**Chapter Nineteen**

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It was accepted, socially speaking, that arrows being fired into the tent you were in, even if it was less a tent and more half a sewer pipe with a tarp over it, was a bad thing. Sephiria acted based on this belief.

She dove to one side, tacking Imoen to the ground as another arrow, fired with the same deadly precision as the one that had killed Angelo, tore through the thin canvas of the tent to pass through the space her heart had been in less than a second earlier. “*Everyone move!”* the young paladin shouted, trying her best to cover her sister despite the fact she hadn’t had time to find any damn *armor…*

“I’m *trying!*” Imoen grumbled, wiggling free to grab her own bow and disappearing from the tent to scout out the enemy. “Heads down and find somethin’ solid to hide behind, ya dope! You don’t even have pants!”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Xan muttered.

Khalid and Jaheira, being the closest things to sane one could find around here (and anyone who knew them well would have called that *very sad*) were already in motion; Khalid down low, moving forward in a hunched motion, huddled as well as he could behind the shield he’d managed to scrounge in their time down here to replace the one Sarevok had destroyed. Luckily, weapons were something brigands always needed, and so entrances to the Undercellars often came up near shops selling them cheaply and discretely.

An arrow struck the shield and went through it, stopping mere inches from his shoulder.

Unluckily, he supposed, cheap weapons were also often *worthless trash*. “Jaheira!”

His wife was already deep in her first casting, relying on him to guard her, but her slight nod told him she was aware of the issue; he could not protect her as well as he’d have liked. Couldn’t even truly protect himself.

“Over yonder, behind the blue tent, takin’ aim through it! And there’s more coming at us from all sides!” Imoen screamed, shouting to be heard over a din that Khalid uncomfortably recognized as growing panic. More than one unlucky lady of the night or patron screamed in dismay, tents beginning to collapse as patrons and proprietors alike tried to run from something roughly barreling through them. To their left, a fire had begun among several of the tightly-packed makeshift tents. To their right, the crowd parted before a man easily six feet tall in full plate, drawing back his own bowstring to catch them in a crossfire. And most worrisome of all, from the path directly in front of them, a pair of full-grown ogres appeared from thin air, one of them stopping to lift a john who hadn’t run fast enough and sink its tusks into his throat.

The scent of fear began to overpower even the cheap perfumes and burning narcotics of the Undercellars. And Khalid thought he detected more than a little bit of blood underneath it.

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Thankfully, despite owning a very good, expensive crossbow (that she had somehow bought without her mother knowing, which spoke to more sneakiness than you’d expect in a pampered rich girl stupid enough to believe her one true love was *Eldoth Kron*), Skie Silvershield was an *atrocious* shot.

Less thankfully, you didn’t need to be a great shot to hit something five feet away.

The shot was not a kill, but it did slam into Acherai’s bicep. He was wearing the dark robes they had taken from Davaeorn, and the magic in them was better than any garment he’d ever seen. The cloth resisted the crossbow bolt better than any chainmail he’d ever seen, and it did not pierce his flesh.

Which is not to say it didn’t hurt. A lot.

He fell to one knee, hissing at the shock of pain running up his arm as the limb went numb. He had put away his dagger and left his staff with the group where it would not be in the way as he snuck through a darkened house. He dearly wished he had *some* kind of weapon in his hand, because Skie immediately ran forward, screaming like a lunatic and slammed her empty crossbow into his jaw. It was not a polished combat move, and one of the arms of the weapon cracked off.

Still hurt.

And as the lights flashed behind his eyes and he fell backwards, he couldn’t help but feel this was *the most* humiliating pain he had ever felt. And he had once slipped during a burglary and fallen off a roof into a horse’s water trough.

“My Eldoth!” she screamed, raising the half-broken weapon over her head to once again use a piece of precision equipment as a club. Acherai was about to have his head smashed with wood, and yet all he could think was, *Gods she has an annoying voice*. “You took my *Eldoth!”*

Coran stepped across and punched her in the face. “Um… sorry.”

