



HOMECOMING

BOOK I

ARCHMAGE

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FORGOTTEN REALMS

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R.A. SALVATORE

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

HOMEcomings

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Prelude

THE HULKING DEMON SNORTED FIRE WITH EVERY GREAT breath, clawed hands twitching, eager to grab at the great flaming whip set in a loop on his hip. This was Balor, the mightiest of his kind, massive and powerful, with great leathery wings, a whip of fire, a sword of lightning, and a keen understanding of battle. The demons that took his name and form were known as the generals of the Abyss, used by the demon lords to guide their armies in the never-ending wars that scarred the smoky and dismal plane.

Balor was itchy now, wanting his weapons but not daring to reach for them. The creature in front of him, half spider, half beautiful drow, had not come here to request his service as a general.

Far from it, it seemed.

“You wish to strike out at me?” the Spider Queen remarked, her eight arachnid legs clattering on the stones as she moved around the beast. Behind her lay a wake of lesser demons—shredded manes, balguras pummeled into piles of mush, shadow demons robbed of their life energy that lay there as smoking clouds of insentient darkness.

“Why have you come to me, Lolth?” Balor asked. “Why have you destroyed my minions? I am not at war, with you or any, and am not now in service to any.”

The Spider Queen twisted her drow torso to regard the carnage she had inflicted. “Perhaps I was bored,” she answered casually. “No matter.”

Balor issued a little growl, but kept his composure. He knew that it—that all of this—was something more, something more dangerous. Lolth had been in the company of the balor Errtu extensively of late, and Errtu was Balor's greatest rival.

"You have not answered my question," Lolth remarked. "Do you wish to strike out at me?"

Balor couldn't deny the eager twitching of his clawed hands. He had served all of the demon lords over the centuries, of course, but Lolth was his least favorite. She was something more than the other Abyssal lords, a goddess relying on the prayers and fealty of some puny mortal race on the Prime Material Plane, beings Balor would use as . . . food. Her eyes, spider or drow—or whatever other form she chose to take—were not focused here in the Abyss, but were ever elsewhere. Like her ambitions.

"Do it," Lolth teased.

Another growl escaped Balor's lips, and how he wanted to comply.

"Ah, but you cannot," Lolth went on. "Because I can unmake you with a word, or make of you something else, something less."

Balor's nostrils flared, fires coming forth. She was not bluffing, of course. She was a demon queen and on this plane, the Abyss, her power over creatures such as Balor was absolute. On another plane of existence, perhaps Balor would strike out at her—and how delicious that would be!—but in the Abyss, he could not.

"I will not unmake you," Lolth promised. "I will not obliterate you. I am curious, beast of fire. Long have I wondered about the sting of your whip. How sharp the flames? They can melt the skin from a manes, but how would they fare against the hide of a goddess? I do not fear your fire, Balor."

The demon did not make a move.

"I will not unmake you," Lolth stated flatly. "You are the favored of Baphomet and Kostchtchie, and as much as I might enjoy the spectacle of mighty Balor reduced to inglorious irrelevance, you are not worth the bother to which such an act would give rise."

The words spun in Balor's thoughts. Baphomet had indeed used him, and recently, to command his legions, and Kostchtchie, the Prince of Wrath, had always called upon Balor first and foremost. But what was this about? Why would Lolth even be here, in Balor's castle?

"I played no role in the failure of Tiamat's rise," the demon told her, wondering if that might be the reason for her visit. There were rumors that Lolth was trying to help the minions of the great catastrophe, Tiamat, in resurrecting her castle and body in the Prime Material Plane, a tremendous effort by the dragons of that plane that had, so said the rumors, spectacularly failed. "I would be glad to be rid of the witch."

"I have made no accusation," Lolth said slyly.

"Then why?" a frustrated Balor roared, fire flying like spittle from his great maw. "Why are you here, Demon Queen of Spiders? Why do you taunt me?"

"When has Balor considered a challenge to be a taunt?"

"A challenge? Or a goading—a prelude to an excuse!"

"Strike me!"

"No!"

"Then I shall unmake you!" Lolth's eyes flared with sinister promise.

Before he could even consider the movement, Balor had his sword in hand, lightning spraying from its tip, and his whip in his other hand, the length of it becoming a living flame.

Lolth reared up, her four front legs coming off the stone to wave in the air, her arms up high, her face a mask of ferocity, mouth opening impossibly wide in a great hiss.

Balor raised his whip arm, the fiery line rolling up high above his shoulder. It felt as if he had dunked that arm under water. Something grabbed at it and slowed it.

A new smell joined in the sulfuric haze of the Abyss, a sharp, burning hiss, and Balor did not have to turn to know that a great conflagration blazed behind him. With a defiant roar, the beast yanked his arm free and sent his whip cracking out in front of him, snapping out at Lolth.

Her legs blocked, the fiery instrument scored her hide with an angry tear and blister. But the Spider Queen's cry was more of joy than pain, or, more likely, it was both.

On she came, lightning flashing from every drow fingertip, four spider legs kicking out to batter at Balor.

And more, the demon realized. The air around him filled with floating webs, Lolth's webbing, and every filament, it seemed, carried a spider, ravenous and biting.

The whip cracked again. Balor thrust forth his sword, the blade extending with a great blast of lightning, one that had Lolth backstepping from the sheer weight of it.

But on she came again, bolt after sharp bolt lashing out from her fingertips, stabbing at Balor. Her eyes flared with fire and she vomited acid and poison, spraying it all over Balor.

His whip arm went back again. This time, the webbing grabbed at it more fully, like a smoking wall moving at Lolth's command, rolling forward to enwrap him. He opened wide his wings, trying to burst free, but he couldn't. The wall closed nearly around him, and millions of spiders leaped upon him, biting at his flesh.

He thrust forth his sword and felt it bite into Lolth's flesh, but she screamed again as if in ecstasy. And when Balor went to retract the blade, he could not.

He glanced down to see the Spider Queen holding the blade in her grasping hand.

Holding the blade!

In desperation, he threw forth another blast of lightning through the blade, perhaps the greatest he had ever evoked, and he saw it enter Lolth's hand, saw it fly from the blade to the gaping wound the blade had gashed. And Lolth took it, accepted it fully into her great frame, and from her free hand came a shock of lightning that seemed her own and Balor's combined, slamming into Balor and driving him back.

He wrenched free his sword, and now he did hear pain in Lolth's cry as her hand came with the sword. But any joy that

realization might garner proved short-lived as he felt the pillow-like softness behind him. The wall of webbing grabbed at him. His thrashing only brought it closer around him.

Hatefully, Balor looked at Lolth, at her smile, even though she was holding up her arm, spraying blood, ending in a torn and fingerless stump.

She vomited onto him again, her poisonous spittle covering him, burning at him. She bade her webbing to complete its roll around Balor. Her million spiders eagerly released their filaments, redoubling their efforts to bite at him.

Balor's whip flashed out and connected with nothing, the swing smothered by the too-thick blanket of webbing and spiders.

All sense of balance left him. He could not move, could feel nothing but the poison of Lolth and the tiny bites of her unrelenting minions.

And he knew of the most insidious part of that poison. In her venom Lolth carried confusion, an unrelenting dizziness that defeated any attempt at magical defense or escape as surely as a globe of invulnerability.

Balor was caught, fully enwrapped, hanging upside down, displayed like a trophy.

And still Lolth's spiders bit at him, and they would, he heard her promise, for a decade.



MATRON MOTHER QUENTHEL Baenre's red eyes flared, belying her otherwise outwardly calm demeanor. Gromph marveled at her control, given the image he had just presented to her in the scrying bowl. Her great achievement on the surface in the Silver Marches, the Darkening, was no more. The sun was shining across the Silver Marches and the orcs were running for their holes in the mountains.

"Bregan D'aerthe's spies indicate that Drizzt Do'Urden facilitated the dissolution of Tsabrak's dweomer," Gromph

remarked, just to twist the blade a little bit. Gromph knew very well what had happened to the magical Darkening, for he had been there when the spell had been defeated. For he, using an unwitting Drizzt as the conduit, had been the one to dissolve the magic. “Drizzt’s human wife, another Chosen of Mielikki by all accounts, looked on with tears of joy. Lady Lolth has lost the battle for the Weave, and now, too, she has been bested in the Silver Marches.”

“Beware your tongue, brother,” Matron Mother Baenre warned in a very deadly tone. Her eyes narrowed, accentuating their sharp edges to give her angular features a harsh attitude.

“True, and well advised, Matron Mother,” Gromph said, and he gave a polite bow. “I should have said that Lady Lolth’s proxies were defeated by those of Mielikki. The failure is—”

“Not ours,” the matron mother interrupted sharply. “We left. We had accomplished all that we had set out to accomplish. Our time there was done, our gains left to the idiot orcs, whom we knew would lose them in short order. That is not our concern, and never was.”

“Surely it is Matron Mother Zeerith’s concern, and the concern of her fledgling city,” said the archmage. “Tsabarak Xorlarrin’s channeling of Lady Lolth’s power was bested by a heretic rogue who is not even skilled in the Art. And her family and city has suffered greatly in this campaign. By my count, near to a hundred and twenty dark elves were killed in the Silver Marches War, and more than four out of five of those were drow of Q’Xorlarrin.”

“She will request our help, of course,” Matron Mother Baenre said, as if that was a good thing.

