

Chapter 1: Melancholy

A very long time ago, there existed only Tel'Quessir. There existed great empires, whose wealth and influence stretched across the vast distances of Faerûn's continent. There existed wondrous cities, paved in gold and illuminated with every rising dawn of Arvandor's light. There existed a prosperous people, who lived with their every need provided and their every fanciful whim explored. There existed the quintessence of perfection.

This was the history that one particular Quess, one particular Elven woman, chose to remember. Seradria always had the ancient tales of her people haunt the back of her mind. She thought of them every time she was reminded of how they now lived in squalor. The empires of old are gone, as not even they could stand the test of time. Since their fall, her kin have grown accustomed to sequestering themselves in groves, hidden away in the deepest reaches of the forests. The fortunate ones otherwise live upon the distant island of Evermeet; a retreat that lingers as a fading echo of what Elven civilization used to be. The rest are scattered across Faerûn, left to depend on the mercy of foreigners.

Beauty, love, freedom. These were largely considered to be the cornerstones of the Quessir. Seradria wondered if these were the things her kin felt, as she watched them struggle to make ends meet in the filthy streets of Caurdor. She had sailed to this city a small while ago, a few years that she hadn't bothered to count. In her time here, she did not speak much to the local populace and the citizenry by and large left her alone. It was entirely possible that her gilded armor, coupled with the weight of her unwelcoming gaze, had a way of deterring the rabble. A few glances were spared here and there, but her silent march through the crowd went on unimpeded. She was due to attend a meeting today, of sorts.

As much as the brooding knight loathed coming to this place, Caurdor was the largest city to be found upon the island of Aralyth; which in turn happened to be the largest stretch of land found along the chain making up this particular archipelago. By all accounts, they were so far out in the South-Western seas that most of the maps covering the Sword Coast didn't even include it. It's insignificance to the rest of the world was clear, but it's also exactly why an Elven settlement had formed here. Between its political irrelevance and geographical isolation, the Quessir could enjoy a measure of solitude in this place; despite the locals suspecting that some Elves had settled nearby. Few really knew *where* their settlement might be, but that didn't really matter to most. Elves have an established history of mingling with other races by now, even if their reception is mixed depending on where they find themselves. Here in Caurdor, the predominantly human citizenry has no qualms welcoming them with open arms as a source of cheap and disposable labour. In this regard, they finally found something in common with the Half-Orcs, even if they'd never admit such a thing.

Seradria pondered this during her brisk steps through the suburban streets. She reflected upon when she had first arrived to Aralyth and how happier she felt then. Even full well knowing the history of her kind, something about exploring the wider world had an allure of wonder to it; a feeling attributed more often to the Moon elves, if anything. This was a fact her parents scolded her about, as a Sun Elf born to a life of luxury and to the auspicious name of house Della'thar no less. Truth be told, they are partly the ones to be thanked for setting her on this journey. Seradria lived a pampered life, and most in her place would have found very little reason to want much else; let alone found *any* to compel them to depart from Evermeet. Alas, this daughter of the Della'thar had very little reason to be happy when her life had been all but decided for her.

So here she was. Enjoying her newfound freedom by trudging through the filth of this human city's underbelly, as an estranged noble and hardly welcomed foreigner. The scent of saltwater struck her as she now approached the dockyards. Numerous workshops and warehouses were built tightly together, making for narrow alleys often occupied by beggars and purse thieves. Hidden behind her immaculate cloak, the knight's hand rested firmly atop the pommel of her blade. She would cross these alleys while making careful note of her surroundings, pointedly ignoring the downtrodden who raised their mugs and plead away. Anytime she looked at them, it only served as a reminder of how different their cultures were. Her people had no such vagabonds in their lands. For the Quessir, it was simply expected that the fortunate provide for those in need, so that they might elevate themselves and work to provide for their communities in turn. That is, so long as the needy in question were true of heart. Seradria saw no such thing in these vagrants.

So, then. Why is it that she continued to dwell upon this island, if she rarely felt at ease amongst its inhabitants and regarded them so bitterly? Because as things stand, only one thing continued to stir this weary knight's soul forward. The same drive that compelled her to toss her noble heritage to the wind long ago. It is her unwavering commitment to the Father. Corellon Larethian, the patron of all Elven kind. She made a promise in his name to set out on a pilgrimage, to wander the lands and lend her blade to any Quess in need. She knew that an Elven settlement was hidden away on this miserable rock somewhere, and heard rumors of their plight dealing with the spread of foul creatures neighboring them. Goblinoids, Orcs, Gnolls, Giants and many more monsters who have united in an unholy coalition. Rallied by their most sinister rival of old. The Dhaerow, known colloquially as **Drow**.

Having witnessed what the Drow were capable of, as a child during their terrible attack upon Evermeet decades ago, it was on that day Seradria made her promise. She spent the later years of her youth learning how to hold a sword for this very purpose. Her heart was filled with such passion, a wholehearted desire to protect her people and a burning hatred for her ancestral enemy. Part of her only wishes she had held onto that youthful naivety. At the very least, it'd have spared her the shock of realising that it was not a 'Drow' who organised the attack upon Evermeet, but one of the Quess. A deranged Sun Elf with ambitions of power left unchecked. Not unlike the first person Seradria felt compelled to kill.