“*Skie!”* Lady Silvershield shouted, watching her daughter join the elf she’d just clubbed on the floor. “You… you…”

“I’m sorry, milady, dreadfully so, but there are a lot of people trying to kill you right now and your daughter did shoot her rescuer,” Coran said, putting as much smooth calm into the words as he could. He was not, traditionally speaking, a master of social manipulation (in point of fact, most men he met hated him), but he did have a certain talent for getting a comely lass to lower her guard (which was *why* the men hated him). Even Skie, who he had *just punched*, looked a little flustered at his tone.

“You… struck me,” Skie said. Her tone suggested she wasn’t *totally* sure what to make of this.

“And I will gleefully spend the rest of my life making it up to you, fair lady. Know that I would never, ever, lay a finger on a woman save in the direst of circumstances, when her very life was at stake,” he said, lowering a hand to help the young noblewoman to her feet. He did not add, *Or if* my *life was at stake, because she turned out to be a mage and also turned out to be the jealous type. And she landed in a pig trough, so it wasn’t like I seriously harmed her. Certainly not as much as she was going to seriously harm* me.

All of that was true, but he it would have seriously hurt the mood.

“I don’t think you should have struck me,” Skie said. “But, um, you do seem nice. Like, in a good way, but… you shouldn’t have. But I’m sure you had a good reason. But it was *mean*. I like your hair.”

“It is always inappropriate of any gentleman to strike a lady, for any reason,” her mother confirmed, her voice suggesting she was rolling her eyes on the inside. “But on the other hand, my dear, you *did* shoot one our rescuers and then smash him about the face with a piece of wood, whilst assassins are still in the manor. You were quite hysterical.”

“They took my Eldoth! The love of my life!” Skie snapped, remembering why she had been angry and why this handsome elf with the smooth voice wasn’t going to make her happy at all, even when he kissed her hand after pulling her gently to her feet, which made her blush slightly. But in an *angry way*.

“You met him *once*,” Acherai grumbled, shakily rising to his feet. “And let me be very blunt with you, milady, he didn’t even like you.”

“How *dare-*“

“Acherai, perhaps now isn’t the time to antagonize the girl? She’s had a traumatic day,” Coran interjected.

“So have I. I’ve experienced literal trauma, of the physical variety,” he snapped. “Like the fact I cannot see out of my left eye and I’m fairly sure my cheekbone is cracked, from a crazed brat *smashing my face.*”

“Think of the assassins, my friend. They’re still out there.”

Acherai lowered his tone to a level that wouldn’t carry outside the room, and said, “They’re not out there, they’re in here. Two doors down the hallway. That door was closed when we passed, now it’s open a crack. One of the shadows inside is too dark to be natural. There’s someone wearing black standing in it.”

Coran winced, and wished he had brought a dagger instead of a longsword. This was going to be messy in the hallways. “At least it won’t be an ambush. Good eye.”

“I can help!” Skie said, her tone excited, and yet, oddly enough, modulated to the same low volume. It was a surprising level of competence considering, both elves noticed wryly, she seemed to forget ‘her Eldoth’ the moment something else caught her attention. “I know how to fight. Um. Sort of. I can shoot a crossbow!”

“You broke your crossbow, milady,” Coran said mildly.

“… Yes. But... um, I also have a knife! It’s in my drawers,” she said. “I kept it with my makeup where nobody would look. I’m not very good with it, but I can probably ‘shank’ someone if they ‘give me lip.’”

“Excuse me?” Her mother asked. Her tone was *not* modulated to an acceptably soft volume, but it *was* extremely cold. That was almost as good, in her world.

“I needed to run off with Eldoth and you wouldn’t let me! So I snuck out a few times to practice. For when he came for me on a white horse.”

“He didn’t own a horse,” Acherai said.

“He smelled a bit musky. Might have been horse,” Coran countered.

