



R. A. SALVATORE

NIGHT OF THE HUNTER



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PROLOGUE



SO MUCH BLOOD.
Everywhere, blood.

It followed Doum'wille wherever she traveled. She saw it on her silvery skin, skin that spoke of her mixed elf and drow heritage. It followed her in her dreams, each night, every night. She saw it on the footprints she left in the snow. She saw it on her keen-edged sword—yes, on the sword most of all.

It was always there, reflected in the red edge of the sentient weapon, Khazid'hea.

A thousand times had she stabbed that blade through her brother's heart. His screams echoed between the beats of her every waking thought and filled her dreams, sweet music to the sensibilities of Khazid'hea.

Her brother Teirflin had tried to stab her with that very sword, with her sword, as she slept one day. But she had been quicker.

She had been better.

She had been more worthy.

She felt the blade entering his chest, easily shearing through skin and muscle and bone, reaching for his heart so that the delicious blood might flow freely.

She could never wash that blood from her hands, but at that time, in the thralls of the weapon, with the warm words of her father whispering into her ear, she didn't want to wash the blood from her hands.

Perhaps Teirflin's dying screams were music after all.

Two, the drow's fingers indicated, and the motion continued in the intricate silent hand-language of the cunning race, *Moving stealthily*.

Tsabrak Xorlarrin, noble wizard of Menzoberranzan's Third House, carefully considered his next move. He wasn't comfortable out here, so far from both Menzoberranzan and Q'Xorlarrin, the new drow city his family was creating in the mines of the ancient dwarven homeland of Gauntlgrym. He was fairly sure that he knew why Matron Zeerith had sent him, particularly him, on this distant reconnoiter: Zeerith wanted to keep him far from Ravel, her son, who was a bitter rival of Tsabrak.

And a bitter rival who had surely gained the upper hand, Tsabrak had to admit. With his successful infiltration of the ancient dwarven homeland, Ravel had become the shining faerie fire to accent the glory of House Xorlarrin—and he had done so in the company of a Baenre, no less, and with the blessing of that powerful clan. The city of Q'Xorlarrin was well on its way to becoming reality, and Ravel had played the paramount role in that development.

The wizard's fingers moved quickly, speaking to the point, demanding more information from the scouts. He sent them forth and headed back the other way, where his cousin Berellip, Ravel's older sister, waited. He spotted her among the entourage, still in a small natural chamber off to the side of the underground river that had been guiding them thus far. Berellip Xorlarrin was rarely hard to find, after all. Brash and loud, she kept the inferior commoner males far away, with only her two young female attendants allowed to even address her.

Tsabrak moved across the small room and waved those attendants away.

"You have found them?"

Tsabrak nodded. "Two, at least. Moving along the lower tunnels."

"Orcs?"

The mage shrugged. "We do not yet know. Stealthier than orcs, it would seem. Clever goblins, perhaps."

"I can smell the orc stench all about us," Berellip said with obvious disgust.

Tsabrak, again, could only shrug. They had come here, to these tunnels underneath the northern reaches of the Silver Marches, with full expectation that they would encounter many orcs. After all, up above them was the land of King Obould, the Kingdom of Many-Arrows.

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“I view your smirk as an invitation to play,” Berellip warned, her hand moving near to the hilt of her snake-headed whip.

“My apologies, Priestess,” Tsabrak said, and he bowed deferentially. This one did so love to put that whip to its painful work on the flesh of drow males. “I was merely wondering if a goblin tribe taken as prisoners would suffice upon our return to Q’Xorlarrin.”

“You still believe that we were sent out here to secure slaves?”

“Partly,” the wizard answered honestly. “I know of other reasons why I might be moved aside for the present. I am not certain, however, why you would be so removed in this time of great upheaval and glory for the House.”

“Because Matron Zeerith determined it,” the priestess answered through tight lips.

Tsabrak bowed again, confirming that such an answer was, of course, all that he needed or deserved. She closely guarded her thoughts, as was often her way, and Tsabrak could only accept it for what it was. He and Berellip had spoken many times of the purpose of their mission, in conversations where Berellip had been far more open, and even critical of Matron Zeerith. But such was the nature of Berellip Xorlarrin that she could simply, stubbornly, pretend that those previous discussions had never taken place.

“It was not only Matron Zeerith who determined our course and the composition of our troupe,” he boldly remarked.

“You do not know this.”

“I have known Archmage Gromph Baenre for two centuries. His hand is in this.”

Berellip’s face grew very tight, and she muttered, “Baenre’s hand is in everything,” a clear reference to Tiago Baenre, the First House’s official escort to Ravel’s mission that had conquered Gauntlgrym. Berellip had made no secret to Tsabrak of her distaste for the brash young noble warrior in the early days of their journey east.

Berellip’s scorn for Tiago came as no surprise to Tsabrak. He knew Tiago fairly well, and the young warrior’s propensity to forego the station afforded mere males and to throw the weight of House Baenre behind his imperial attitude was well-documented among the lesser Houses in Menzoberranzan. Besides, rumors whispered that Tiago would soon wed Saribel Xorlarrin, Berellip’s younger, and by all accounts and all measures,

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inferior sister, having chosen her above Berellip. No doubt, Tsabrak realized, Berellip thought much the same of Saribel as she did of Ravel.

“What business would the archmage have with us out here?” Berellip asked, despite her smug superiority. “He would bid Matron Zeerith to send a high priestess and a master of Sorcere off on an errand to collect simple slaves?”

“There is more,” Tsabrak said with confidence. He reminded her of a previous conversation by continuing, “The Spider Queen is pleased with our journey, so you have assured me.”

He held his breath as he finished, expecting Berellip to lash out at him, but was pleasantly surprised when she simply nodded and said, “Something larger is afoot. We will know when Matron Zeerith determines that we should know.”

“Or when Archmage Gromph determines it,” Tsabrak dared to say, and Berellip’s eyes flashed with anger.

He was quite relieved then, at that very moment, when his scouts returned, rushing into the side chamber.

“Not goblins,” one reported, clearly excited.

“Drow,” said the other.

“Drow?” Berellip asked. She and Tsabrak exchanged looks. There were no drow cities out here that either knew of.

Perhaps we will soon find our answers, Tsabrak’s fingers silently flashed to his cousin, the mage taking care to keep the signal out of sight of the scouts and others in the room.

The two lithe figures sat on a ledge, halfway up an underground cliff face. Water poured from the tunnel opening above them, diving down to an underground lake below. Despite the narrow and seemingly precarious perch in the meager light of a few scattered lichens, neither shifted around nor clenched uncomfortably.

“Why must we ascend this cliff?” asked the woman, Doum’wielle, the younger of the elves. She hauled up the rope from below. She had to speak loudly to be heard over the sound of the falling, splashing water, which made the other, older figure, her father, wish that he had properly instructed her in the ways of drow sign language. “I thought

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our plan was to *descend* through the Underdark,” Doum’wielle added sarcastically.

