

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

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SACRIFICE
OF THE
WIDOW

THE
LADY PENITENT
BOOK
I



PRELUDE

Two deities stared at each other across an immense gulf: a gate, forged between two domains. Lolth and Eilistraee, mother and daughter. Goddess of darkness and cruelty, goddess of kindness and light.

Eilistraee stood in a forest, bathed in moonlight. Branches heavy with blue-white moonstones the size of apples twined in a bower above her head. The goddess was naked, her silvery white, ankle-length hair flowing over velvet-black skin like streams of liquid moonlight. Twin swords floated in the air, one at each hip. Their silver blades vibrated softly, their blended music like women's voices raised in wordless song. Eilistraee's face was proud and perfectly formed. Those few priestesses who had gazed directly

upon it were only able to recall, in tear-choked voices, that it was beautiful beyond description. Her eyes were what these mortal women remembered best: irises that held a shifting hint of blue, the elusive glint found in moonstone.

Lolth, goddess of spiders, sat on a black iron throne, its bulbous seat as bloated as an egg-filled abdomen and supported by eight segmented legs. Above her, shrieks of tortured souls filled a boiling black-and-purple sky. Lolth wore her drow form—just one of the eight aspects the goddess had fragmented into after ending her Silence. Her ebon skin was clothed in strand upon strand of spider silk that wove itself, at her shoulders, into her bone-white hair. Tiny red spiders spilled from her mouth as she spoke and dangled from her lower lip on hair-thin strands of webbing, swaying in the foul breeze. Her eyes blazed red with the reflected fires of the Demonweb Pits, but they were the only points of light on her body. Darkness seemed to fold itself about her like a cloak.

Between the two goddesses, straddling the gate, was a *sava* board. Shaped like a web and formed from a living slab of wood that was both part of the World Tree and separate from it, the board floated at waist height, suspended by its own magic. The game being played upon it had been going on for as long as mortals drew breath. Hundreds of thousands of playing pieces covered the circular board, the vast majority of them Slaves. A few thousand were of higher merit: the Priestess, Wizard, and Warrior pieces.

The usual arrangement of white pieces and black pieces did not hold in this game. All of Lolth's pieces were black as the ebon skin of a drow, as were the vast majority of Eilistraee's, yet the goddesses knew their pieces by feel. Each held a mortal soul.

Lolth had been sitting in stillness for several turns, the result of her self-imposed Silence. During that time, Eilistraee had made tremendous gains. For the first time

in many, many ages, she felt confident of victory, so when Lolth stirred and proposed the addition of an additional playing piece on each side, Eilistraee's interest was piqued.

"What sort of piece?" she asked cautiously. Her mother was, above all else, treacherous.

"The Mother."

Eilistraee gave a sharp intake of breath. "We enter the game ourselves?"

Lolth nodded. "A battle to the death. Winner take all, with Ao as witness to our wager." She gave her daughter a taunting smile. "Do you agree to those terms?"

Eilistraee hesitated. She stared across the board, her face drawn with lines of pity, deep sorrow, and hope. This might end it, she thought. Once and for all time.

"I agree."

Lolth smiled. "Then let us begin." Her hands gave darkness and malice shape, creating a midnight-black spider—another of her eight aspects. She placed it on the board at the center of her House.

Eilistraee shaped moonlight into a glowing likeness of herself and placed it at the center of her House. That done, she looked up—and saw something that startled her. Lolth was no longer alone. A familiar figure crouched to the right of her throne: an enormous spider with the head of a drow male—Lolth's champion, the demigod Selvetarm. He laid his sword and mace down and spun a likeness of himself. He placed it on the board beside Lolth's Mother piece.

"Unfair!" Eilistraee cried.

"Scared?" Lolth taunted. "Do you wish to capitulate?" She leaned forward, as if to gather up the pieces on the board.

"Never," Eilistraee said. "I should have expected this of you. Play."

Lolth reclined on her throne. She glanced at the board then casually moved a piece forward. A Slave, the hood of

his *piwafwi* shadowing his face, a dagger held behind his back. Strands of webbing from Lolth's hand clung to the piece then tore free as she set it down, causing it to rock gently.

Lolth sat lazily back on her throne, and said, "Your move."

A furtive movement behind Lolth drew Eilistraee's eye. A figure lurked in the shadow of her throne. An exquisitely beautiful drow male, the lower half of his face hidden by a soft black mask: Eilistraee's brother Vhaeraun. Had he slipped a piece onto the board as well—and if so, on which side? He was as much Lolth's enemy as Eilistraee's.

Perhaps he was just trying to distract her.

Ignoring him, Eilistraee studied the *sava* board. She could see now why her brother might have wanted to pull her attention away from the game. Lolth had just made a foolish a move, one that left her Slave piece completely exposed. It could easily be taken by one of Eilistraee's Wizard pieces—a piece that had entered the game only recently. She lifted the Wizard from the board, weighing its strength and will in her hand. Then she moved it forward. She set it down, nudging Lolth's piece aside.

"Wizard takes Slave," Eilistraee announced. With slender fingers, she removed Lolth's piece from the board. Her eyes widened as she took its measure and realized what it was. Not a Slave piece at all.

Lolth sat forward, her eyes blazing. "What?" Her fists gripped the knobbed legs of her throne. "That's not where I placed . . ."

She glanced behind her throne, but Vhaeraun was no longer there.

Eilistraee hid her smile as Lolth turned back to the board, a deep frown creasing her forehead. Then, abruptly, the frown vanished. The Spider Queen laughed, a fresh gout of spiders cascading from her lips.

“Poorly done, daughter,” she said. “Your impulsive counter move has opened a path straight to the heart of your House.”

Lolth leaned forward, reaching for the Warrior piece Selvetarm had placed on the board. She moved it along the line that led to Eilistraee’s Mother. Beside her, Selvetarm watched intently, eyes gloating above the weapons he held crossed against his spider body.

“You lose,” Lolth gloated. “Your life is forfeit and the drow are mine.” Eyes blazing with triumph, she lowered the piece to the board. “Warrior takes—”

“Wait!” Eilistraee cried.

She scooped up a pair of dice that sat at one edge of the *sava* board. Two perfect octahedrons of blackest obsidian, each with a glint of moonlight trapped within: a spark of Eilistraee’s light within Lolth’s dark heart. The dice were marked with a different number on each side. The one was the round dot of a spider, legs splayed.

The dice rattled in Eilistraee’s cupped hands like bones clattering together in a chilling wind. “One throw per game,” she said. “I claim it now.”

Lolth paused, the drider-shaped Warrior piece nearly hidden by the webbing that laced her fingers. A look of unease flickered in her red eyes then disappeared.

“An impossible throw,” she smirked. “The odds against double spiders are as long as the Abyss is deep. Corellon is as likely to forgive our betrayal and call us home to Arvandor as you are to make that throw.”

Anger swirled in Eilistraee’s blue eyes. “*Our* betrayal?” she spat. “It was your dark magic that twisted my arrow in mid-flight.”

Lolth arched an eyebrow. “Yet you accepted exile without protest. Why?”

“I knew there would be some among the drow, despite your corruption, who could be drawn into my dance.”

Lolth sank back into her throne, still holding the

Warrior piece. She waved a disdainful hand, and strands of web fluttered in its wake.

“Pretty words,” she said with infinite scorn, “but it’s time for the dance to end. Make your throw.”

Eilistraee held her cupped hands before her like a suppliant, gently rattling the dice inside them. She closed her eyes, extended her hands over the *sava* board, and let the dice fall.