“Donkey. Trust me, I can tell the difference. He rode a donkey until he had to actually meet someone he wanted to be impresse, then stole a horse to use. Or bought a beat-up old screw of a mare for a song, and gussied it up to look like a real horse for awhile. Sell it after he didn’t need to be impressive anymore,” Acherai said. “It’s how you stay unnoticed. Don’t look like someone people will notice until you have no other choice.”

“Speaking from experience?” Coran asked wryly.

Acherai sniffed, and shifted his dagger to his good hand, sliding a wand out of his sleeve into the weakened one. “Please. I’m *always* impressive. It’s the curse of being me. I have the one on the left.”

“Right.”

“Middle!” Skie offered.

“Only two of them, dear,” Coran said.

“You’re *smart*,” Skie squealed. Against all odds, she had *still* kept her voice modulated low enough to not be heard. Acherai would have been impressed if he wasn’t so *deeply* filled with wrath. He decided to take it out on someone else.

The shadow down the hall moved slightly. He didn’t hear the sound of a weapon being unsheathed, but he *felt* it. The moment where a shadow becomes a threat, that feeling anyone who’s ever walked down a dark alley has gotten when they realize they’re being hunted.

Of course, if you grew up in dark alleys, walked down them every day, learned how to look deep into every shadow to see which ones were just a *little* too dark, you also learned quickly enough: just because you were being hunted, didn’t necessarily mean you were *prey.* Sometimes the garter snake turns out to be a viper, and sometimes the bulge in the mark’s clothes is not a pouch of coins but a very sharp knife.

Acherai pointed the wand into the shadows that were slightly too dark, and spoke the command word. And then, well, it was hard to hide in the darkness when you were sharing the room with a bolt of lightning.

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The people who dwelt in this place were, as a whole, sick and weak. Tamoko had no respect for anyone who would willingly abandon the world for a haze of drugs and rutting, but there was little point to *massacring* them. This could have been done quickly and quietly as soon as the scrying found the girl and her group. A dozen arrows. A single spell to burn the tent with them inside. Instead, the Acolytes of Sarevok had given in to their base instincts, indulging their desperate need to kill every single thing that crossed their path no matter how little a threat it was.

They had approached it with practiced skill and fanatical enthusiasm. Aasim and Diyab, the clerics of Cyric, had started fires at two of the entrances, forcing the entire crowd to stampede to those that remained unblocked. Gardush, the fighter, was poised in one of these, and between the storm of arrows he fired at the target, he took the time to loose a random shot into the terrified mob, making the ones at the lead turn, run other directions, turn the crowds against themselves. Naaman and Alai, slipping through the mad crowd, steadily moving to flank as their allies used spell and arrow to pin the enemy into one defensive position. And as they passed, more than one harmless addict or whore found themselves hamstrung by an unseen blade, falling screaming to the floor in the middle of a stampede, tripping up others and leading more than one to be trampled to death. And Cythandria’s ‘pets,’ a pair of ogres she had magically enslaved, drove the survivors into a wild frenzy as they stormed through the crowd, hurling survivors and corpses alike aside as if they weighed nothing.

It was an effective distraction, she supposed, and would certainly disguise any evidence of their presence, but it was all so *pointless* when they could have finished the task quickly and efficiently in minutes, and already been on their way home with news of success. Sarevok would have enjoyed it, she knew, and that made things worse rather than better as she once again found herself wondering how very little humanity he even had left to lose, if he could find pleasure in such mindless chaos.

And her company wasn’t making it any better.

“Having a bad day?” Cythandria asked, her tone sweetly venomous as she watched the terrified crowd of degenerates fleeing into the sewers, the acolytes tearing through them like scythes through wheat. She was not like them, the murder addicts, those who had joined Sarevok to stand in the shadow of a killer greater than themselves and bathe in the blood he shed, and she was *certainly* not anyone who would follow him out of faith or personal loyalty. Cythandria was a parasite, seeking to tap into the power to be found here for her own use. She believed Sarevok would ascend to godhood, and when the new Lord of Murder blackened the heavens, she would be among his favored subjects.