The darker-skinned drow at her side took a bite of an Underdark mushroom, then looked at it distastefully. “This is the path I took when I left my home,” he answered.

The young elf woman, half-drow, half-moon elf, leaned out a bit from the ledge and twirled the grapnel end of the rope, preparing to throw. She stopped mid-swing and stared at her companion incredulously.

“That was a hundred years ago,” she reminded. “How can you remember the path you took?”

He tossed the rest of the mushroom from the ledge, gingerly stood, one leg showing garish wounds, and wiped his hands on his breeches. “I always knew I would return some day.”

The woman spun the rope once more and let fly, the grapnel disappearing into the black hole of the tunnel entrance above.

“So I never let myself forget the way,” he said as she tested the grip of the grapnel. “Although the waterfall wasn’t here last time.”

“Well, that’s promising,” she quipped and began to climb.

Her father watched her with pride. He noted the sword she carried sheathed on her hip, his sword, Khazid’hea, the Cutter, a sentient and powerful blade known for driving its weaker wielders into savage madness. His daughter was gaining control of the bloodthirsty weapon. No small feat, he knew from painful personal experience.

She wasn’t halfway up to the tunnel when he jumped onto the fine, strong elven cord, his sinewy arms propelling him upward quickly behind her. He had nearly made the ledge as she rolled herself over it, turning to offer him a hand, which he took and scrambled over.

She said something to him, but he didn’t hear her. Not then. Not when he was looking at a line of approaching enemies, arms extended, hand crossbows leveled his way.



Standing in the mouth of the tunnel opposite the waterfall, the same course his prey had taken, Tsabrak Xorlarrin watched the pair ascend the cliff face from across the underground lake. He had found them quite easily, and with his considerable magical abilities, had trailed them closely, and

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indeed with a wide smile (though it could not be viewed, since he was under the enchantment of invisibility), for he was fairly certain that he knew this wayward drow.

He wondered what Berellip Xorlarrin would do when she discovered this one's identity as a once-favored son of Menzoberranzan's Second House, the greatest rival family of House Xorlarrin.

"Tread cautiously, witch," he whispered, his words buried beneath the din of the waterfall. He could have used one of his spells to magically send a word of warning to Berellip's ambush group, and indeed, he almost began the spell.

But he changed his mind and smiled wider, and wider still when he heard the female cry out and saw a flash of lightning just within the tunnel entrance.

As a precaution, Tsabrak moved to the base of the cliff, noting two solid anchor points, stalagmites, as he began to cast a spell.



Pops and crackles sounded above the rush of water as Doum'wielle's lightning sheet intercepted the incoming hand crossbow bolts. Their momentum stolen, they fell harmlessly to the ground.

"To my side!" she cried to her father, but she needn't have bothered, for the veteran warrior was already moving to that very spot, sliding in beside her up against the tunnel wall. Like her, he clearly had no desire to battle the incoming warriors with his back to a cliff ledge.

He drew out his two swords, she her one.

She only held one blade, for Khazid'hea would not allow a sister weapon, would not share in the glory of the kill.

Three drow males swept in before the pair. They kept their backs to the rushing river, with practiced coordination, one sliding, one leaping, another running in to defend his comrades, and all three with two swords drawn. The sliding drow popped right to his feet in front of Doum'wielle's father with a double-up cross of his blades, driving his opponent's swords up high.

The leaping, somersaulting drow landed beside him, and before the drow had even touched down, he stabbed one blade out toward Doum'wielle and one out at her father. And with the third drow coming in hard at her and demanding a double parry, Doum'wielle only barely avoided being stabbed in the face.

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“Do not kill!” her father cried, though whether he was speaking to her, or imploring their enemies, she could not tell. Nor would she have followed the command in any case, her sword thirsting for blood, demanding blood . . . any blood. She swept Khazid’hea across with a powerful backhand, taking her attacker’s two swords aside. He rolled his trailing blade as she rolled Khazid’hea, both stabbing out.

Doum’wielle couldn’t retreat with the wall against her back. But her strike drove her opponent back so that his sword, too, could not reach her. One against one, and with Khazid’hea in hand, she was certain she could defeat this formidable warrior.

But she wasn’t one against one, and neither was her father. The drow centering the trio of enemies worked his blades independently, left and right, stabbing at both between the twirl of counters and parries.

No! Khazid’hea screamed in her thoughts as it sensed her intentions.

The demand of the sword carried little weight, though, for Doum’wielle’s movements were driven by desperate need, not choice. The young half-drow battle-mage stabbed straight ahead, swept her blade out to deflect a strike from the centering enemy, then stabbed ahead again, driving her immediate opponent back.

She timed his retreat perfectly with the release of magic, a spell that sent him skidding into the river on the slippery stones. He thrashed and cried out, and was caught by the current and washed past his companions and out over the ledge.

“No!” her father cried at her, but for far different reasons than had the sword she held. Khazid’hea’s cry was in denial of her use of magic, she understood, for the sword wanted all the glory and all the blood. Her father, however, apparently still thought that they could find the time to barter and diffuse the situation—a notion Doum’wielle thought all the more ridiculous because of the mocking response of Khazid’hea in her mind.

Noting that other enemies were near at hand and closing fast, Doum’wielle turned fast on the second drow in line, thinking to drive him into the enemy facing her father.

But this time, he proved the quicker, and as she advanced he leaped back and leaped high, one hand going to a brooch on his cloak tie, his House insignia. The magic of that jewelry brought forth a spell of levitation, and the drow floated out across the underground river.

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Doum'wielle thought to pursue, but Khazid'hea drove her forward instead, sensing the vulnerability of the third in line, who was already entangled with her father. That enemy turned to meet her rush, and managed to partially deflect her leading strike.

Partially, but the devilish Khazid'hea got through, and so easily pierced his fine drow chain mail, and so beautifully slid into his skin. A look of delicious horror on his face, the drow threw himself backward, and flew from the ledge into the open air of the vast chamber beyond.

Doum'wielle turned with her father, side-by-side once more and facing into the tunnel, where four drow warriors, including the one who had levitated away across the river, stood in a line, lifting hand crossbows once more.

"And now we die," her father said with resignation.

"Enough!" came a loud cry, volume clearly magically enhanced, from behind the enemy line. It was a call that would surely carry the weight of command among any raised in Menzoberranzan, for it had sounded in a female voice.

The drow line parted and between the warriors passed a female, dressed in fine black robes adorned with spider-shaped charms and elaborate designs. Even Doum'wielle, who had no experience with drow culture other than the teachings of her father, could not miss the significance. This was a priestess of the goddess Lolth, and one of great power.

For she held the terrible weapon of her high station, a snake-headed whip, four living serpents weaving eagerly in the air at her side, ready to strike at her command.