But Gromph wasn’t letting Quenthel off the hook that easily. “Your own position is compromised.”

The matron mother sat up straight at that, her red eyes flaring dangerously yet again.

“Lady Lolth will not blame you,” Gromph was quick to explain. “But the other matron mothers . . . you have tightened

your noose around their necks. Tos'un Armgo is dead, his *ibliith* daughter missing. Matron Mother Mez'Barris has lost her one fingerhold to the Eighth House of Menzoberranzan, and so she will view the reconstituted House Do'Urden with great suspicion and dismay."

"I will allow her to appoint another noble of Barrison Del'Armgo to serve in the hierarchy of House Do'Urden."

"She will refuse."

The matron mother clearly wanted to argue the point, and just as clearly had no valid argument with which to do so.

"House Hunzrin hates House Xorlarrin," Gromph reminded. "And more important, hates the concept of Q'Xorlarrin, a city that threatens their trade dominance. And House Melarn hates . . . well, everything. If those fanatical Melarni priestesses come to believe that Tsabrax Xorlarrin's failure and House Xorlarrin's losses indicate the displeasure of Lady Lolth, they will surely join in with House Hunzrin to . . ." He let his voice trail off and heaved a great sigh. "Well, will they perhaps, shall we say, conclude the experiment of a sister city so near the surface in no uncertain terms?"

His coyness didn't seem to impress his sister, but he didn't want it to. He just wanted to anger Quenthel, to stick verbal pins into her, to force her hand.

To force a mistake.

"Do you think I am unaware of these threats, Archmage?" the matron mother said coolly, back in complete control. "Or do you believe me incapable of properly seeing to them? Your lack of confidence is both touching and insulting. Perhaps you would be wise to consider that dueling truth."

Gromph bowed again and bid farewell. He had almost reached the room's exit when he glanced back over his shoulder and said, "And do not forget the loss of a dragon. Or that Tiamat's disciples were defeated in their quest to return their dragon mother to the Prime Material Plane."

Matron Mother Baenre twitched, despite her resolve. The chromatic dragons—reds, blues, whites, greens, and blacks—had

plotted to horde such a treasure that they would bring their goddess Tiamat and her grand castle back to the Prime Material Plane, to unleash unspeakable devastation across the lands.

But they had failed, and in the attempt, Matron Mother Baenre's own actions had brought about the downfall of a white dragon, Aurbangras, son of the great Arauthator—who had been chased back to his mountain home.

Lady Lolth had apparently approved of the chromatic dragons and their plans for Tiamat. Through the matron mother, she had called for the enlistment of the white dragons, and had insisted that Arauthator and his son be given huge amounts of treasure in return for their services.

And now that, too, had failed.

Gromph nodded and did well to hide his satisfaction at Quenthel's clear discomfort. He left her chamber then, but did not depart House Baenre, for there was another matter needing his full and urgent attention.

He moved for his own private quarters, a suite of rooms where he rarely resided, but one that served as home to House Baenre's newest high priestess, Minolin Fey Baenre, who was Gromph Baenre's wife and the mother of his all-important baby daughter.



THE MOMENT GROMPH was out of the room, Matron Mother Quenthel Baenre checked her magical wards and guards against scrying, then unleashed a tirade of invective and magical power that left two of her servants writhing on the floor in agony and a third one dead.

Matron Mother Zeerith had already contacted her, begging help and information, for she feared exactly the alliance—Hunzrin and Melarn—of which Gromph had just warned. Her House and city of Q'Xorlarrin were truly depleted. The list of the compromised and the dead was impressive, with two nobles, the wizard Ravel and High Priestess Saribel, serving in House

Do'Urden; her daughter, High Priestess Berellip, murdered very recently by Drizzt and his friends; her house weapons master, the great Jaerthe, slain on some ridiculous venture to the frozen wilderness known as Icewind Dale; and a hundred of her warriors and wizards killed in the Silver Marches.

The troubles of Matron Mother Zeerith were not, in and of themselves, a bad thing for Matron Mother Baenre. She had never intended Q'Xorlarrin to be anything more than a satellite of House Baenre, after all, despite the pronouncements of it as a "sister city" to Menzoberranzan. Q'Xorlarrin, combined with Bregan D'aerthe, would serve as House Baenre's way of competing with House Hunzrin for trade with the surface dwellers. That was the only seam in Baenre's armor, the only advantage the other Houses could use against the mighty First House of Menzoberranzan.

Nor was Quenthel overly concerned over the reported death of Tos'un Armgo, a deserter rogue who was never much in Matron Mother Mez'Barris Armgo's favor anyway, and never anything more than a minor noble in House Barrison Del'Armgo.

The combination of those things, though, along with the death of a white dragon and the destruction of Lady Lolth's Darkening, could lead to all sorts of trouble. She worried that Matron Mother Mez'Barris would throw in with Houses Hunzrin and Melarn, and so House Baenre would face all three in defending Q'Xorlarrin. If so, then surely the Seventh House of Menzoberranzan, House Vandree, would side with the conspirators.

Matron Mother Baenre believed that the rest of the Ruling Council was on her side, but would they pledge allegiance to her openly, with warriors, priests, and wizards?

And these were drow Houses, after all, known for reliability only in the fact that they could not be considered reliable. These bonds were not alliances as much as they were compacts of convenience, and Quenthel had turned the thumbscrews down hard on the other matron mothers, both in her actions in the Silver

Marches and in the reestablishment of House Do'Urden—and, of course, in appointing a *darthiir*, a surface elf, as the matron mother of that Eighth House.

Matron Mother Baenre had pushed them all to the edge, had slapped them all in the face, to demonstrate her superiority and thus put them in line. And it had worked thus far, but now, in the aftermath of the fall of the Silver Marches to the previous powers there, would be the critical time.

"But it was always to be like this," she told herself, pushing aside the defeat of the Darkening and the death of a white dragon—and the defeat of Tiamat's ultimate plan.

Quenthel nodded and closed her eyes. She was Matron Mother Baenre. Lolth was still with her, she believed. And she felt it then, warmly.

She had tugged the whole of Menzoberranzan into her iron grip, as Lolth had demanded of her.

But how to keep them there in this dangerous and uncertain time?

Quenthel closed her eyes and fell deep into meditation, deep into the memories she now held that were not her own. The memories of her mother, Yvonnell the Eternal, that had been telepathically imparted to her by the squirming tentacles of the mind flayer who had served as her mother's closest advisor, those were the memories she considered now.

She saw Menzoberranzan, then, in a light as never before. The great cavern housing the city appeared more natural, far less shaped by drow craftsmen, far less highlighted by drow illumination, like the faerie fire outlining the great houses or the glow of Narbondel, the heat-clock.

She knew that she was seeing the earliest days of the city, tumultuous, yet only built and settled in pockets.

In this atmosphere had House Baenre become ascendant. In this time of potential had House Baenre realized it most of all.

She saw the drow.

She saw the demons.

So many demons! Scores of them, from the worthless manes, the fodder of the Abyss, to the great glabrezu, marilith, nalfeshnee, and even mighty balors. They wandered the streets, rampaging, feasting, engaging in orgies with the drow, engaging in battles with the drow, engaging in whatever impulse crossed their chaotic and destructive desires.

There was chaos, truly!

But it was superficial, Matron Mother Baenre realized, like a series of bar fights in a city full of overlords and armies.

And that superficial chaos was enough. The demons caused enough grief, enough trouble, enough chaos, to keep the lesser Houses fully occupied. They could not align and plot against ascendant House Baenre with demons literally knocking on their doors.

Matron Mother Baenre watched in amusement as her borrowed memories revealed a balor in battle with a band of insectoid chasme.

The demons were no threat to the greater Houses of the city, even then, in Menzoberranzan's fledgling days. Never could they coordinate enough within their own ranks to pose any significant threat to the order of Menzoberranzan, an order being imposed by House Baenre and House Fey-Branche.

But the demons, so thick about the city, had surely kept the lesser matron mothers busy with thoughts of self-preservation. Those lesser Houses were too busy securing their own fences and structures to contemplate invading others.

Matron Mother Baenre blinked open her red eyes and considered the glorious revelations.

"Chaos begets order," she whispered.

Yvonne the Eternal's memories had shown Quenthel the way.

"No, she said more loudly, shaking her head, for surely this diabolical possibility had been divinely inspired. "Lady Lolth has shown me the way."



HIS SLY TAUNTING of his sister did little to improve Gromph's bitter mood. Even if he toppled her, even if he destroyed every matron mother and high priestess in the city, what would he accomplish?

He was a male, nothing more, and even when Lady Lolth had turned to the Weave, to a domain he had come to dominate more than any dark elf in centuries—in millennia, in perhaps the entire history of the race—Lolth's gratitude had not reached to him, nor his fellow male wizards.

Sorcere, the drow school of arcane magic, the academy under the control of Gromph, had counted among its students almost exclusively male drow, with only a few notable exceptions of priestesses looking to enhance their magical repertoire by adding arcane spells to their divinely inspired magic. Yet as soon as the Weave had become a web, as soon as it appeared that Lady Lolth would steal the domain of the goddess Mystra, the noble Houses had flooded Sorcere with their daughters as students.

The matron mothers, with Lolth's blessing, would not suffer the males of Menzoberranzan their position atop the ranks of Lolth's arcane disciples.

Would Gromph's ultimate title of archmage have proven secure?