She was also a filthy, conniving whore who used good looks and a general lack of dignity to ensnare men with promises of pleasure, making herself appealing in the bedchamber to offset her utter lack of use in any other capacity.

Not that Tamoko was jealous of her in any way.

“I do as milord commands, as do you,” Tamoko said, trying to keep the wrath out of her tone. Sarevok did not take kindly to feuds among his lieutenants. He expected, and *demanded*, all personal issues be set aside in favor of acting only in his interests. If you were to act in a way that brought profit to yourself, it must also bring profit to Sarevok. If you were going to destroy a foe, it must not be a foe that Sarevok found useful in any way. Cythandria was keenly aware that if she and Tamoko came to do battle, the one who struck the first blow would also be the one Sarevok tore limb from limb.

This was good for Cythandria, because Tamoko’s first blow would also be Cythandria’s last. But the mage apparently had little comprehension of how very, very quickly the priestess could wipe her from the face of the planet, and so provoking her rival into striking first had become a hobby of hers.

“True,” the mage said cheerfully. “But I do it with a smile on my face, while you seem *oddly* reluctant to obey milord’s will. Are you losing faith, Tamoko? Questioning his path when he nears the end? I should *hate* to see him think you a traitor, but the evidence is mounting.”

“Because I do not enjoy random massacres, I am a traitor? The acolytes are doing their duty, killing for their lord. I have done my duty, leading them here. You are doing your duty, whatever that might be,” Tamoko said flatly. Something ugly flashed behind the lovely mage’s eyes at the implication she was a worthless hanger-on to the rest of the group, and Tamoko tried not to smile at it. “If you wish to paint me as a traitor, I suggest you do better than that. Sarevok dislikes having his time wasted by idiocy.”

“Maybe you don’t need to be a traitor, Tamoko,” Cythandria said softly, and yet Tamoko could somehow hear her over the screams and the crackling of fire. “Maybe you just need to be weak. Maybe Sarevok just needs to see how *pathetic* you are, how you don’t have the *stomach* for his vision. Maybe he’ll see the same softness in your eyes that I do right now, and he’ll just reach out and snuff your life out like a candle. Because he is a *god*, and something like you is less than *nothing.*”

“Maybe,” Tamoko said, her eyes leaving the petty mage to seek movement at the westernmost entrance, behind Gardush. The warrior was drawing back the string on his longbow and did not see the covering to the tunnel beyond move, “something is about to go off-prompt before we have an opportunity to worry about that.”

“Wh…”

“*GO FOR THE EYES, BOO!”* screamed a voice that Tamoko suspected would have sounded like a shout even if it was whispering. *“GO FOR THE EYEEEEEEEEES!”*

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Slythe heard the crack of thunder and giggled. “Witnesses, witnesses. Someone’s fighting baaaaack.”

“You seem… happy, sir,” one of the dopplegangers said softly, his voice muffled by the Shadow Thief mask he wore.

“Deliriously, good man! Two roasted Shadow Thief corpses at the scene of the crime will do our job just as well as anyone getting out alive, so we get to kill everyone after all,” Slythe said gleefully. “No need to leave Entar’s women alive to talk of things when a body tells a thousand words and all of them are ‘Amn.’ So after we do our job here, we can go back up the *hall,* you see, find two scared little *rabbits* and after we get them away from their protectors we just have to wrap our hands around their little throats and squeeze, and squeeze, and *squeeze.* Just like breaking their necks for a stew, hm? You boys must be *starving.*”

The doppleganger was named Kransizess, the eldest of the group that had joined the two assassins on this raid. He had, the day before, waylaid a member of the local thieves’ guild in an alley and eaten him alive while he begged for mercy (well, gurgled; like any good hunter, Kransizess went for the throat first), just to acquire some proper clothing and equipment for this mission. Sentient beings were his literal food source, and he hunted and killed them with gusto. He still found Slythe’s enthusiasm a *bit much*. Particularly since, against all odds, he was actually *worse* without Kristin to distract him. The man was practically vibrating with the need to rush the room down the hallway where Entar hid and kill everyone inside, at which point he clearly *would* go hunting for Entar’s wife and daughter just to murder them for fun. It was like his only joys in life were his lover and bloody murder, and without one he focused every iota of his being on the other.

