in all lands, even the cities of man. Though we may try to pretend that civilization drives away the harmony of nature, it will find a way to attain balance in the end.”

From the alleys around them, sounds began to emerge. Skittering, yowling, the occasional snarl.

“And sometimes, this balance will be found in about thirty seconds, as I have been sending out a mental call for aid to the several hundred stray animals which dwell in any given city. Mostly rats, but I think we’ll find a surprising number of dogs and cats as well, which is just one more sign that pet owners are terrible people and animals should not be bred for captivity. They should be swarming our pursuers shortly, at which point we should make two left turns and go down the sewer entrance while the guards are distracted,” Jaheira said.

More into the ‘hands on’ philosophy of druidism, Jaheira was.

Imoen shook her head as the sounds of skittering, snarling, and (very suddenly) human voices screaming began to fill the city streets. “Seffie has a secret brother. Aunty Jahrie is a secret rat tamer. If Minsc turns out to be a secret poet, I’m just callin’ this adventure a lost cause.”

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“Have I ever told you how much I love a woman with tattoos?” Coran asked.

“Have I ever told you how much I love murdering men who talk too much?” Shar-teel replied.

The elf sighed, not at all certain what was supposed to be coming next for him. This group wasn’t turning out at all as he’d imagined, when he had come forth seeking wine, women, and song. There was no wine, nobody was singing, and the only ‘women’ were a drow and what he could only assume was some kind of rabid bear that had been polymorphed into human form. And the general moral fiber of the group was… lacking, to say the least. Now, certainly, Coran was a thief, but that didn’t mean he was (by his own definition of the word) a *bad person*. He stole from people who could afford it, and only because it was exciting. Usually he didn’t even steal anything physical, just the attention of their lonely wives.

The fact that most of the angry, rich husbands considered this *much worse* than just taking their money was a bit lost on dear Coran. You’d have thought the bounty on his head would have been a hint, but he generally chose to ignore boring things like that.

In any case, the general problem remained. These people didn’t seem very interested in amusement for the sake of it, instead doing things like, well, selling out a man they had just met to his certain death. He couldn’t argue against it too strongly, as Eldoth Kron had clearly been a piece of trash, but it still felt harsh.

“So, you people have been a laugh and a half,” Coran said, standing up. “And as much as I love staying in a mansion, they haven’t given us any brandy and all the servants I’ve seen are men.”

“Can I kill him?” Shar-teel asked.

“Wait until the next battle, and stab him in the back,” Edwin muttered.

“*Did I say you could talk to me?!*” she snapped.

“You see? This is the kind of sterling conversation that I will hate to miss. But the most sane person in this room is a woman whose species wants to destroy mine, and I fear that means this just isn’t going to work out.”

“I’m saner’n the drow,” Kagain said with a pout.

“Yes, but I don’t acknowledge the presence of short bearded men unless I have literally no other options,” Coran said. “I’m afraid I’m going to take my share of the gold and head off to find a tavern. Thank you for your help with my little wyvern problem, but as I didn’t sign up for a conspiracy and literally all of you are *awful,* I think this group hasn’t been a great fit for me.”

And then, because the gods have a finally developed sense of timing, Acherai entered the room, the door slamming open as he and their host Duke Silvershield practically fell through it. The older man was clutching at side, blood flowing between his fingers, and his breath was coming in short gasps.

“Assassin in the building,” Acherai muttered, wiping a line of blood flowing from a cut on his forehead. “She’s a mage, she’s fast as a damn cobra, and she isn’t alone. We need to move.”

Shar-teel pounded Coran on the back, smiling viciously as she drew her sword with her other hand. “HA! Still bored, elf? Don’t worry, maybe you’ll die here and solve *both* our problems.”

Coran sighed. “Yes, not the best fit at all.”