But Lolth had lost her bid for the Weave, so Gromph had learned, though the details were not yet known to him. The Weave was no longer in her spidery claws and the city and school would return to normal, perhaps. Gromph would remain the archmage, and, he now even more poignantly understood, would remain a "mere male" in Menzoberranzan.

Or perhaps not, he mused as he pushed through the door of his private chambers, to see Minolin Fey seated on the great-backed chair, their tiny child Yvonne suckling at the high priestess's breast.

"Your presence is long overdue," the infant said in a gurgling, watery voice. Baby Yvonne turned her head to stare hard at the archmage, her threatening visage only slightly diminished by the spit and mother's milk dribbling out the side of her tiny mouth.

Her eyes! Those eyes!

Gromph remembered that look so well. With that one petulant expression, Yvonne his child had thrown him back a thousand years and more, to the court of Yvonne his mother.

“Where is Methil?” the infant demanded, referring to the ugly illithid who had imparted the memories and knowledge of Yvonne the Eternal, Gromph’s mother, the longest-serving matron mother Menzoberranzan had ever known, into the malleable mind of this tiny creature before she had even been birthed. “I told you to bring Methil.”

“Methil will soon arrive,” Gromph assured her. “I was with the matron mother.”

That brought a bit of a growl from the child, one that sounded almost feral.

Gromph courteously bowed before his baby.

The side door to the chamber banged open then and in slid a handmaiden, an ugly yochlol, resembling a huge, half-melted gray candle with waving tentacles.

“The illithid has arrived for your lesson, Yvonne,” the demon creature said in a bubbly, muddy voice that still somehow managed to hold the sharp edge of a shriek. The handmaiden slid over to the child, leaving a trail of muddy goo, its tentacles reaching for the babe though it was still several feet from Minolin Fey—who was all too happy, even eager, to surrender the baby.

Out of the room glided the yochlol, one tentacle dragging back to clasp the door and slam it shut.

Minolin Fey slumped back in the high-backed great chair, not even bothering to straighten her gown to cover her exposed, leaking breast. Her breathing was quite raspy, Gromph noted, and more than once she glanced at the closed door with an expression that seemed to be clearly approaching panic.

“She is beautiful, is she not?” Gromph asked, and when the high priestess snapped a surprised glare at him, he added, “Our child.”

Minolin Fey swallowed hard, and Gromph laughed at her. Whatever her feelings, Minolin would not dare harm Yvonne.

She would do as she was told, as Lolth's avatar had instructed, because in her heart, Minolin Fey was truly a coward. Even in their previous plotting to overthrow Matron Mother Quenthel—before the end of the Spellplague, before the Darkening, before Methil had imbued Quenthel with the memories of Yvonnell much as the illithid had done with the child in Minolin's womb—Minolin had slithered in the shadows. She had remained in the background, prodding others into the forefront to hunt for K'yorl Oblodra in the Abyss, and whispering to those other Houses that would bear the brunt of Matron Mother Baenre's wrath if the plot unfolded badly.

"You do not understand!" Minolin Fey snapped at him in a voice as shrill as any she had ever dared use with Gromph Baenre.

"I?"

"To have your body so invaded . . ." the high priestess said, lowering her gaze and looking thoroughly, pathetically broken. "Those illithid tentacles, invading my flesh, probing me," she said, her tone hinting that she was barely able to speak the words. "You cannot know, husband."

She dared look up, to find Gromph glaring at her.

"You know nothing of what I know or do not know, Minolin of House Fey-Branche." His reference to her lesser House, instead of naming her as a Baenre, was a clear and sharp reminder.

"You are not a woman," Minolin Fey said quietly. "There is nothing more . . . personal."

"I am not a woman," Gromph echoed. "A fact of which I am reminded every day of my life."

"The child . . ." Minolin Fey said with a disgusted shake of her head.

"Will become Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan," Gromph stated.

"In fifty years? A century?"

"We shall see." Gromph turned on his heel and started for the door.

“There remains K’yorl,” Minolin Fey dared remark before he reached the exit, referring to their previous plans to be rid of Quenthel.

Gromph stopped and stood staring at the door for a few heartbeats. Then he snapped about, eyes and nostrils flaring. “This is not Quenthel any longer, who serves as Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan,” he warned. “Not simply Quenthel, at least. She knows as Yvonne knew, and as our child Yvonne is coming to know.”

“Knows . . . ?”

“The history of our people, the living truth of the ways of the Spider Queen, the myriad plots and contortions of the many, many Houses that have come before. You would do well to remember that, Minolin Fey. Our union has served me well.” He glanced at the door where the yochlol and the baby Yvonne had gone. “But if you conspire and connive, and so invoke the wrath of Quenthel—of Matron Mother Baenre—then know that I will not protect you. Indeed, know that I will destroy you, in service to my beloved sister.”

Minolin Fey could not match his gaze and lowered her face.

“Treat our child well, my wife,” Gromph warned. “As if your very life depended on doing so.”

“She demeans me,” Minolin Fey muttered under her breath as Gromph turned once more to leave. And again the archmage spun on his heel.

“What?”

“The child,” the high priestess explained.

“The child demeans you?”

The high priestess nodded, and Gromph chuckled once more.

“You understand who that child has become?” Gromph asked rhetorically. “Beside her, you deserve to be demeaned, and mocked.

“But fear not,” Gromph added. “Perhaps if you treat her well, and feed her well with your breasts, she will not utterly obliterate you with a Lolth-given spell.”

Still chuckling, though not really feeling any better than when he had entered the room, the archmage departed.

Sometime later that day, Gromph became aware of a major demon, a gigantic canine-faced four-armed glabrezu, wandering the ways of Menzoberranzan near House Baenre. After that, a courier from the matron mother arrived and informed him that more demons would follow, and he was not to destroy or banish them except in defense of his very life.

The archmage's expression grew sourer still.



SEATED AT THE right foreleg of the spider-shaped council table, Matron Mother Mez'Barris Armgo trembled visibly after High Priestess Sos'Umptu Baenre announced that their scouts had located a very-much-alive Tiago Do'Urden, thus finishing the full recounting of the results of the Silver Marches War—full, except for the not-so-minor detail that the sun had returned to that region of the World Above, the Darkening spell dismissed, and the fact that her words about Tiago were untrue, issued only to annoy Matron Mother Mez'Barris Armgo of the Second House.

"Issues, Matron Mother Mez'Barris?" the matron mother asked when Sos'Umptu moved back around to the far side of the table and took her seat, the Ruling Council's new Ninth Seat, between the matron mothers of House Vandree and House Do'Urden.

"Too many to recount in the hours we have, perhaps," the matron mother of House Barrison Del'Armgo retorted.

"Then the most recent, if you please."

"Did you not hear your own sister's words?"

Matron Mother Baenre shrugged dismissively.

"Drow nobles were killed," Mez'Barris said.

"Drow nobles are often killed," Matron Miz'ri Mizzrym of the Fourth House obediently pointed out. Miz'ri had become little more than an echo for the whispers Matron Mother Baenre did

not wish to speak aloud. As she looked from Miz'ri to the matron mothers Vadalma Tlabbar and Byrtyn Fey, she was reminded of the tightening and dangerous alliance between House Baenre and the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Houses of Menzoberranzan.

Mez'Barris had to unwind that alliance if she was ever to be out from under the squirming shadow of the wretched Quenthel Baenre. She turned her stare over Miz'ri once more and added a sly and knowing grin, pointedly letting her gaze drop to the ornate necklace of gemstones Miz'ri had worn to council this day. Rumors about the city claimed that House Mizzrym was dealing with enemies of Menzoberranzan, including the deep gnomes of Blingdenstone, and that, of course, would explain the precious gemstones around Miz'ri's neck.

Perhaps that was Baenre's hold over Matron Mother Miz'ri, Mez'Barris mused. It was no secret that House Mizzrym was trying to build a trade market beyond Menzoberranzan to rival that of the ever-dangerous House Hunzrin, and perhaps the matron mother was granting Miz'ri dispensation to bargain with enemies, even the hated deep gnomes, with impunity.

It was just a hunch, but one worth investigating and perhaps exploiting.

"It is curious, though, that with the discovery of a living Tiago, of the Do'Urden nobles who went to war, only two were killed," Mez'Barris remarked. "And those two of the same family line."

"Are we to believe now that you ever truly claimed the *darthiir* half-breed daughter of Tos'un as a true member of House Barrison Del'Armgo?" asked Dahlia—Matron Darthiir Do'Urden—and the whole of the Ruling Council, with the exception of the two Baenres, gasped in unison, not so much at the bluntness of the remark but that the wretched elf who all, even the allies of House Baenre, knew to be no more than a second echo for Matron Mother Baenre's votes, had spoken the open accusation.

Seated beside Dahlia, High Priestess Sos'Umptu Baenre smiled unabashedly, as if she cared not at all that the puppet master's strings were visible to the audience.

“Tos’un Armgo died honorably,” Matron Mother Baenre boldly pronounced, abruptly deflecting the conversation before it could be reduced to an open show of sides. “He rode Aurbangras, son of Arauthator, into battle even as Tiago flew Arauthator beside him. There, above the battlefield, they met the enemies of the white dragons, a pair of copper wyrms, in great combat. If there are any implications to your remark, Matron Mother Mez’Barris, perhaps you should first consider that neither I nor any others of Menzoberranzan hold sway over dragons, particularly not those of the metallic persuasion.”