“Sir, the, uh… target?” Kransizess asked.

“Of course, of course. Krissy has probably already started her little fire, and we have to put business before pleasure,” Slythe said. “Of course, my business *is* my pleasure. You and the short one back there, he looks disposable. I want you to play a part for me. Tell me, when you were all researching the family, how closely were you paying attention?”

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“Entar? Entar, darling?” a voice called from outside the room, and Viconia took a step back behind the dwarf and leveled her holy symbol at the door.

“Acherai?” she asked.

“Elle!” Entar snapped, nearly *lunging* for the door, despite the fact Viconia had quite intentionally left him slightly too wounded to be moving around quickly. It wouldn’t do to have him running off before he had fulfilled his part of the bargain. Besides, he was wealthy and powerful, after all, and if they needed a hostage for some reason he would do nicely.

One didn’t survive terribly long in Menzoberranzen without considering how to plan for any possible scenario and set up a plan to profit in each and every one. And with three sisters (well, just one by the time she was finished), Viconia had more incentive to practice than many other drow females. She stepped between the old lord and the door, and slammed an elbow into where she knew his wound was still on the verge of opening. He fell hard, and did not rise again despite his tense muscles indicating he dearly wanted to.

“HA!” Shar-teel said, displaying her usual complex and subtle wit in regards to witnessing a man in pain. Viconia could understand the amusement factor, certainly, but still found she couldn’t like the woman. She reminded Viconia far too much of home, more specifically of her most stupid and subsequently *dead* sister. “If we decided to kill him, I call next shot. I don’t like his face.”

“I was not killing him, I was shutting him up,” Viconia said flatly. “You, outside. You are this one’s mistress?”

“His *wife,*” a chilly, imperious tone said. “And daughter.”

“Papa? Papa, are you okay? I heard you cry out…” said a younger, frankly rather pitiful voice that put Viconia in the instinctive mood to kick something.

“Skie!” Entar shouted back in an agonized voice, and Viconia had to fight off a very strong inclination to make him the target of said kick. Shar was not so gracious as to give her the power to raise the dead as of yet, and they did still need him alive for one way or the other. Making him bleed out was bad business. “That is my wife and daughter, you have to…”

“Please! Those men saved us, but we got separated and there’s more behind us!” the pitiful voice continued. “Papa, let us in!”

“Silence, human,” she snapped. “Mage. Can you divine the truth of their words?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, do I resemble a crystal ball to you?” Edwin sneered. “As if I carry spells to determine the identity of every maiden I run across. (And just stop there, letting them think I have run across a great many, of course. Shhhhh, they don’t know.)”

“I do not know who you are or why you have my husband, but if you mean us well, you will *open this door*. Our lives are in danger,” the older of the two women said, her tone icy and yet with just the right tinge of worry. Viconia considered this, and pondered her own personal beliefs on gender politics.

Most people on the surface, she knew, thought drow females hated all males. This was not true. They didn’t respect males enough to hate them. All males were nothing to her but a potential source of amusement, whether it be in the form of a toe-curling orgasm, growth to her own power and wealth, or just the pretty patterns their blood made when it hit the floor. It was possible, if one was sufficiently amusing in one or more of these manners, to even feel a sort of mild attachment to them, as one might grow attached to a favorite pair of shoes. Pleasant to have around, but you wouldn’t really care when they wore out and it was time to have the slaves burn them (by these standards, Acherai had turned out to be a pair of slippers that appeared awful on the outside but turned out to be surprisingly comfortable when worn; you wouldn’t take them out in front of someone you respected, but they were fine for the bedroom).