"Who are you and why are you here?" Doum'wielle asked in the language of the drow, which her father had taught her.

"Ah, yes, introductions," her father said. "I would have offered them earlier, but your warriors were too busy trying to kill me."

The snakes of the female's whip hissed, reflecting her ire.

"You dare speak to a high priestess with such insolence?"

Doum'wielle was surprised to see her father fall back a step, clearly intimidated. He had underestimated her rank and did not seem overly confident now that it had been revealed.

"Forgive me," he said with a graceful bow. "I am . . ."

"Tos'un Armgo, of House Barrison Del'Armgo," Doum'wielle finished for him. "And I am Doum'wielle Armgo, of the same House." She stepped forward, Khazid'hea at the ready, its red edge shining angrily, hungrily.

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“You will escort us to Menzoberranzan,” she ordered, “where we will rejoin our House.”

She couldn't tell if the stately priestess opposing her was impressed or amused.

“Children of House Barrison Del'Armgo, Menzoberranzan does not rule here,” she said evenly.

She was amused, Doum'wielle realized, and that did not bode well.

“The city of Q'Xorlarrin, though, will greet you,” the priestess said, and Tos'un sighed, and Doum'wielle thought it and hoped it to be an expression of great relief.

“Q'Xorlarrin?” he asked. “House Xorlarrin has built a city?” He half-turned to Doum'wielle and whispered, “My little Doe, our new life may yet prove more interesting than I had planned.”

“Yes, House Xorlarrin,” the priestess responded. “Once the Third House of Menzoberranzan, now greater. Greater than the Second House, it would seem.”

The way she had spoken seemed to take the hope from her father's face, Doum'wielle noted.

“Tos'un Armgo,” came a male voice from behind, and Doum'wielle and Tos'un turned in unison to see a drow floating in the air just beyond the ledge. Doum'wielle moved as if to lash out with magic, but her father grabbed her arm and held her still. When she looked at him, she understood that he thought them clearly overmatched.

“Tsabrak?” he asked.

The floating mage laughed and bowed, which seemed almost comical while hanging in mid-air.

“A friend?” Doum'wielle whispered hopefully.

“Drow don't have friends,” Tos'un whispered back.

“Indeed,” Tsabrak Xorlarrin agreed. “And yet, I have done you a great service, and likely saved you from summary execution.” He pointed down below him, and Doum'wielle and Tos'un dared to inch closer and glance down over the ledge, to see the two drow warriors they had driven over caught helplessly, but safely, in a magical web strung near the bottom of the watery cavern.

“My cousin, the eldest daughter of Matron Zeerith, has only recently been granted, by the will of the goddess, a fourth snake for her implement of Lolth's mercy, and is eager to put the serpent to use, I would expect. Berellip is not known to show mercy on those who kill Xorlarrins.”

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“Perhaps, then, she should not send Xorlarrins to attack the children of House Barrison Del’Armgo!” Doum’wille imperiously replied. Tos’un gasped and moved to stop her, and indeed, she did bite off the end of that retort.

But only because four living snakes, the heads of Berellip’s mighty whip, bit her in the back for her impudence.

Khazid’hea screamed at her to retaliate, but the poison and the agony denied that, driving Doum’wille to her knees.

And so her lesson had begun.

PART ONE



TOGETHER IN DARKNESS

Do people really change?

I've thought about this question so many times over the last decades—and how poignant it seemed to me when I happened once more upon Artemis Entreri, shockingly alive, given the passage of a century.

I came to travel with him, to trust him, even; does that mean that I came to believe that he had “changed”?

Not really. And now that we have once more parted ways, I don't believe there to be a fundamental difference in the man, compared to the Entreri I fought beside in the Undercity of Mithral Hall when it was still in the hands of the duergar, or the Entreri I pursued to Calimport when he abducted Regis. Fundamentally, he is the same man, as, fundamentally, I am the same drow.

A person may learn and grow, and thus react differently to a recurring situation—that is the hope I hold for all people, for myself, for societies, even. Is that not the whole point of gaining experience, to use it to make wiser choices, to temper destructive instincts, to find better resolutions? In that regard, I do believe Artemis Entreri to be a changed man, slower in turning to the dagger for resolution, though no less deadly when he needs it. But fundamentally, regarding what lies in the man's heart, he is the same.

I know that to be true of myself, although, in retrospect, I walked a very different path over the last few years than that I purposefully strode for the majority of my life. Darkness found my heart, I admit. With the loss of so many dear friends came the loss of hope itself and

so I gave in to the easier path—although I had vowed almost every day that such a cynical journey would not be the road of Drizzt Do'Urden.

Fundamentally, though, I did not change, and so when faced with the reality of the darkened road, when it came time for me to admit the path to myself, I could not go on.

I cannot say that I miss Dahlia, Entreri, and the others. My heart does not call out for me to go and find them, surely—but I am not so certain that I could confidently claim such a casual attitude about my decision to part ways had it not been for the return of those friends I hold most dear! How can I regret parting with Dahlia when the fork in our road led me directly back into the arms of Catti-brie?

And thus, here I stand, together once more beside the Companions of the Hall, rejoined with the truest and dearest friends I have ever known, and could ever hope to know. Have they changed? Have their respective journeys through the realm of death itself brought to these four friends a new and guiding set of principles that will leave me sorely disappointed as I come to know them once more?

That is a fear I hold, but hold afar.

For people do not fundamentally change, so I believe. The warmth of Catti-brie's embrace is one inspiring confidence that I am right. The mischievous grin of Regis (even with the mustache and goatee) is one I have seen before. And Bruenor's call that night under the stars atop Kelvin's Cairn, and his reaction to Wulfgar . . . aye, that was Bruenor, true to the thick bone and thick head!

All that said, in these first days together, I have noted a change in Wulfgar's step, I admit. There is a lightness there I have not seen before, and—curiously, I say, given the description I have been told of his reluctance to leave Iruladoon for the mortal world once more—a smile that never seems to leave his face.

But he is Wulfgar, surely, the proud son of Beornegar. He has found some enlightenment, though in what way I cannot say. Enlightened and lightened. I see no burden there. I see amusement and joy, as if he views this all as a grand adventure on borrowed time, and I cannot deny the health of that perspective!

They are back. We are back. The Companions of the Hall. We are not as we once were, but our hearts remain true, our purpose joined, and our trust for each other undiminished and thus unbridled.

I am very glad of that!

And, in a curious way (and a surprising way to me), I hold no regrets for the last few years of my journey through a life confusing, frightening, and grand all at once. My time with Dahlia, and particularly with Entreri, was one of learning, I must believe. To see the world through a cynical perspective did not hurl me back to the days of my youth in Menzoberranzan, and thus encapsulate me in darkness, but rather, has offered to me a more complete understanding of the consequence of choice, for I broke free of the cynicism before knowing what fate awaited me atop Bruenor's Climb.