"Commander." A voice whisks the knight away from her thoughts, just as her heart began to pound against her chest. She'd walked this path so many times now that she didn't realise she already reached the place. Standing next to a reinforced, steel door is a tall figure wearing dark leather armor. A man whose cloak is long enough to serve as a hood and mask in equal measure, but Seradria recognises him nonetheless.

"Vesryn. I take it everything is in order?" Seradria seems to stare past him as she speaks.

"Our guest awaits you inside." He nods, but pauses a moment before continuing. "Mmh. But a man of his standing was not easy to get a hold of. No doubt his absence is bound to cause a bit of unrest." His gaze rises to meet Seradria's intently. "I hope that word of this doesn't fall back to us, Commander."

"Then let us act quickly. Should the worst come to pass, I will not hold you to blame." Her eyes now narrow as they meet his. "But make no mistake. There is too much at stake for us to let caution impede us now. As much as I'd rather have Caurdor on our side, you must ready yourself should her people turn against us."

"Of course, Commander. I shed no tears at the thought of crossing blades with their lot." The hooded man seems hardly perturbed by this. If anything, his hand grazes the hilt of one of his daggers. "I shall depart and lend my ear to the streets. By your leave." The two quickly nod to one another before parting ways.

Seradria pries open the heavy door, just enough to slip inside before pulling it back to a close. She takes the time to then slide a thick metal slab forward, and properly lock it from within. Afterwards, she turns to now make her way down a dark, stone hallway. Were it not for the fact she'd been here before, she'd assume this place to be vacant. After all, the cobblestone floor looked as though it hadn't been swept for years. Dust caked every nook and cranny of this place, and even the occasional spider web looked to have been abandoned. Total darkness reigned over this place, but thankfully the Quessir have a knack for seeing clearly in dimly lit environments. Thus, she continued to march onwards, letting a sigh slip under her breath.

Indeed, that was the first grim truth Seradria had to reconcile with. Her experiences here showed her that wickedness comes in many forms, and can plague the hearts of even the most virtuous of souls. Not even the Quessir are immune to this. If anything, the Drow take great delight in expanding their insidious influence upon the minds of her kin to prove as much. Nevertheless, it is precisely the reason that she continues to work so tirelessly. Should their machinations be permitted to continue, the Drow will never have a need to show themselves upon the surface at all. They would take greater delight in rotting the Quessir from the inside out. All the while continuing to sway the civilizations of the surface, so that they might be convinced to annex the remaining lands of her people once and for all. With every fiber of her being, Seradria believed this to be true. No, it was true.

If only the importance of her mission helped assuage her spirit in some regard. She always envisioned her future days to be spent fighting as some valiant protector of her people, not so much as an inquisitor. However, if she doesn't find solace in that, perhaps she may well find it by remembering the friends that await her back home. Those who do, in fact, think of her as something of a hero. To reflect upon the smiles of their faces evokes a tinge of warmth in her heart she almost thought had died out by now. For their sake, she will cling onto her faith. She only wishes they do not discover the nature of her work.

After arriving at the end of the hallway, Seradria pushes open the door and finds herself met with a near blinding light. Inside were perhaps the only other living souls in this entire complex. Two masked figures stood to face her, Elves whom Seradria knew quite well. Between them, however, is a man sitting in a chair with his wrists and ankles bound to its limbs. A young adult, by the looks of things. Cleanly shaven and dressed in the sort of garb one would expect of a noble. Despite the cloth covering his eyes, the human swiftly rises his head to try and leer at whomever it was that now faced him.

"Who's there!?" The man shouts, but his demanding tone earns him no answer.

Seradria looks down at him with indifference. She always steels herself in times like these, knowing it's better to save feelings such as pity for later. Her gaze wanders briefly to the table at her side, if only to confirm that all of her tools were accounted for. Satisfied, the armored woman proceeds to slowly seat herself upon the stool set out in front of him.

"Greetings, Chancellor Delmore." She speaks plainly. His sudden, appalled expression suggests that the man recognises her voice. "Or do you prefer Martyn? Regardless, we have much to discuss. I only hope - despite your affiliations - that your conscience will compel you to cooperate with me tonight." The Elven woman slowly leans forward, close enough to gently whisper in her captive's ear. "Though, rest assured, I am prepared for the possibility that it does not."

"...Tch. What sort of farce is this?" Martyn speaks again after a moment's pause. "You're one of them Scions, aren't you? Figures." He snickers to himself. "Only your lot would be stupid and reckless enough to pull a stunt like this."

"Yes. I'm afraid none of us feel particularly compelled to abide by the laws of your city, least of all ones that you wrote." She passionlessly remarks, before leaning forward to continue. "You're something of an odd creature, Chancellor. Being the uncouth drunkard that you are, I always thought you had been elected due to your sway with the halfwits of this city."

"Piss off." Martyn lets out a dejected laugh, shaking his head.