“And Doum’wielle?” Matron Mother Mez’Barris retorted, and she was sorry she had blurted that from the moment it had left her mouth, particularly given the words of Matron Darthiir Do’Urden.

Seven of the nine members of the Ruling Council openly laughed at Mez’Barris’s remark. Only Zhindia Melarn of the Sixth House sat grim-faced, suspecting, no doubt, the same thing as Matron Mother Mez’Barris: It was no accident or simple matter of fate that neither Tos’un Armgo or his daughter Doum’wielle had returned from the surface campaign, or that now, apparently, all of the others—Tiago of House Baenre, Ravel of House Xorlarrin, and Saribel of both those Houses—would once more serve as nobles of the reconstituted House Do’Urden in Menzoberranzan.

Any thoughts Mez’Barris might have entertained of holding any influence in the Do’Urden compound were now clearly dashed.

The city was Matron Mother Baenre’s.

For now.

Mez’Barris glanced at Zhindia Melarn. She had never held any love for the fanatical Melarni priestesses, but it seemed to her that they were destined to ally now, given the unabashed and continuing power grab by Matron Mother Baenre.

She turned her gaze to Miz’ri Mizzrym, whose alliance with House Baenre was surely tentative. Miz’ri walked the fine line

between rival merchant groups and House Baenre, who were reaching out for surface trade through both the rogue band Bregan D'aerthe and the new city of Q'Xorlarrin, which was fast becoming little more than an outpost of House Baenre.

But House Hunzrin, far more powerful than their rank on the Ruling Council might suggest, would not be pleased—and indeed were outraged that the matron mother had reestablished House Do'Urden from thin air, thus blocking the logical ascension of the other Houses with House Xorlarrin's departure from the city—and Bregan D'aerthe was less controllable and predictable than any of the matron mothers ever dared openly admit.

Yes, there were cracks in Matron Mother Baenre's designs, particularly now that the Spider Queen had failed in her bid for the Weave. And by all accounts Q'Xorlarrin had suffered greatly in the war. While this would surely send the sniveling Matron Mother Zeerith closer to Matron Mother Baenre's side, would House Baenre be able to afford to send Zeerith the soldiers she might need to defend a concentrated assault by several drow Houses?

That suspicion was somewhat confirmed a moment later, when Matron Mother Byrtyn Fey, at best a very recent convert to Matron Mother Baenre's circle of allies, unexpectedly changed the subject.

"Why did we not foresee the coming of the metallic wyrms?" she asked the matron mother, her tone not sounding critical, but her question surely biting. "The enlistment of Arauthator and Aurbangras to our cause, the joining of our cause to that of the goddess Tiamat, was a blessed thing. The execution of that alliance and the fall of Aurbangras, however, was not."

"Matron Mother, surely you understand that the will and actions of dragons . . ." Matron Mother Baenre started to reply.

"Yes, of course," Byrtyn Fey interrupted—interrupted!—and with impunity she kept going. "But our own forces were in full recall to Menzoberranzan when Aurbangras was killed by the copper wyrms. Surely that fact will not serve Lolth well in her dealings with the goddess Tiamat."

"The grandson of Dantrag Baenre was astride one of those white dragons in the last battle," a clearly perturbed Matron Mother Baenre replied with an open sneer.

"One of only a handful of our people remaining in the Silver Marches," Byrtyn argued. "Had our army been on the field below—"

"The outcome of the dragon fight would not have changed," Matron Mother Baenre snapped.

"But the Spider Queen's position before Tiamat would have been strengthened. Do not run from errors, Matron Mother. Let us perhaps examine together how we might have better served Lady Lolth."

And there it was, Mez'Barris knew. She could barely contain her giggle. The words "examine together" when uttered by any matron mother to another matron mother, particularly at the table of the Ruling Council, were an accusation of failure far more than they were an offer of coordination. Those words stood among the oldest of drow verbal daggers. Drow matron mothers never "examined together" anything, other than the corpse of a third matron mother they had temporarily allied against and deposed.

The whole of the Council Chamber moved on edge, then, Mez'Barris noted to her delight, and even the wretched Quenthel seemed shaken, more like the old, ridiculous, and weak Quenthel Baenre whom Mez'Barris had known before this recent and inexplicable transformation had come over her.

Quenthel's nervousness lasted only a heartbeat, though, and she settled back comfortably and managed an amused look at Byrtyn Fey, like a silky cat looking into a rat hole with a promise that the occupant would not avoid the dinner table for long.

The room's door banged open then and a pair of towering creatures, humanoid and massively muscular but with a dog's face and a goat's horns, and an extra set of arms sporting giant pincers that could scissor a drow in half, stormed into the chamber.

Behind them came a slithering, naga-like creature, its lower body that of a serpent and upper body that of a shapely, naked woman, except with six arms all sporting axes or swords of various cruel design.

The matron mothers all started, some even rising, some beginning spells—except for the matron mother and Sos’Umptu, and of course, the impotent puppet, Darthiir Do’Urden.

Mez’Barris quickly calmed at the sight of the demons, the two glabrezu and the greater female, whom she recognized as either Marilith or Aishapra—this type of powerful demon looked too much alike for her to be certain.

“They are here with the blessings of Lolth,” Sos’Umptu explained.

“Forgive my intrusion,” said the female demon, and Mez’Barris knew from the voice that it was indeed Marilith, the greatest of her kind. Mez’Barris recalled then, as well, that yes, it was Marilith whose left breast was considerably larger than her right for some symbolic reason that no drow had ever discerned. Demons of this power could easily rectify such physical deformities if they so chose. Mez’Barris knew, too, from the female demon’s tone and personality, that the vile and dangerous creature cared nothing for forgiveness, nor would ever offer any.

“I learned of your council and wanted to see how many of the ruling matron mothers were still known to me,” Marilith went on. “It has been more than a century . . . a fleeting time, no doubt, but I care so little for drow that my memories of you are not forefront in my thoughts.”

Screeches, like those of great birds, echoed out in the hall behind her and her glabrezu guards, and strange creatures that seemed half-human and half-vulture—vrock, they were called, hulking and vicious, and standing nearly as tall as the ten-foot glabrezu—stalked into view along with a couple of clearly and understandably nervous dark elf sentries.

“Still, it’s good to be back,” Marilith said. She slithered around in a wide arc and departed, her hulking glabrezu guards close behind.

As the door shut, the matron mothers heard the agonized, horrified scream of a drow, and all suspected that one fewer sentry now guarded the sacred Council Chamber.

Demons were like that.

The Quality of Vengeance

NEVER HAVE I SO CLEARLY COME TO KNOW THAT THAT WHICH I DO not know, I do not know.

I did not expect to rise into the air in the middle of that field, in the middle of the dwarf army. When beams of light burst from my fingertips, from my feet, from my chest, from my eyes, they came without conscious thought—I was nothing more than a conduit. And I watched as surprised as any around as those light beams shot into the sky and melted the roiling blackness that had darkened the land.

When I sank back down from the unexpected levitation, back to the ground amongst my friends, I saw tears of joy all about me. Dwarves and humans, halflings and elves alike, fell to the ground on their knees, paying homage to Mielikki, thanking her for destroying the darkness that had engulfed the Silver Marches, their land, their home.

No one shed more tears of joy than Catti-brie, Chosen of Mielikki, returned to my side by the grace of the goddess, and now, clearly, finding some resolution to the trials for which she and my other friends were returned to the realm of the living.

Catti-brie had oft speculated that her battle with Dahlia in the primordial chamber of Gauntlgrym had been no more than a proxy fight between Mielikki and Lolth, but of course, she could not be certain. But now this spectacle of my body being used in so dramatic a manner to defeat the darkness,

the Darkening, of the Spider Queen, could not be questioned, so she believed. So they all believed.

But yet, I do not know.

I remain unconvinced!

I was the conduit of Mielikki, so they say, so it would seem, for I am no magic-user and surely know of no such dweomer as the one that escaped my mortal coil. Surely something, some power, found its way through me, and surely it seems logical to ascribe that power to Mielikki.

And so, following that logic, I was touched by the hand of a goddess.

Is it my own intrinsic skepticism then, my continual need to follow evidence, which prevents me from simply accepting this as true? For it simply did not seem to me to be that which they claim, but then, what might being so touched by a goddess actually feel like, I wonder?

This is my continuing dilemma, surely, my nagging agnosticism, my willingness to accept that I do not know and perhaps cannot know, coupled with my determination that such knowledge or lack thereof has no bearing—has to have no bearing—on how I conduct myself. I found Mielikki as a name to fit that which was already in my heart. When I learned of the goddess, of her tenets and ways, I found a melody consistent with the song of my own ethical beliefs and my own sense of community, with people and with nature about me.

It seemed a comfortable fit.

But never had I been able to truly separate the two, that which is in my heart and some extra-natural or supernatural other, whether ascribing that name to some higher level of existence or to, yes, a god indeed.

To me, Mielikki became a name to best describe that conscience within, and the code of existence that fits most smoothly. I did not find the need to search further, for the truth of Mielikki's existence or her place in the pantheon, or even the relationship

of the one true god—or gods and goddesses, as the case may be—to the mortal beings roaming Faerûn, or more pointedly, to my own life. Ever has my chosen way come from within, not without, and truly, that is how I prefer it!