I am not so self-centered as to believe that the world around me is created for me! We all play such self-centered games at times, I suppose, but in this case, I will allow myself one moment of self-importance: to accept the reunion of the Companions of the Hall as a reward to me. Put whatever name you wish upon the gods and goddesses, or the fates, or the coincidences and twists that move the world along its path—it matters not. In this one instance, I choose to believe in a special kind of justice.

Indeed, it is a foolish and self-serving claim, I know.

But it feels good.

—Drizzt Do'Urden

CHAPTER 1



THE SEASONED MATRON BAENRE

IT SEEMED JUST ANOTHER DAY FOR MATRON MOTHER QUENTHEL BAENRE as she went to her evening prayers. Her magnificent black robes, laced like flowing spiderwebs, swirled around her as she regally moved along the center aisle, passing the inferior priestesses at the many side altars of the Baenre House Chapel. The slightest breeze could send the spidery ends of that robe drifting upward and outward, blurring the form of the matron mother, giving her the appearance of etherealness and otherworldliness.

Quenthel's sole surviving sister, Sos'Umptu, the first priestess of the House and keeper of the chapel, had preceded her to prayer this evening, and now prostrated herself, face down on the stone floor, legs tucked in a tight kneeling position. Quenthel considered that image as she neared, noting that Sos'Umptu had her forearms and hands flat on the floor above her head, up toward the altar, a position of complete supplication and apology, even, and not the typical form for daily prayers by the leading priestesses. A priestess of Sos'Umptu's station rarely assumed so humble an entreaty.

Quenthel walked up close enough to hear her sister's chanted prayer, and indeed, it was an apology, and a desperate one at that. The matron mother listened for a bit longer, hoping to catch some hint of why Sos'Umptu would be apologizing, but caught nothing specific.

"Dear sister," she said when Sos'Umptu finally broke from her fevered chant.

The first priestess raised her head and turned to glance back.

"Supplicate," Sos'Umptu whispered urgently. "At once!"

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Quenthel's first instinct was to lash out at Sos'Umptu for her disrespectful tone and for daring to order her to do anything. She even put a hand to her snake-headed whip, where the five writhing, sentient serpents continued their eternal dance. She was surprised as she grasped the weapon, though, for even K'Sothra, the most bloodthirsty of the serpents, warned her away from that course—and rare indeed was it for K'Sothra to ever counsel anything but the lash!

Hear her, purred Hsiv, the advisor serpent.

Sos'Umptu is devout, Yngoth agreed.

With the counsel of the serpents, the matron mother realized that only a matter of great importance would ever coax such irreverence from her sister. After all, Sos'Umptu was much like Triel, their deceased older sister, reserved and quietly calculating.

The matron mother straightened her robes out behind her and fell to her knees beside the first priestess, face down, arms extended in full surrender.

She heard the screaming—shrieking, actually—immediately, the discordant cacophony of demons, and of Lady Lolth herself, full of outrage and venom.

Something was very much amiss, clearly.

Quenthel tried to sort through the possibilities. Menzoberranzan remained on edge, as did most of Toril, as the world continued its realignment after the end of the Spellplague, some five years previous. But the drow city had fared well in that time, Quenthel believed. House Xorlarrin, Third House of Menzoberranzan, in league with House Baenre, had established a strong foothold in the dwarven complex formerly known as Gauntlgrym, and soon to be known as Q'Xorlarrin. The great and ancient Forge, powered by nothing less than a primordial of fire, had blazed to life, and weapons of fine edge and mighty enchantment had begun to flow back to Menzoberranzan. So secure did the new sister city seem that Matron Zeerith Xorlarrin herself had begun to make preparations for her departure, and had requested of Menzoberranzan's ruling council that it approve the name Q'Xorlarrin for the new settlement, and as the permanent abode for her powerful House.

Replacing that House on the Council of Eight could prove messy, of course, as was always the case when those Houses immediately below the top eight ranks saw a chance at ascendance, but Quenthel remained confident that she had those issues under control.

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Bregan D'aerthe, too, was thriving, with the resulting trade flowing in and out of Menzoberranzan. Under the leadership of Kimmuriel and Jarlaxle, the mercenaries had come to dominate the surface city of Luskan, and quietly, so as to not provoke the curiosity or ire of the lords of the surrounding kingdoms, particularly the powerful city of Waterdeep.

The matron mother subtly shook her head. Menzoberranzan was operating quite smoothly under her leadership. Perhaps these screams were prompted by something else. She tried to widen her focus beyond the reach of Menzoberranzan's tentacles.

But the sudden shriek in her head left no doubt that Lolth's anger this night was focused—and focused squarely on House Baenre, or at least, on Menzoberranzan. After a long while of accepting the telepathic berating, Quenthel lifted herself up to a kneeling position and motioned for Sos'Umptu to do likewise.

Her sister came up shaking her head, her expression as full of confusion as Quenthel's own.

The source of Queen Lolth's ire? Quenthel's fingers asked in the intricate drow sign language.

Sos'Umptu shook her head helplessly.

Matron Mother Quenthel looked at the grand altar, its standing backdrop a gigantic drider-like figure. Its eight spider legs were tucked in a squat, and it bore the head and torso of a female drow, the beautiful figure of Lady Lolth herself. Quenthel closed her eyes and listened once more, then fell to the floor in supplication yet again.

But the shrieks would not provide focus.

Quenthel gradually came back to a kneeling position no less confused or concerned. She crossed her arms over her chest and rocked slowly, seeking guidance. She put her hand on her sentient weapon, but the serpents remained silent, uncharacteristically so.

At length, she lifted her hands and signed to her sister, *Get you to Arach-Tinilith and retrieve Myrineyl!*

"Sister?" Sos'Umptu dared to openly question. Arach-Tinilith, the training academy for drow priestesses, served as the greatest of the drow academies, elevated on Tier Breche above the school of warriors, Melee-Magthere, and Sorcere, the school for promising young wizards.

Quenthel shot Sos'Umptu a threatening glare.

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I should retire to the Fane of Quarvelsharess, Sos'Umptu's fingers flashed, referring to the great public cathedral of Menzoberranzan, one Sos'Umptu had been instrumental in creating, and in which she served as high priestess. I only visited Chapel Baenre so that I would not be tardy for evening prayers.

Her argument revealed to the matron mother that Sos'Umptu thought the issue bigger than House Baenre, encompassing all of Menzoberranzan, and perhaps that was true, but Quenthel was not about to take the chance of allowing her House to become vulnerable in any way.

No! Quenthel's fingers flashed simply. She saw the disappointment on Sos'Umptu's face, and knew it was more a matter of the reason for the ordered diversion to Arach-Tinilith than the delay in her return to her precious Fane of Quarvelsharess. Sos'Umptu was no friend to Myrineyl, Quenthel's eldest daughter, after all! Soon to graduate from Arach-Tinilith, the whispers had already started concerning the expected struggle between Myrineyl and Sos'Umptu over the title of First Priestess of House Baenre, which was among the most coveted positions in the drow city.