What drow females *really* hated was other females, and that was because they, unlike males, were intelligent and dangerous enough to be a *threat.* Nothing could set Viconia’s nerves on edge like a woman acting helpless and endangered, because she knew from experience: when they *looked* helpless was when they were about to bring the dagger down. She looked at the door with increased intensity, as if willing her eyes to look through it and see what trap awaited on the other side.

It was her ears, however, that gave her the answer, the crackling of flame just *barely* audible to her elven senses. From *outside*.

“This is a distraction! Dwarf, kill them!” Viconia snarled, planting her foot firmly on Entar’s back to stop the old man from interfering.

“Don’t take orders from drow, ya…”

“They are keeping our attention on the door while another of their band burns our escape route, *wael dwen’del!*” she hissed, shifting into drow to let the words ‘idiot dwarf’ have the venom to them she felt deep in her soul. “We’ve no options but to fight our way out, so *someone kill them!*”

A gray-skinned hand, its fingers tipped in wicked claws, slammed through the wooden door, reptilian eyes peering through the hole with wicked glee dancing in them. “That *issss* the idea, meat,” the creature hissed, its voice still that of a young girl, but its tone nothing but taunting reptilian hunger.

The doppleganger pulled back from the newly formed hole in the door, and Viconia had *just* enough time to see the smiling, dreadlocked man down the hallway before he released the crossbow bolt.

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Naaman had never been a great assassin, because he did it for the joy more than the money. As a result, he took few high-paying jobs, for they were difficult. Complicated. He wanted the *kill*, not a struggle for it. Challenge did not interest him, blood did. He would much rather kill a beggar in the streets every day for a copper apiece than be paid a thousand gold to spend a year meticulously plotting the death of a king. The *immediacy* was what he needed. Death had been about quantity to him, not quality.

He had been a fool, and Sarevok had taught him much. Particularly the fact that if a man was willing to fight through that urge, be *patient* against all instincts, than the quantity could be made to grow more than Naaman had ever dreamed. Patience and resources, a man who had these things could do anything. Such a man could kill *countries.*

This burning pit had been like heaven to him. He slipped through the crowd like a wraith, reveling in the screams, each step moving him slightly closer to his god’s greatest enemy, and she would never see him in this chaos. The flame and smoke were thick, the chaos of the mob that his group had taken care to cultivate ensuring she would not see him approach. They had killed dozens here, but far more had been left alive, herded by flame and arrow, wounded to stop others from fleeing. They rode the madness, and soon Naaman and Alai would be on the target, blades drawn…

And then, when Naaman was nearly in striking distance, someone *screamed* like a rampaging dragon, something about *eyes*, and when his gaze was torn to the entrance where Gardush had taken up aim with his longbow… just in time to see a bald giant with a hamster on his head run the man over like a minotaur stomping on a rat.

“What in Bhaal’s na-” he began, because there were some things even a hardened killer *has* to stop and notice.

He didn’t get to finish the oath, however, because something cold and bleak that buzzed like a wasp in his ear ran over him, and he could not so much as twitch an eyelid, much less speak.

This was for the best, he soon found, because it meant he felt almost no pain from the sword that slashed open the side of his neck.

“I would apologize for using such an unfair tactic as exploiting Xan’s spell in a sneak attack, but you are a mass-murderer of helpless folk who had little enough life to give in the first place,” Sephiria said, and the sheer *wrath* in her voice convinced her that yes, this *was* Sarevok’s brethren. “And if it consoles you, the rest of your vile band will follow you soon.”

He could not close his eyes, but his vision went dark regardless. All he could see in the shadows was a pair of glowing golden eyes that could not possibly be real.

With his last thoughts, he decided that at the hands of such a predator was not so bad a way for one like him to meet his end.