I did not know of the existence of, or the rumor of the existence of, some being named Mielikki when I walked out of Menzoberranzan. I knew only of Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders, and knew, too, that that which was in my heart could never reconcile to the demands of that evil creature. Often have I feared that had I remained in Menzoberranzan, I might have become akin to Artemis Entreri, and there is truth in that fear in regards to the hopelessness and apathy I see, or once saw, in the man. But long ago, I dismissed the possibility that I would have become like him in action, whatever my despair.

Even in the domain of the Demon Queen of Spiders, even surrounded by the vile acts and unacceptable nurture of my kin, I could not have gone against that which was in my heart. My internal god of conscience would not have allowed it. I would have been left a broken man, I do not doubt, but not, but never, a callous destroyer of others.

No, I say.

And so I came to the surface world and I found a name for my conscience, Mielikki, and I found others who shared my mores and tenets, and I was at spiritual peace.

Catti-brie's declaration regarding the irredeemable nature of evil of goblin and giantkind shook that tranquility, as surely as her tone—and that of Bruenor—shook my more earthly sensibilities. I knew in that moment that I was likely at odds with a pronouncement my beloved wife claimed had come straight from the goddess. I have tried to rationalize it and tried to accept it, and yet . . .

Discordance remains.

And now this. I was lifted into the air, my body used as a conduit, the result presenting light where there was once

only darkness. It was good. Good—there is no other way to describe the change that Mielikki, if it was Mielikki—but how could it not have been Mielikki?—created through our magical communion.

Does not this godlike presence, then, command me to subjugate that which I believe to be just and right within my heart to the supposed command Mielikki relayed to me through Catti-brie? Am I not now, in the face of such powerful evidence, bound to dismiss my belief and accept the truth of the goddess's claim? When next I happen upon a nest of goblins, even if they are acting peaceably and bothering no one, am I therefore bound to battle within their home and slaughter them, every one, including children, including babies?

No, I say.

Because I cannot. I cannot dismiss that which is in my heart and conscience. I am a creature of intelligence and reason. I know what actions please me and put me at ease, and which pain me. I will kill a goblin in battle without regret, but I am no murderer, and will not be.

And that is my pain, and my burden. For if I am to accept Mielikki as my goddess, the circle cannot square, the yawning gulf of disagreement cannot be bridged.

Who are these gods we serve, this pantheon of the Realms, so rich and powerful and varied? If there is a universal truth, how then are there so many realizations of that truth, many similar, but each with rituals or specific demands to separate one from the other, sometimes by minute degree, sometimes by diametric opposition?

How can this be?

Yet there is universal truth, I believe—perhaps this is my one core belief!—and if that is so, then are not the majority of the pantheon claiming themselves as gods and goddesses truly frauds?

Or are they, as Bruenor had come to believe in the early years of his second life, cruel puppeteers and we their playthings?

It is all so confusing and all so tantalizingly close, but ever beyond the reach of mortal comprehension, I fear.

And so I am left again with that which is in my heart, and if Mielikki cannot accept that of me, then she chose the wrong conduit, and I named the wrong god.

Because despite what Catti-brie insisted, and what Bruenor came to declare with eager fire, I will continue to judge on the content of character and not the shape or color of a mortal coil. My heart demands no less of me, my spiritual peace must be held as the utmost goal.

With confidence do I declare that the edge of my scimitar will sooner find my own neck before it will cut the throat of a goblin child, or any child.

—Drizzt Do'Urden

Of Orcs and Dwarves

HUNDREDS OF DWARVEN CROSSBOWS WERE LEVELED ATOP the fallen logs of what used to be Dark Arrow Keep. A monstrous band approached: a score of the ugly orcs, a handful of goblins, and a frost giant.

And a dark elf named Drizzt Do'Urden.

"Lorgru," Sinnafein explained to the dwarf kings. "Lorgru, who would have become the next King Obould had not Warlord Hartusk usurped the throne."

"The retreating orcs flocked to him in the mountains, so said Drizzt," Catti-brie put in, and Sinnafein, whose scouts had told her the same thing, nodded her agreement.

"Lorgru ain't for shieldin' the dogs from me boys," King Harnoth proclaimed. "If he's looking to take up the fight, Adbar'll finish it for him!"

"Aye, but I'd like his ugly head on a pike outside our western gate," Oretheo Spikes added, and other nearby dwarves nodded at that.

King Emerus and Bruenor exchanged concerned glances. They had known this wasn't going to be easy from the first reports that the orcs were congregating around the deposed Lorgru in the Spine of the World.

Bruenor moved up to the central barricade and climbed atop the log. "Put up yer bows, boys," he called down the line after a cursory scan of the incoming forces. "No threat to be found. Durned elf'd kill 'em all afore ye let yer first bolt fly, if it came to fightin'."

The dwarves around him relaxed somewhat, but grumbled, too, more than a little disappointed that the meeting would most likely go off as planned.

Bruenor turned and held his hand up high. Drizzt responded in kind, and walked his unicorn mount, Andahar, around in front of the leading orcs, halting their progress.

“Ye with me?” Bruenor asked, turning around. The other three dwarf kings, Catti-brie, and Sinnafein of the elves moved to join him. Aleina Brightlance, who had been given the title and role as Emissary of Silverymoon and Everlund, rode forth as well.

Out from the other ranks rode Drizzt upon Andahar, along with an orc upon a snarling worg, a goblin shuffling fast along behind them, and the frost giant pacing them with its long strides.

“Who will speak for the Alliance of Luruar?” Drizzt asked, purposefully and pointedly evoking the alliance that had crumbled with the march of the Kingdom of Many-Arrows.

All turned to Bruenor.

“King Bruenor,” said Emerus Warcrown. He turned a sly eye upon his opponents, particularly upon Lorgru. “Aye, that Bruenor,” he explained to the visibly startled orc. “The one what signed the Treaty of Garumn’s Gorge with Obould the First them years and years ago.”

“I had thought King Bruenor long dead,” the orc leader replied.

“Well, ye thought wrong, I’m guessing,” Bruenor answered and stepped forward. “Is yerself speaking for them goblins and giants, too?”

“You are Bruenor?” Lorgru asked, incredulous, for surely the dwarf standing in front of him was very young.

“Don’t matter who I be,” the dwarf answered. “I’m speaking for ’em, and they’re agreeing, eh?” Behind him, the others all nodded.

That seemed to satisfy the orc, who nodded, though still wore a confused expression. “I speak for Many-Arrows,” he said.

“There ain’t no Many-Arrows,” King Harnoth said from behind, drawing wincing from several of the others, Drizzt included.

"The orcs fleeing the field have returned to me," Lorgru explained to Bruenor. "Never would I have sanctioned such a march against your people, or such a war. It is not the way of Obould!"

"And where's yerself been this last year o' fightin'?" Bruenor asked, suspicious.

"In the mountains, in exile," Lorgru answered.

Drizt looked at his red-bearded friend and nodded solemnly.

"My kingdom was stolen from me," Lorgru continued, "by factions determined to return to the warlike ways of the orcs. I reject those ways! She"—he pointed to Sinnafein—"is alive and free by my choice, though I could have ordered her killed, legally, even by your own laws, for intruding upon my kingdom."

All eyes went to Sinnafein.

"King Lorgru speaks truly," Sinnafein confirmed. "He would have been within his rights to execute me, but he did not."

"Are ye expectin' cheers?" King Harnoth said with a growl, looking from Sinnafein to Lorgru.

"I expect nothing," Lorgru replied. "I ask for a truce."

"A truce? Now that we got yer dogs runnin'?" Harnoth argued. "A truce so that ye can put 'em all back together and come hunting dwarfs once more?"

"Bruenor speaks for us, King Harnoth," Emerus Warcrown said, an edge of anger coming into his tone. Harnoth returned his angry stare, but Connerad Brawnnavil was quick to back up King Emerus, as was Aleina Brightlance.

"Bah, but I'm not needin' ye," Harnoth grumbled at length. "The boys o' Adbar alone can finish the job."

"Aye, but ye won't," Bruenor said in a tone that brooked no debate. The red-bearded dwarf spun on Lorgru. "A truce, ye're wanting?"

The orc nodded.

"Ye want us to leave yerself and yer boys alone in the mountains, do ye?"

Another nod.

“Well ye hear me good, then, King Lorgru, or Obould, or whate’er name ye mean to put on yer ugly face. Yerself and yers ain’t welcome in the Silver Marches anymore. There’s no Kingdom of Many-Arrows, and any o’ yer boys that come out o’ the mountains south of this ruined keep’s north wall, or in the Lands Against The Wall, or anywhere else in the Silver Marches’ll be counted as raiders and treated as such. We’ll be watching ye, don’t ye doubt, and first fight’s last fight, for don’t ye doubt that we’ll be coming in to find ye.”

King Lorgru glanced around like a caged animal, a look that changed to unmistakably crestfallen, as if only then did he realize that the dreams of his ancestors were lost to him. There would be no resurrection of Dark Arrow Keep, no return to the relationships and treaties the orcs had known before the rise of Warlord Hartusk.

He wanted to argue, they could all see, and even started to rebut. But he bit back his argument and accepted Bruenor’s terms with a nod.

“Perhaps one day we will prove ourselves worthy of your trust,” he said.

“I trust an orc corpse,” said King Harnoth. “So there’s a start to an understanding.”

“Ye stay in yer holes,” Bruenor warned. “Ye stay clear o’ the Silver Marches. Or don’t ye doubt that we’ll hunt ye down, every one, and kill ye to death. Every one.”