You will work with Myrineyl, Quenthel's hand signs explained, and aloud she added, "Summon a yochlol, in this temple. We will hear the call of Lady Lolth and will answer to her needs."

Up and down the chapel, the matron mother's words were met by rising eyes, even rising priestesses, at the proclamation. Summoning a yochlol was no minor thing, after all, and most in attendance had never seen one of Lolth's Handmaidens.

The matron mother watched the expressions being exchanged among the lessers, wide-eyed, full of apprehension, full of excitement.

"Select half the priestesses of House Baenre to witness the summoning," the matron mother instructed as she rose. "Make them earn their place of witness." She threw the train of her spidery gown out behind her and imperiously strode away, appearing the rock of confidence and strength.

Inside, though, the matron mother's thoughts roiled, the shrieks of Lolth echoing in her mind. Somehow, someone had erred, and greatly so, and punishment from Lolth was never an easy sentence.

Perhaps she should take part in the summoning, she thought, before quickly dismissing the idea. She was the Matron Mother of House Baenre, after all, the unquestioned ruler of Lolth's city of Menzoberranzan. She would not request the audience of a yochlol, and would only accept the

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invitation of one, should it come to that. Besides, high priestesses were only supposed to call upon one of Lolth's handmaidens in a dire emergency, and Quenthel wasn't completely sure that's what this was. If not, and the summoning invoked the further displeasure of Lolth, better that she was not among those calling!

For now, she decided, she should visit with the one she believed to be her only other surviving sibling, the Archmage of Menzoberranzan, her brother Gromph, to learn what he might know.



The Elderboy of House Baenre, the first child of the great Yvonne, Gromph Baenre now stood as the oldest living drow in Menzoberranzan, and had long before earned the distinction as the longest-serving archmage of the city. His tenure predated not only the Spellplague but the Time of Troubles, and by centuries! It was said that he got along by getting along, and by knowing his place, for though his station afforded him great latitude within Menzoberranzan, inarguably as the most powerful male drow in the city, he remained, after all, merely a male drow.

In theory, therefore, every matron mother and every high priestess outranked him. They were closer to Lolth, and the Spider Queen ruled all.

Many lesser priestesses had tested that theory against Gromph over the centuries.

They were all dead.

Even Quenthel, Matron Mother Quenthel herself, knocked lightly and politely on the door of the archmage's private chamber in House Baenre. She might have been more showy and forceful had Gromph been in his residence in the Academy of Sorcere, but here in House Baenre, the pretense couldn't stand. Quenthel and Gromph, siblings, understood each other, didn't much like each other, but surely needed each other.

The old wizard stood up quickly and offered a respectful bow when Quenthel pressed into the room.

"Unexpected," he said, for indeed, these two spent little time in each other's company, and usually only when Quenthel had summoned Gromph to her formal chair of station.

Quenthel closed the door and motioned for her brother to be seated. He noted her nervous movements and looked at her slyly. "There is news?"

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Quenthel took the seat opposite the archmage, across the great desk, which was covered in parchment, both rolled and spread, with a hundred bottles of various inks set about them.

“Tell me of the Spellplague,” Quenthel bade him.

“It is ended, mercifully,” he replied with a shrug. “Magic is as magic was, the Weave reborn, and gloriously so.”

Quenthel stared at him curiously. “Gloriously?” she asked, considering his strange choice of words, and one that surely seemed stranger still, given the typical demeanor of Gromph.

Gromph shrugged as if it did not matter, to deflect his nosy sister. For once, regarding the movements of Lady Lolth, this situation did not yet concern her. For once, the male wizards of Menzoberranzan had been entreated by the Spider Queen before and above the domineering disciples of Arach-Tinilith. Gromph knew that his time standing above Quenthel in Lolth’s eyes would be brief, but he intended to hold fast to it for as long as possible.

Quenthel narrowed her eyes, and Gromph suppressed his smile, knowing that his apparent indifference to such godly games surely irked her.

“The Spider Queen is angry,” Quenthel said.

“She is always angry,” Gromph replied, “else she could hardly be considered a demon queen!”

“Your jests are noted, and will be relayed,” Quenthel warned.

Gromph shrugged. He could hardly suppress his laughter. One of them would soon be exposing quite a bit of truth regarding the Spider Queen, he knew, but to Quenthel’s surprise, it wouldn’t be her.

“You think her current anger is regarding the Weave? The end of the Spellplague?” he asked, because he could not resist. He pictured the expression Quenthel would wear when the truth was revealed to her, and it took all that he could muster to not break out in open, mocking laughter. “Five years, it has been—not so long a time in the eyes of a goddess, true, but still . . .”

“Do not mock her,” Quenthel warned.

“Of course not. I merely seek to discern—”

“She is angry,” Quenthel interrupted. “It seemed unfocused, a discordant shriek, a scream of frustration.”

“She lost,” Gromph said matter-of-factly, and he laughed at Quenthel’s threatening glare.

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“It’s not about that,” the matron mother said with confidence.

“Dear sister . . .”

“Matron Mother,” Quenthel sharply corrected.

“Do you fear that the Spider Queen is angry with you?” Gromph went on.

Quenthel rested back in her chair and stared off into nothingness, contemplating the question far longer than Gromph had anticipated—so long, in fact, that the archmage went back to his work, penning a new scroll.

“At us,” Quenthel decided some time later, and Gromph looked up at her curiously.

“Us? House Baenre?”

“Menzoberranzan, perhaps.” Quenthel waved her hand dismissively, obviously flustered. “I have set Sos’Umptu and my daughter to the task of summoning a handmaiden, that we might get more definitive answers.”

“Then pray tell me, dear sister”—Gromph folded his hands on the desk before him, staring hard at Quenthel, pointedly referring to her in that less-than-formal manner—“why did you decide to disturb my work?”

“The Spellplague, the Weave,” the matron mother flailed, again waving her hand.

“Nay, that is not the reason,” said the old archmage. “Why, Quenthel, I believe that you are afraid.”

“You dare to speak to me in that manner?”

“Why would I not, dear sister?”

Quenthel leaped from the chair, sending it skidding out behind her. Her eyes flashed with outrage as she corrected him once more, spitting every syllable, “Matron Mother.”

“Yes,” said Gromph. “Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan.” He rose to face her directly, and matched her unblinking stare with his own. “Never forget that.”

“You seem to be the one—”

Gromph rolled right over the thought. “And act the part of it,” he said evenly.

Quenthel’s eyes flashed again, her hands clenched and opened as if readying for a spell, but she quickly composed herself.

Gromph nodded and gave a little laugh. “If the Spider Queen is angry with you and you show any weakness, your doom will fall,” he warned. “The World Above, and below, is in flux, Lady Lolth’s own designs have only begun to spin, and she will brook no weakness now.”