"But I see that you are more conniving than that. You played the part of the fool so well, that I had no reason to think of you as an agent of the Zhentarim." Seradria straightens her posture, and casts her gaze upwards as she speaks. "But I am left to wonder why you would choose to associate with the Underdark all the same. I know the Zhentarim are ever-driven by their... mercantilism." She wrinkles her nose. "But someone of your standing must have more than enough coin to their name, surely."

"Might just be that it doesn't have anything to do with money, elf." He grits his teeth before continuing. "Could just be, that some of us in this city are damn well tired of having you parade around the place. Scaring the locals, dragging their children off into the dark to do who knows what to 'em." He spits forward, hitting the disinterested knight in the arm. "But I guess I'll be getting an idea of the sort of barbarity you've been doin', eh?"

"Spare me, Chancellor. I've only ever sentenced criminals." She waves her hand dismissively. "The ones your corrupt bureaucracy proves to be either too slow or inefficient to handle."

"Criminals! Do you think that's meant to comfort those people's families, to make 'em feel better!? To have been found 'guilty' by a band of religious thugs, goin' off executing people left an' right however they fancy?"

"...What do you know of suffering?" Seradria sharpens her tone. "Do your people even live long enough to care for what they have?" The knight's lips curl in distaste. "I've spent centuries watching the legacy of my kin be undone. Seeing our lands be taken, our history be forgotten, our culture *defiled*. I do not give a damn what you *think* you feel. I only act in the best interests of my people."

"...Aye, so do I. Which is why that precious, floating city of yours will be a heap of rubble before tonight's end. Aralyth doesn't belong to you Elves, and if I have to work with the Drow to help drive you off this island, well. So be it."

"So be it." Seradria coldly repeats, before rising to a stand. "Humoring your drivel at least revealed your motivations. We can start from there." The knight then wanders back to the nearby table to examine her array of tools. "You will yield to me the names of your conspirators. That is, if you'd like for this to end swiftly."

"Hah... No, I don't think I will." His voice adopts a smug tone, just before the blindfolded man throws back his head to shout. "Azun kara SATINE!"

Seradria's instincts drove her to turn upon hearing those first few words, but she wasn't fast enough. Her comrades, ever vigilant as they were, swiftly drew their daggers but only one of them proved quick enough to stab the man's shoulder. Those draconic words caused a surge of violet light to fill the room, and a gust of wind blew them back against the wall. By the time Seradria regained her senses, she'd find that both the man and the chair he sat on were simply gone.

"Damn it all. How in the hells was he capable of mustering a spell of that magnitude?" She sharply regards the men in the room with her.

"We.. do not know, Commander. His hands were bound as well, which would mean he is proficient enough to cast without movement as well." The hooded elf knits his brow, while the other idly sweeps the floor for clues.

"...No matter. I do not know where the wretch has run off to, but hopefully our seers will manage to track him down." She turns to march her way to the door. "Regardless, we've overstayed our welcome. The Chancellor will no doubt go spin his lies of what took place here. Until Anaria can temper the impending... diplomatic tensions, treat Caurdor as you would any other hostile territory."

"Yes, Commander. We will return to the shadows." The two elves then salute her. She returns the gesture before exiting the room.

Seradria cursed under her breath, as she hastily made her way back through the hallway. Had she been informed of the man's magical aptitude, she would have taken greater precautions. Either way, she gambled the risk of war only to gain confirmation that the Chancellor *is* acting them. Not much of a worthwhile trade; at least not for the strain it'll put on Anaria's shoulders. Her friend has far too much weighing on her shoulders already, being the Queen-Elect of that 'floating city' the loathsome Chancellor spoke of. Myon, the "Floating Gem," whose soldiers served under Seradria's command. Indeed, when Seradria discovered Myon for herself, she acted as its loyal guardian until the day she was entrusted with so prestigious a role.

A role that now has her preoccupied with playing cloak and dagger games in foreign cities. Despite the brevity of her interrogation, she couldn't help but reflect on Martyn's words. She's seen people be driven by many a vice, but never has she dealt with someone who accused *her* to be the motive of their actions. It was absurd! No doubt an attempt to deflect from his sins, to absolve himself of his crimes by claiming they were done in vindication. Nevertheless, his rambling revealed that some form of attack would be taking place this night. Even should it be a lie, Seradria felt it prudent to go send word to the city regardless. She reached the end of the hallway by now, and began unlocking that heavy steel door to pry it open again.

Upon doing so, she is immediately bumped into by Vesryn who stumbles his way inside. Thankfully, her armor prevents her from being slammed back into the wall.

"Seradria!" He grabs onto her arm, staring at her with uncharacteristic urgency.

"What is it, Vesryn? By the Seldarine, what has gotten into you?" Bewildered, she looks him over to see if he had been injured in some way.

"The City is in grave peril. You must hurry back, immediately!" His hand quivers as it grips her tighter.

"..You speak of Myon? I know. I was just about to warn the others to-"

"You *do not* understand. The city is falling."

"...What?"

"The mythal has been compromised. *Myon* is falling."

A chill runs down her spine, freezing her where she stands. Not again. It can't happen again.