King Lorgru nodded and held forth his hand, but Bruenor didn’t take it, and indeed, it seemed to all looking on that it took every ounce of control the fiery dwarf could manage to stop him from leaping out and murdering Lorgru then and there.

“What o’ yerself?” Bruenor demanded of the goblin.

The diminutive creature glanced around nervously. “We are done the war!” it shrieked, and cowered.

Bruenor’s gaze shifted to the frost giant, tall and proud, and clearly unbended by the weight of guilt or defeat.

"I am Hengreda of Starshine," he said in his beautiful and resonant voice. He gave a little chuckle. "It seems that I am all that is left of Starshine."

He shrugged, as if that was simply the accepted way of war, which to frost giants it surely was.

"I wish to go to Shining White and Jarl Fimmel Orelson," the giant explained. "I wish to tell him that the war is ended."

"And why would ye wish to do such a thing as that?" a skeptical Bruenor asked.

"So that Jarl Orelson ends his preparations to continue the war," Hengreda said with surprising candor.

"Are ye sayin' he's meaning to come back with his boys?" Emerus Warcrown demanded.

The frost giant shrugged. "If there is war, Jarl Orelson will fight. If there is war no more, he will not."

Bruenor turned back to regard the other dwarf kings before he responded, mostly seeking the approval of King Emerus, who was old and wise and had been through this many times before. When Emerus nodded, the red-bearded dwarf turned back to the frost giant.

"Ye go and tell Jarl Orelson what I telled Lorgru here," Bruenor instructed. "He stays away and we'll leave him—we'll leave ye all—be. But if a dwarf o' the Silver Marches falls to the blade of a frost giant, then tell your Jarl Orelson that we'll be melting Shining White to a puddle, aye, and one red with giant blood, don't ye doubt."

"You boast loudly for such a little creature," Hengreda remarked.

Drizt, Catti-brie, and all the dwarves around gasped at that, expecting Bruenor to spring upon the giant and throttle him. King Harnoth even started forward threateningly, but Bruenor swung out an arm and held him back.

Bruenor just stood there and smiled, staring at Hengreda for a long, long while.

"Nothin' worth sayin' to the like o' yerself," said Bruenor. "I telled ye what was what, so do what ye want with it. But take

yerself a good look at the field behind us, giant. At the big holes we're filling with dead enemies. Ye might want to tell yer Jarl Orelson about that."

The frost giant snorted derisively.

"And if yer sense of honor, or whatever stupid thing's driving ye makes ye think ye're wantin' to fight me, then go and deliver the message to Shining White and come back," Bruenor offered. "We'll fight it out, me and yerself—just me and yerself. And when we're done, me boys'll dig a hole and put ye in it."

"Brave words, dwarf," the giant replied.

"Not just any dwarf," King Emerus said, stepping forward. "King Bruenor Battlehammer, Eighth King of Mithral Hall, Tenth King of Mithral Hall, who slew Hartusk. So go and run yer errands, boy, and ye come back and play. Ye'll get the chance to kill a legend, or think ye'll get the chance, because we're knowin', and yerself should be too, that Bruenor'll cut ye down bit by bit and spit in yer eye afore he finishes ye."

Through it all, Bruenor never blinked, never changed his expression, never seemed anything but calm.

Hengreda, though, did blink. "Aye, I will! I will come back and kill a legend!" he said, but no one, not even Lorgru and the goblin standing beside him, believed him.

"Ye don't come back," Bruenor warned Lorgru. "And ye don't get too many o' yer dogs all in one place, or we'll find ye and break ye. Now get on. Go to yer holes and stay there."

Lorgru, looking thoroughly defeated, nodded his agreement and led the others away.

"We'll watch for the giant," Connerad assured Bruenor.

"He won't be back," Bruenor told him. He noted then the scowl of King Harnoth, off to the side and standing beside Emerus, so he moved over to the pair, with Connerad in tow.

"Ah, but we erred in lettin' that dog go," Harnoth insisted. "He's an orc king and they'll swarm about him, and so we're to be knowin' war soon enough."

"No," said Sinnafein, off to the side, and she, too, moved over to join the impromptu meeting. "Lorgru is not like Hartusk or the other war chiefs. He is the son of Obould, and traces his bloodline to the first Obould. He believes in that vision."

"Then he shouldn't've let his dogs come huntin'," was all that Bruenor would say.



"KING HARNOTH WANTS to push into the mountains to hunt down the orcs," Catti-brie explained to Drizzt, the two off to the side and watching the small gathering. "Bruenor won't let him, and Emerus and Connerad back Bruenor. Harnoth may still go. He is outraged about the death of his brother and will never rest easy knowing the orcs are so close."

Drizzt spent a long while staring at her, measuring her tone and the tenseness within her strong frame. "You agree with Harnoth," he said.

Catti-brie matched his stare but didn't respond.

"Because of the goddess," Drizzt reasoned. "You think it our . . . *your* duty to hunt down and kill the orcs, one and all."

"We did not start this war."

"But we ended it," Drizzt replied. "Lorgru won't come back."

"What of his son?" Catti-brie asked. "Or his grandson? Or the next warlord who usurps the throne with visions of glory in his eyes?"

"Do you mean to kill every orc in all the world?"

Catti-brie just stared at him again, and Drizzt knew then that he and his wife would spend many hours on this topic in the coming days and months. Many unpleasant hours.

Drizzt turned back to the dwarves and nodded at Bruenor. "Do you think he's told them yet?"

Even as he asked the question, King Harnoth cried out in dismay.

"He has now," Catti-brie dryly replied.

Bruenor had confided his plans to the couple. He was going west with as many soldiers as the three dwarven citadels of the Silver Marches would afford him. Bruenor meant to reclaim Gauntlgrym from the drow and any other inhabitants who might have made the place a home.

Across the way, Harnoth had become quite animated, waving his arms and stomping in circles. Drizzt and Catti-brie went over to lend support to their dwarf friend.

"Why don't ye just empty all the durned citadels and let the durned orcs come walking in?" Harnoth roared.

"Never said I'd empty any," Bruenor calmly replied.

"Four thousand, he said," King Emerus added solemnly, his demeanor cutting at Harnoth as much as his words. "We've twice that number and half again right here on the field. And we've all left worthy garrisons back behind us."

"Four thousand!" said Harnoth. "That orc swine ye just sent walking's got ten times that number! *Twenty* times that number!"

"And you've got Silverymoon and Everlund," Aleina Brightlance remarked, all the dwarves turning to regard her with surprise—and in the case of all but fiery Harnoth, with gratitude.

"We'll not be abandoning you," Aleina vowed. "And we will rebuild Sundabar, do not doubt. The alliance will be stronger than ever, if the three dwarven citadels and the Moonwood elves so desire it."

"Aye," Bruenor, Emerus, and Connerad all said together, while Sinnafein nodded.

"My people will serve as your eyes in the north," Sinnafein added. "If the orcs begin to stir, we will know, and you will know, and any march they might make will be hampered by the sting of elven arrows, do not doubt."

"The dogs almost won this time," King Harnoth warned. "And now we'd be down four thousand dwarves, and with Sundabar a shell o' what she was, and with so many others dead—all o' Nesmé dead! Who'll stop 'em this time if they come calling?"

"They didn't get into the halls afore, and they won't next time, if there's e'er to be a next time," Bruenor insisted. "And now we're knowin' the threat and there are ways we can better prepare."

"Some of us always knew, King Bruenor," Harnoth said, and it was clearly meant as a jab at the dwarf who had signed the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge.

"Are ye thinkin' to drive us apart, King o' Adbar?" King Emerus was quick to retort. "Cause aye, that's what yer words're doing now. And don't ye doubt that Felbarr'll be standin' with Mithral Hall if ye keep on with it."

"As will the cities of Silverymoon and Everlund," Aleina added with an equally grim tone.

King Harnoth, young and full of pride, started to respond in an animated and angry fashion, but Oretheo Spikes put a hand on his shoulder to calm him, and when the young king snapped his head about to regard the Wilddwarf, Oretheo nodded and led him off to the side.

"He's a stubborn one," Catti-brie remarked.

"He lost his father not long ago, and his brother was slain in the war," Drizt reminded. "As were many of his most important advisers. He sits atop a throne now, alone and unsure. He knows that he erred many times in the last year, and that we saved him from certain doom."

"Then he might be offerin' some gratitude and a dose o' well-earned humility, eh?" asked Bruenor.

Drizt shrugged. "He will, but on his terms."

"If Adbar refuses our plan, then yerself and meself'll raise the army we're needin' to get yer quest done, me friend," King Emerus promised.

"We'll not be raising that number without Adbar," Bruenor said.

"So we'll go to Mirabar and find more allies—should be thinkin' that anyway," said Emerus. "Them boys are Delzoun, and so're yer boys in Icewind Dale. We'll get back Gauntlgrym, don't ye doubt!"

"We'll?" Drizt asked, catching on to Emerus's hint.

“Much to talk about,” was all the King of Citadel Felbarr would say on that subject at that time.

Harnoth and Oretheo Spikes came back over then, the King of Adbar seeming much less animated.

“Me friend here thinks Adbar’s holding strong with two thousand less,” Harnoth explained. “So half yer force’ll be marchin’ under the banner o’ Citadel Adbar, King Bruenor.”