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“Menzoberranzan thrives under my leadership!”

“Does it?”

“House Xorlarrin has settled Gauntlgrym. The ancient Forge is fired anew, and to the benefit of Menzoberranzan!”

“And House Barrison Del’Armgo?” Gromph asked slyly. “Do they view the move of Xorlarrin as one that strengthens the hand of Matron Mother Quenthel or as one that opens an opportunity for them here in the City of Spiders? You have removed a threat to them, have you not?”

“Their enemies the Xorlarrins are not far—Matron Zeerith is still within the city,” Quenthel protested.

“But when she goes and the compound here is abandoned, as is soon to occur?”

“They will not be far.”

“And if Matron Mez’Barris Armgo offers Zeerith a better deal than you have offered?”

Quenthel slid back into her chair, mulling over that dangerous notion. A long while passed before she looked up across the desk at Gromph, who stood towering above her now.

“Take heart, dear sister,” Gromph said lightly. “We do not even know the source of Lady Lolth’s . . . shriek. Perhaps it is naught but a residual scream of frustration over some event in the realm of the gods that has no bearing upon us whatsoever. Perhaps it was not, is not, directed at you or at House Baenre or at Menzoberranzan at all. Who can tell with these gods?”

Quenthel nodded hopefully at that.

“They will likely have engaged the yochlol by now,” she explained, rising once more and turning for the door. “Let us go and get our answers.”

“You go,” Gromph bade her. He already had his answers, after all. “I have my work here—I will remain in House Baenre this day and throughout tomorrow in case I am needed.”

That seemed to satisfy the matron mother and she took her leave, and Gromph remained standing until she had closed the door behind her. Then he sat, with a profound sigh.

He did not need a handmaiden to enlighten him. Another source, more ancient than he, had already told him of the stirrings of the Spider Queen and Lolth’s mounting frustration with Menzoberranzan.

Quenthel would return to him shortly, he knew, and she would not much enjoy the journey he had planned for her.

The handmaiden's muddy voice, bubbly and scratchy all at once, fit its physical appearance, that of a half-melted blob of dirty wax, and with several tentacles waving around just to complete the nightmare.

"You extend, but you are not strong," the yochlol said, clearly irritated.

Sos'Umptu and Myrineyl exchanged nervous glances.

"We seek only to please the Spider Queen," Sos'Umptu replied, her voice thick with proper deference and supplication.

"She is pleased by strength," said the yochlol.

It was a surprising answer to both the priestesses, in that it did not include any variation or synonym to the word "chaos," which was the very edict and domain of Lady Lolth.

The gooey mass shifted then, turning slowly and thinning as it went. The tentacles shrank and became arms, drow arms, and drow legs, as the creature transformed into the guise of a female drow, naked and glorious. With a wry grin, the handmaiden walked over to Myrineyl and gently lifted her hand to stroke the drow's cheek and chin.

"Are you afraid, daughter of Matron Mother Quenthel?" the yochlol-turned-drow asked.

Myrineyl, now visibly trembling, swallowed hard.

"We sense that the goddess is in pain, or in distress," Sos'Umptu interjected, but the yochlol held up a hand to silence the older drow, and never turned her penetrating gaze from Myrineyl. The handmaiden's hand drifted lower, around Myrineyl's delicate jaw and gently, lightly, down her neck.

The young Baenre seemed to Sos'Umptu on the verge of panic. Despite her misgivings regarding Myrineyl, Sos'Umptu lifted her hand into Myrineyl's view and her fingers flashed the word *Strength!*

Myrineyl firmed up immediately and shook her head. "We are House Baenre," she said solidly. "If Lady Lolth is in need, we are here to serve. That is all."

"But you tremble at the touch of a handmaiden," the yochlol replied. "Are you afraid? Or do I so disgust you?"

Sos'Umptu held her breath, knowing that if Myrineyl answered incorrectly, the yochlol would likely drag her back to the Demonweb Pits for an eternity of torment.

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But Myrineyl smiled, then suddenly embraced the handmaiden in a passionate kiss.

Sos'Umptu nodded in admiration, silently congratulating the play of the young priestess.

A long while later, Sos'Umptu and Myrineyl walked side-by-side through the halls of the Baenre main house, on their way to report to the matron mother. They had learned little from the handmaiden directly, which was typical of such encounters.

"Why?" Myrineyl asked quietly.

She didn't have to elaborate. Sos'Umptu could have allowed her to fail the handmaiden's test and been rid of her once and for all—and every drow in Menzoberranzan knew that Sos'Umptu Baenre would like nothing more than to be rid of Quenthel's troublesome and ambitious daughter.

"You thought it a test?" Sos'Umptu replied.

Myrineyl stopped walking and considered the older priestess.

"You think the handmaiden's call for strength is aimed at you?" Sos'Umptu asked, and scoffed. "Is it inexperience, then, or stupidity that propels you? Or arrogance, perhaps. Yes, that would be a proper failing for a child of Quenthel."

For many heartbeats, Myrineyl didn't respond, didn't even blink, and Sos'Umptu could see her rolling the insult over and over in her thoughts, looking for an angle of counterattack.

"You dare speak of the matron mother with such disrespect?" came the predictable retort.

"The test was for me," Sos'Umptu declared, and she started walking again, briskly, forcing Myrineyl to move swiftly to catch up. "And as such, for House Baenre wholly."

Myrineyl, who had, after all, just made love to a half-melted lump of dirty wax, wore a most delicious and perplexed expression.

"When a handmaiden takes the illusion of a drow, does she see through the eyes of the drow?" Sos'Umptu asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The yochlol physically watched me while she faced you, young fool," Sos'Umptu explained. "She saw my sign to you to show strength as clearly as you did, and that was the whole point of the exercise. Something is wrong. The Spider Queen is greatly upset, and demands strength."

"Unity," Myrineyl quietly breathed.

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“Unity among the two nobles of House Baenre least likely to provide it.” Myrineyl’s eyes went wide.

“Do you think that the rivalry between the high priestess of House Baenre and the daughter of Matron Mother Quenthel would go unnoticed?” Sos’Umptu replied.

“I remain at Arach-Tinilith, serving Mistress Minolin Fey,” Myrineyl said innocently.

“But you will never replace Minolin,” Sos’Umptu said slyly, “or Ardulrae of House Melarn as Matron of Scriptures. With those appointments, the matron mother, your mother, satisfies two rival Houses, potential enemies House Baenre prefers not to deal with in this dangerous time of House Xorlarrin’s departure. But then, you know this.”

The innocent look was gone from Myrineyl’s face now, Sos’Umptu noted, the young priestess assumed a rather brash posture.

“Unity now,” Sos’Umptu said against that threatening pose. “The Spider Queen demands it.” The words sounded quite curious to her as she spoke them, and to Myrineyl, as well, she realized when the younger priestess responded simply, “Why?”

Sos’Umptu could only sigh and shrug against that all-important question. The handmaiden had revealed little, her largest hint being an obscure reference that “The Eternal would understand.”

They had arrived at Quenthel’s door by then. Myrineyl lifted her hand to knock, but a look from Sos’Umptu warned her away. “Unity requires adherence to station, young one,” Sos’Umptu explained, and it was she who knocked, she who answered the matron mother’s call, and she who entered Quenthel’s private chambers first.



Gromph smiled as his door swung open and, predictably, Matron Mother Quenthel swept into the room.

“She taunts me!” Quenthel whined. She moved up to the chair she had previously used and started to sit down, but instead just kicked it aside. “The Eternal would know, the handmaiden whispered to Sos’Umptu and Myrineyl. The Eternal! Our mother would know, but alas, mere Quenthel cannot!”

Gromph realized that his chuckle might not be appreciated at that moment, but he couldn’t hold it back. The reference, the Eternal, was clear

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enough, speaking of their mother, Yvonne, who was known as Yvonne the Eternal, the greatest matron mother Menzoberranzan had ever known, and one who had ruled the city for millennia.

“And now you dare taunt me?” Quentel fumed. “Would you ever have so responded to Yvonne?”

“Of course not,” the old archmage replied. “Yvonne would have killed me.”

“But mere Quentel cannot, so you suppose?” The matron mother’s features tightened into a dangerous scowl.

Gromph casually rose. “You won’t,” he replied, “whether you can or not.”

“Are you so sure of that?”

“Only because I know my sister to be wise,” he replied, moving to the left-hand wall of the chamber. There, he opened a large cabinet, revealing several shelves covered with various items: scrolls—so many scrolls!—coffers, sacks, and one large iron box. With a wave of his hand and a quick chant, Gromph cast a minor spell. A glistening, floating disc appeared beside him. He scooped out the iron box and placed it atop his enchantment.

“Of course I only dare to tease you because I have the answer to your riddle,” he explained, turning back to Quentel.

“In there?” she asked, indicating the box.

Gromph smiled all the wider.

“I have been waiting for this day for a long time, dear sister,” the archmage explained.

“Matron Mother,” she corrected.

“Exactly. It is past time that you are no longer referred to in any other manner.”

Quentel rocked back a step, then sat in the chair, staring at the archmage. “What do you know? Why is the Spider Queen angry?”

“That, I do not know,” he replied. “Not exactly. But the handmaiden’s reference to our dear dead mother tells me that I—that *we* can likely find out.”

He gave another little laugh. “Or at least, I know how you can find out. Indeed, I know how you might learn many things. Good fortune lurks in the corridors of the Underdark just outside of Menzoberranzan. Good fortune and an intellect older than Yvonne.”

Quentel stared at him hard for a long while. “Do you intend to forevermore speak in riddles?”

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Gromph crossed the room behind her, to another cabinet near a display case. He opened the door to reveal a large, floor-to-ceiling mirror. The archmage closed his eyes and cast another spell, this one much longer to complete and much more intricate. The image of Gromph and the room in the mirror darkened, then disappeared altogether.

“Come,” Gromph instructed, looking over his shoulder and reaching out for his sister’s hand. The disc with the iron box atop it floated up beside Gromph.

“In there?”

“Of course.”

“Where?” Quenthel demanded, but she reached out and took Gromph’s hand.

“I just told you,” he explained, stepping through and pulling Quenthel behind him. The floating disc came in as well, and with a word from Gromph, the magical construct began to glow, illuminating the area and revealing an Underdark tunnel.

“We are outside the city?” Quenthel asked, her voice a bit unstable. As the primary voice of Lady Lolth in Menzoberranzan, Matron Mother Quenthel was not allowed such journeys without a large entourage of soldiers and guards.

“You are quite safe, Matron Mother,” Gromph replied, and his use of the proper title had the desired effect, drawing a nod from Quenthel.

“I discovered an old friend out here—or shall we call him an acquaintance?—quite by accident, you see,” Gromph explained. “Although now I must presume that it was no accident, but a godly inspired discovery.”

“More riddles?”

“It is all riddles—to me as well,” he lied, for he knew well that Lolth had led him to these revelations and with definite purpose. “But you see, I am not the matron mother, and so our acquaintance will only reveal so much to me.”

Quenthel started to reply, but stopped when Gromph pointed a wand out into the darkness of a side corridor and called upon its powers to create a small light in the distance, revealing a cave entrance blocked by lines of beads.

The archmage started for it, the matron mother and the floating disc right beside him.

Quenthel fell back when those beads parted at the end of a three-fingered hand, and an ugly biped stepped forth, the tentacles of its bulbous head waving excitedly.

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“Illithid!” Quenthel gasped.

“An old friend,” Gromph explained.

Quenthel steeled herself and stared hard at the approaching creature. Gromph took delight in her obvious disgust. Mind flayers were horrid creatures, of course, but this one was uglier still, having suffered grievous wounds, including one that left part of its brain-like, bulbous head hanging in a flap above its left shoulder.

“Methil,” Quenthel whispered, and then called more loudly, “Methil El-Viddenvelp!”

“You remember!” Gromph congratulated.

Of course she remembered—how could anyone who had been serving in House Baenre in the last decades of Matron Mother Yvonne’s rule possibly forget this creature? Methil had served beside Matron Mother Quenthel as her secret advisor, her *duvall*, as the drow called the position. With his mind-reading abilities, so foreign to all but psionicist drow, which were very few in number since Matron Mother Quenthel had obliterated House Oblodra by dropping the whole of the place into the Clawrift during the Time of Troubles, Methil El-Viddenvelp had provided Matron Mother Quenthel with great insight into the desires, the deceit, and the desperation of friends and enemies alike.

“But he died in the attack on Mithral Hall,” Quenthel whispered.

“So did you,” Gromph reminded. “And you are wrong in any case. Our friend here did not die, thanks to our bro—thanks to the efforts of Bregan D’aerthe.”

“Kimmuriel,” Quenthel reasoned, nodding, and Gromph was glad that he had corrected himself quickly enough, and that Kimmuriel Oblodra, one of the few surviving members of the fallen House, an accomplished psionicist, known associate of illithids, and, coincidentally, currently one of the co-leaders of the mercenary band, had reasonably come into her mind.

Kimmuriel had not even been involved in the efforts their brother Jarlaxle had expended in saving the grievously wounded illithid. But Quenthel didn’t need to know that—or to know that Jarlaxle was even related to them!

“How long have you known about the mind flayer?” Quenthel asked suspiciously.

Gromph looked at her as though he didn’t understand. “As long as you . . .” he started to reply.

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“How long have you known him to be out here?” the matron mother clarified.

“Many months,” Gromph replied, though as he considered the question, he realized it had probably been many years.

“And you did not think to inform me?”