“No,” Bruenor immediately replied, even as the others began to smile and even cheer. All eyes turned sharply on the red-bearded dwarf with his surprising answer.

“No banners for Adbar, Felbarr, or Mithral Hall,” Bruenor explained. “As in the war we just won, we’re walkin’ under the flag o’ our Delzoun blood, the flag o’ Gauntlgrym!”

“Ain’t no flag o’ Gauntlgrym!” Harnoth protested.

“Then let’s make one,” Emerus Warcrown said with a wide grin. He held up his hand to Harnoth, and after only a slight hesitation, the young King of Adbar took that hand firmly in his own.

Bruenor, meanwhile, began producing flagons of ale from behind his magical shield, one for each of the four dwarf kings assembled on the field.

And so they toasted, “To Gauntlgrym!”



THE WORK AT the ruins of Dark Arrow Keep continued for several tendays, with the massive orc fortress being stripped down to a watch-post with only a couple of towers left standing. There had been a small debate about whether to dismantle the place or perhaps refit it more to accommodate dwarven sensibilities, but Bruenor had pointed out, rightly so, that leaving any semblance of Dark Arrow Keep intact might entice the orcs to try to reclaim it.

Reclaiming it, after all, would be a lot easier than rebuilding it from rubble.

So they ripped the rest of it down, except the meager watch-towers, and they carried the great logs to the river and floated

them downstream where they could be caught at Mithral Hall and used as fuel for the hearths and forges.

The docks, too, were dismantled, as were the surrounding orc villages, now abandoned, erasing all remnants of the Kingdom of Many-Arrows from the Silver Marches. As summer turned to fall, the dwarves and their allies marched for their respective homes, with the three citadels pledged to meet throughout the winter months to plan the spring march to the west.

"What's troubling you?" Catti-brie asked Regis on that journey to Mithral Hall. Regis had joined in the cheers and drinks and "huzzahs," of course, but every passing day, Catti-brie had watched him, and had noted a cloud that often passed over his cherubic face.

"I'm weary, that's all," he said, and she knew he was lying. "It's been a long and difficult year."

"For all of us," Catti-brie said. "But a year of victory, yes?"

Regis looked over at her, his seat on his pony far below the tall shoulders of Catti-brie's spectral unicorn. His smile was genuine, though, as he quietly offered, "Huzzah for King Bruenor."

But there was the cloud again, behind his eyes, and as he turned back to the road in front of them, Catti-brie figured it out.

"You're not coming to Gauntlgrym with us," she stated. In the shadows of his eyes, she didn't have to ask.

"I have said no such thing," Regis replied, but he didn't look at her when he spoke.

"Nor did you deny it, even now."

She watched the halfling's face tighten, though he still would not look over and up at her.

"How long have you known?" Catti-brie asked a short while later, when it became apparent to her that Regis was simply not going to lead this conversation.

"If Bruenor was marching to war in Gauntlgrym, and Drizzt was in Cormyr, or the Bloodstone Lands perhaps, what would you do?" Regis asked.

"What do you mean?"

“Would you accompany Bruenor on his quest, this latest quest in a perhaps unending line of quests, or would you desire to find Drizzt once more and resume your life beside him?”

“Donnola Topolino,” Catti-brie realized then.

“My love for her is no less than yours for Drizzt,” Regis explained. “I left her to fulfill my vow, and because I knew my friend Drizzt needed me. And so I traveled from Aglarond halfway across Faerûn to Icewind Dale, and stood with you and the others as we found our friend near death.”

The woman nodded, her open, sympathetic, and inviting expression prompting him forward.

“And this war we have just won,” Regis explained. “It was important, and in truth a continuation of that which we had started those decades ago. I served as Steward of Mithral Hall in the days of the first Obould.”

“I remember well, and you served with great honor.”

“And so I came back to finish what we started, to complete the circle,” the halfling explained. “In both of these duties, I nearly died—I’m not afraid to die. I never was, and certainly am not after my time in the enchanted forest of Mielikki.”

“But you are afraid that you will never see your beloved Donnola again,” the woman reasoned.

“This is a dwarf war, the quest of the Delzoun brotherhood,” Regis tried to explain. “I’m not a dwarf. Drizzt has said that taking Gauntlgrym from the drow could take years, and then holding it will likely prove to be a task that will stretch for decades. At what point . . . ?” His voice trailed off, the question unasked.

“Have you finished your service?” Catti-brie finished for him, and Regis finally did look up at her, plaintively. Her smile was warm and disarming. “You have done more than any could ask, my friend. None will judge you for leaving now, though surely we all will miss you.”

“Brother Afafrenfere is only passing through Mithral Hall,” Regis explained, “then going south to Silverymoon and Everlund, and to the south road to Waterdeep.”

"He has explained as much, that his time here is at its end," Catti-brie agreed. "All are grateful for his actions here, for indeed he is credited in no small part in killing the white dragon on the slopes of Fourthpeak. A great ally is Brother Afafrenfere."

"From Waterdeep, he'll find the Trade Way, which I rode with the Grinning Ponies before I found you on the banks of Maer Dualdon. I will go with him, all the way to the port of Suzail, and I'll sail home east to Aglarond while he sails northeast to the city of Procampur and the Bloodstone Lands."

"I wish I could dissuade you."

"You know that you cannot."

"You are in love, Reg . . . Spider Parrafin," Catti-brie said. "I only hope that one day I will meet this halfling woman, Donnola Topolino, who has so stolen your heart."

"You will," Regis vowed. "I will lead her to the road of adventure beside me, or so I hope. And that road will lead to Gauntlgrym."

"It is a wider world than you imagine, I fear. When Wulfgar left us for Icewind Dale, did we not proclaim that we would all meet again."

"I did—with Wulfgar, I mean. As did Drizzt."

"And?"

The halfling swallowed hard at that poignant question, for that meeting with Wulfgar in Icewind Dale had been friendly enough, but strangely unfulfilling to all three of them.

"Are you saying that I should not return? Or that I should not go?"

"I surely do not want you to go!" the woman replied. "But no, you have no choice, my dear friend. I have seen you looking east in your quiet moments—we all have. You cannot spend your days wondering about your beloved Donnola. You'll always have the Companions of the Hall, Spider of Aglarond. Always will you remain one of us, and so, always welcomed wherever we are, with open arms and wide smiles, and kisses from me—so many kisses!"

"I tried to be worthy of the Companions of the . . ." Regis started to say, but his voice trailed away.

It was becoming very real to him, then, Catti-brie knew. He was leaving them, and the weight of that was only now truly descending on his small shoulders.

"Worthy? You are a hero, in every sense of the word. You saved Wulfgar's life in the tunnels south of Mithral Hall. Twice!"

"After he came for me."

"It is what we do for each other," said Catti-brie. "I only wish I could accompany you to Aglarond."

Regis nodded and swallowed hard, and forced Catti-brie to look him in the eye, his expression very serious, which confused the woman.

"Wulfgar has agreed to come with me," Regis explained.

For a moment, Catti-brie seemed unbalanced, as if she would simply fall off the side of her magically summoned mount. She steadied herself quickly, though, and managed a nod.

"He has agreed to stand beside me in my journeys," Regis explained. "Perhaps he feels as if our trials together in the Underdark . . ."

"He owes you a life debt."

"One for which I would never demand payment."

"He is happy to repay you. Likely, he is happy to find the open road and more conquests . . . of various natures."

"Say nothing, I beg you," Regis was quick to reply, as if Catti-brie's remarks had reminded him of something. "Well, we will go to Drizzt and Bruenor together, but for now, it is our secret. Agreed?"

"Why?"

Regis motioned forward with his chin, leading Catti-brie's gaze to Wulfgar, and to the Knight-Commander of Silvermoon.

"Aleina Brightlance is quite smitten with him," Regis explained.

"Perhaps she will go with you."

Regis was shaking his head before Catti-brie finished the thought. "Her duty is to Silvermoon. There are rumors that she will be given command of Sundabar when it is rebuilt."

"You have chosen love," the woman reminded. "Perhaps she . . ."

"I do not think Wulfgar would want her to come," Regis explained. "He's . . . different now. I don't believe he desires a family—he already had one, in his previous life. Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren—he knew them all. He outlived many of them. He had already mentioned to me that his biggest regret in the road I have chosen is that he'll not travel with you back through Longsaddle."

"Penelope Harpell," Catti-brie said with a laugh.

Regis shrugged. "Our secret?"

"One we have to share soon with Drizzt and Bruenor, that we can all properly prepare to say good-bye."

The halfling nodded and turned his focus once more on the road ahead. He had to do that, Catti-brie knew, to make sure she didn't see the tears that were welling in his eyes.



LATER THAT DAY, the great marching force split, with the elves turning east to the River Surbrin, where their boats waited to ferry them and the thousands from Citadel Adbar across to the Glimmerwood.

King Emerus and his charges of Citadel Felbarr could have gone that way as well, but he opted to march farther south, to the Surbrin Bridge, beside his friend Bruenor so they could further discuss this great adventure that awaited the dwarves in the most ancient Delzoun home of all.

That very night, Catti-brie and Regis found Bruenor, Wulfgar, and Drizzt alone by a fire. They took their seats beside their friends, with food and drink all about.

"Call in Guenhwyvar," Regis bade Drizzt.

The drow looked at him curiously, for it seemed a strange request.

"Ain't none in the world to attack the army about us," Bruenor said.