Gromph again stared at her as if he didn’t understand. “You think to use Methil as Yvonnell once utilized him?” Before Quenthel could reply, he added, “You cannot! The creature is quite damaged, I assure you, and would cause you considerable grief and nothing more in that role.”

Quenthel’s hand flashed up, palm outward, at the illithid, who had moved too close for comfort. She uttered a spell of command. “Halt!”

Normally such a spell would never have proven effective on a creature of such intellect, but when Matron Mother Quenthel uttered a command, it carried much greater weight indeed. That, perhaps combined with Methil El-Viddenvelp’s clearly diminished mental capacity, had the illithid skidding to an abrupt and complete stop.

“Then why are we here?” Quenthel asked her brother pointedly.

“Because Yvonnell would know,” he replied, and he turned to the iron box set upon the floating disc. He waved his hand over it, the cover magically lifting, and said, “Behold.”

Quenthel gasped again as she peered into the box to see a withered head, split down the middle and somewhat stitched back together, a head she surely recognized, the split head of her long-dead mother!

“What is that?” she asked, falling back in horror. “You dare to blaspheme—”

“To preserve,” Gromph corrected.

“How did you get that . . . her? Who?”

“Bregan D’aerthe, of course. The same ones who saved Methil, here.”

“This is unconscionable!”

“You mean to resurrect Yvonnell?” The tremor was clear in her voice, Gromph noted, and rightly so—such an act would steal profoundly from the current matron mother, after all.

Gromph shook his head. “Our dear dead mother is far beyond that. The magic that had kept her alive for too many centuries is long dissipated. To bring her back now, well, she would just wither and shrivel and be dead once more.”

“Then why do you have that?” Quenthel asked, pointing to the box, and she even dared to edge closer and glance in once more at the horrid thing.

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“A curiosity at first,” said Gromph. “Have you not complained to me many times about my collections?”

“This is beyond even your morbid sensibilities,” Quenthel said dryly.

The archmage shrugged and smiled. “Indeed, you may be right, but . . .” He paused and nodded his chin past his sister. Quenthel turned and found the illithid in a highly agitated state, shivering and hopping about, with disgusting drool spilling down over the front of its white robe.

Quenthel turned an angry glare back at her brother. “Explain!” she demanded. “What desecration—”

“It would seem that I have preserved more than the physical head of our dead mother,” Gromph replied casually. “For, as I have learned from Kimmuriel Oblodra of Bregan D’aerthe, and he from the illithids, the physical mind is full of patterns, tiny connections that preserve memories.” As he spoke, he waved his hand, and the disc floated past Quenthel toward Methil, whose tentacles waggled insatiably.

“You would not dare!” the matron mother said, to both of them.

“I already have, many times,” Gromph replied. “To your benefit, I expect.”

Quenthel shot him an angry glare.

“The Spider Queen knows of it,” the archmage explained. “So said the Mistress of Arach-Tinilith, with whom I spoke.”

Quenthel’s eyes flared with anger and her hand fell to her dreaded whip, but all five of the snakes screamed in her thoughts to hold back. Trembling with rage, for she knew well her conniving brother’s confidante, the matron mother composed herself as much as possible and whispered through gritted teeth, “You confided in Minolin Fey, above me?”

“On Lolth’s command,” came the damning reply, so easily and confidently spoken.

Quenthel cried out, and she winced then and swung around, then fell back a step when she saw Methil leaning over the opened iron box, the creature’s tentacles waggling within it, waggling within the skull of Matron Mother Yvonne Baenre, no doubt!

“I revealed nothing to dear Minolin in specific detail, of course,” Gromph casually continued. “Only in cryptic generalities.”

“You would choose House Fey-Branche over House Baenre?”

“I would choose a powerful Mistress of Arach-Tinilith as a confidante in a matter most urgent to the Spider Queen. Minolin Fey understands that

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any betrayal on her part will be a move against Lolth and not one against House Baenre. Understand, Matron Mother, that the Spider Queen is not angry with me. Indeed, given the handmaiden's response to Sos'Umptu and Myrineyl this day, I hold confidence that Lady Lolth expected this all along, and certainly she sanctions it, and likely she orchestrated it. And it is, in the end, your own fault, dear sister."

Anger flashed in Quenthel's eyes. "Minolin Fey is a weakling," she said. "A fool of the highest order, and too stupid to even understand her own ignorance."

"Yes, accept the truth of my insult," Gromph came right back without fear. "How do you judge your tenure as the Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan?"

"Who are you to ask such a question of me?"

"I am the archmage. I am your brother. I am your ally."

"The city thrives!" Quenthel argued. "We expand to Gauntlgrym on my doing!"

"Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?" Gromph asked slyly, for they both knew the truth. Titanic events were going on all around them with the end of the Spellplague, and Lady Lolth herself was at play in the realm of arcane magic, Gromph knew, and yet, through it all, the denizens of Menzoberranzan had been mere spectators, after all.

And while House Baenre's hold on the city seemed as solid as ever at a cursory glance, the Baenre nobles knew the truth. The departure of House Xorlarrin, the Third House of the city and the one of greatest arcane power, was a tremendous risk that could bring great tumult to Menzoberranzan. Perhaps it would be seen as an opportunity for ascension to the ultimate rank by Matron Mez'Barris Armgo of House Barrison Del'Armgo, Baenre's rival, who had long coveted the title held by Yvonnell and now by Quenthel.

Appearances aside, Gromph knew it and Quenthel knew it: Menzoberranzan teetered on the edge of civil war.

"Our friend is ready for you," Gromph said.

Quenthel looked at him curiously for a moment, then, catching the reference, her eyes went wide as she spun around to face the illithid, who was standing right behind her. Quenthel took a fast step away, or tried to, but Gromph was quicker, casting a spell of holding upon her—a dweomer that never should have taken hold on the Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan.

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Unless Lady Lolth allowed it, Quenthel realized to her horror as she froze in place.

Still, she fought against the magic with all her strength, thoroughly repulsed, as Methil El-Viddenvelp's wagging tentacles reached for her tender skin, touched her neck and face, slithered up her nostrils.

Her expression became a mask of indignation, of outrage, and the purest anger Gromph had ever seen. He knew that if she found the power to break away at that moment, she would launch herself at him, physically and magically, to punish and bite and tear. She'd put her five-headed snake whip to work in short order, letting them strike at him, filling him with their agonizing venom, letting them chew into his belly and feast on his entrails.

Oh, if only she could break free!

But she could not, for Lady Lolth had sanctioned this most painful and profound lesson, and Gromph stood confident that by the time Quenthel was released, she'd more likely thank him than punish him.

For now, though, there was violation at a most intimate level, an outrage at the most primal depth, and pain of the most excruciating sort.

How she screamed! In terror and in the purest and most exquisite pain as the illithid did its work. Quenthel's agonized wails echoed through the corridors of the Underdark.