But Regis looked to Drizzt and nodded, and Catti-brie did, too, and so the drow pulled out his onyx figurine and brought in the sixth member of the Companions of the Hall.

All gathered then, Regis and Wulfgar announced their plans, and Bruenor's cry of dismay split the night and turned many nearby eyes their way.

"It's me greatest quest!" the dwarf protested, on the edge of desperation. "I can'no be doin' it without ye!"

"Yes you can," Catti-brie answered. "*We* can. Drizzt and I will be beside you, and thousands of your sturdy kin as well."

Bruenor looked at her sharply, clearly feeling he had been deceived, or as if he was the last to know.

"They have to go," Catti-brie insisted. "Their business—Regis's business in particular—is no less urgent than your own. More urgent than your own, I say, for Gauntlgrym has been there for thousands of years, and will be there for thousands more, no doubt, but Donnola . . ."

She looked at Regis, who nodded his gratitude.

"Yer girl?" Bruenor asked incredulously, as if the thought of chasing a woman when such a grand adventure lay in front of them was perfectly ludicrous.

"The woman I will make my wife," said Regis. "Perhaps we will name our first child Bruenor, though I fear his beard will disappoint you."

Bruenor started to argue, but the halfling's words turned that into a sputter, then a laugh.

And so they ate and so they drank, and many cheers and flagons of ale were lifted into the night air, and many promises that they would see each other again, in Gauntlgrym likely. This was no good-bye, they all declared, but merely a temporary parting of the ways.

How many have made those often futile promises?

"Are we disturbing your private gathering?" came an unexpected voice. Jarlaxle walked into the firelight, flanked by the sisters Tazmikella and Ilnezhara.

"We've room for more," Drizzt said quickly, before Bruenor could protest. He slid along the log he had taken as a bench, making room for the newcomers.

"A drink?" Drizzt asked, looking to Bruenor, who scowled for a heartbeat, but produced another flagon.

Ilnezhara handed the first flagon along to Jarlaxle and explained, "I prefer blood," as Bruenor reached behind his shield once more. The dwarf stopped and stared at her.

"You walk openly among the dwarves and others," Drizzt said quietly to Jarlaxle.

"The war is over and so I have come to try to mend relations between the races, ostensibly," the drow mercenary replied and took a sip of the ale. "Though, of course, I am here as a spy for Matron Mother Baenre, to whom I will, of course, provide a complete accounting."

Wulfgar bristled and Bruenor hopped up at that declaration.

To which Jarlaxle merely shrugged and smiled, and looked to Drizzt. "My use of 'of course' two times in one sentence did not properly relay my sarcasm?"

"It's been a long year," Drizzt replied.

"Ah," Jarlaxle agreed. "Well, good dwarf and man-giant, do be at ease," he said. "I will tell Menzoberranzan nothing more than that which they already know. The dwarves won, the orcs fled, the human kingdom will be built anew, and for all of our—of *their*—efforts, this war Menzoberranzan prodded onto the Silver Marches has done little more than strengthen the bonds of the alliance of Luruar."

"That's what ye're meaning to tell 'em, eh?" asked Bruenor.

"Aye," Jarlaxle answered. "In exchange for a small favor."

Bruenor straightened at that, and cast a sour look Drizzt's way, but Drizzt held up his hand, begging the dwarf for patience.

"I have two associates, both known to you, who are intrigued at the prospect of your intended reclamation of Gauntlgrym," the drow explained.

"Them two?" Bruenor asked, pointing to the sisters.

"Try not to be so foolish," Tazmikella said.

"Good dwarf, we are already long bored," Ilnezhara agreed.

"Not them," Jarlaxle explained, "but dwarves, including the newest member of Bregan D'aerthe. Both have asked for a leave, that they might march beside you to your homeland, and given all that they have done, I would be a terrible leader and a worse friend to refuse them." He lifted his hand and motioned, and into the firelight hopped Ambergris and Athrogate, holding hands and grinning hopefully.

"Ye want me to take these two?" Bruenor asked.

"Powerful allies," Jarlaxle said.

Bruenor seemed at a loss. He looked from the drow to the dwarves to Drizzt, then back and forth again. "Aye, I can no deny the truth o' that."

"I been granted back me old home o' Felbarr," said Athrogate.

"And meself can return to Adbar and all's forgiven," added Amber Gristle O'Maul, of the Adbar O'Mauls. "And we're owing ye all for that."

"Aye, and we'd rather be takin' the road aside ye," Athrogate said. "Fore'er more."

"And what of yourself?" Drizzt asked Jarlaxle.

The mercenary shrugged. "I've to report to the matron mother, of course, and then I have another road before me."

"He's off to find Effron, don't ye know?" Ambergris interjected. "Aye, to find the poor boy and give him a hug for meself."

"Do we have an agreement?" Jarlaxle asked.

"And if I'm sayin' no?" Bruenor asked.

"Then I will report the same tale to the matron mother, but you will have lost a pair of fine and powerful companions."

Bruenor looked to Drizzt. "What says yerself, elf?"

"In a fight, those are two dwarves I would want on my side."

"Good enough, then, and glad to have ye," Bruenor said to the pair, who grinned all the wider, bowed, and moved back out into the darkness between the campfires.

"And now I must be off," Jarlaxle said, draining his flagon, tipping his cap, and rising. "Farewell and not good-bye, for I've no doubt that our roads will cross again, my friends." He started to bow, but Tazmikella grabbed him by the sleeve and with frightening ease pulled him back down to sit beside her. She began whispering in his ear, and pointed across the firelight to Wulfgar. Jarlaxle laughed.

The big man scowled.

"My friend here is wondering if you are in need of a fine bed this night," Jarlaxle said.

The stunned Wulfgar seemed at a loss, muttering "umm" repeatedly.

"She's a dragon, boy," Bruenor said to him.

"Why does everyone keep saying that as if it is a bad thing?" Jarlaxle asked. He looked to Wulfgar and grinned slyly. "Enticing, yes?"

But Regis answered before Wulfgar could. "Aleina is not far, and she is expecting you," he reminded, and the growing smirk disappeared from the big man's face.

"I . . . with sincere gratitude . . ." Wulfgar stammered, but the sisters laughed at him and stood up, hoisting Jarlaxle between them and tugging him away.

"I will have to suffer greater trials for your absence," Jarlaxle said with feigned regret. He tried to bow again, but was off the ground, lifted over the log, and easily slung over Ilnezhara's shoulder.

"Alas," he said with great lament, and he awkwardly managed to tip his outrageous hat.

"Dragons . . ." Catti-brie said incredulously, and she looked to Wulfgar and shook her head with disgust.

"It does present an intriguing . . ." Drizt kidded, and he ducked fast from Catti-brie's good-natured slap.

To Wulfgar, though, there remained a look of clear interest as he watched the trio depart. He considered the beautiful sisters and what he, surprisingly, found to be an intriguing

offer. And he looked, too, at Jarlaxle, envying the carefree, self-serving drow.

Had Jarlaxle found what Wulfgar sought?



HORNS BLEW AND the cadence of a drumbeat was matched perfectly by the thousand dwarves of Citadel Felbarr, stomping across the Surbrin Bridge, escorted away by the cheering of their Battlehammer kin.

“He’s supporting you with everything he can,” Drizzt remarked to Bruenor as they watched Emerus Warcrown depart.

“He’s a good man, is me friend Emerus,” Bruenor replied solemnly. “He’ll be generous when we meet at the year’s turn. Many who’re marchin’ beside us, elf, will be from Citadel Felbarr, don’t ye doubt.”

“I don’t,” Drizzt agreed.

Another horn blew, this one to the south, and Drizzt noted that Bruenor swallowed hard at this one, the muster call from the Knights in Silver. Drizzt, too, breathed a long sigh.

“Me girl’s with ’em,” Bruenor remarked. “Let’s go and say our good-byes . . .” His voice trailed off and the sturdy dwarf bit back a chortle. He looked up at Drizzt and nodded, and the two started off.

They found Catti-brie with Wulfgar and Regis a few moments later, Aleina and Brother Afafrenfere standing off to the side, waiting patiently.

Bruenor began pulling flagons of ale out from behind his shield the moment he arrived, handing them around to the other four, then lifting his own up high.

“To the Companions of the Hall,” the dwarf said in a strong and loud voice—loud enough so that many nearby turned to regard the gathering of the five friends. “If ne’er we’re to meet again, then know in yer hearts that few’ve knowed a friendship as deep.”

Regis winced at that, and it seemed to Drizzt as if he was on the verge of breaking, perhaps renouncing his intended journey to Aglarond.

"We'll meet again," Drizzt said to assure them all, particularly the halfling, though in truth, he doubted his own words.

"Aye, in this world or the next," Catti-brie confidently added.

Drizzt noted that this time both Wulfgar and Regis winced. He understood.

They toasted and drank, toasted some more and drank some more, though the horns to muster were growing more frequent and more urgent in the south. Finally Aleina Brightlance walked over. "We are off," she told Wulfgar and Regis.

Hugs and kisses, and the five left, all with tears in their eyes. When he hugged Drizzt, Regis whispered, "I have to go" into the drow's ear, as if asking permission.

"I know," the drow said.

And so they did, moving down the riverbank to the south with the soldiers of Silverymoon and Everlund, leaving Drizzt and Catti-brie and Bruenor to contemplate their long road ahead without the pair.

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