

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

LISA
SMEDMAN

STORM
OF THE
DEAD

THE
LADY PENITENT

BOOK
II



PRELUDE

The *sava* board hung in a space between the planes, a bridge between the realms of two rival goddesses.

On one side was Lolth's realm—the Demonweb Pits—a blasted ruin of blackened rock, overshadowed by a dark sky the color of a bruise. Eight pinpoint lights shone down with a fitful glow, turning blood-red the spiderwebs that drifted on the wind. Souls drifted with them, their agonized screams and howls rending the air.

On the other side was Eilistraee's realm, a forest dappled with light and shadow. Thick branches screened the moon, the only source of illumination. It hung in the sky, unmoving, a blade-straight line bisecting its face. Half illuminated, half in shadow—like the moonstone fruits that hung from the branches below.

Songs drifted through the woods on which the half-moon shone: a multitude of duets. High, female voices paired with mid-range male voices. Yet some of the male voices had an edge. They sounded strained, pain-choked, as though forced to sing in a higher range than they were accustomed to. Other male voices droned in low bass, obstinately repeating the same phrase over and over: a melodic background at odds with the rest of the music.

Eilistraee's realm had once been a place of perfect harmony. It had grown larger, made stronger by a recent influx of souls. Yet that potency was the product of an uneasy compromise.

The goddess, too, had changed. Eilistraee stood naked, her ankle-length hair the only covering for her velvet-black skin. Her hair had once been uniformly silver-white but was streaked with black. Her twin swords floated in the air, one at each hip. One still shone silver bright, but the other had turned the color of obsidian. Across the lower half of the goddess's face was a faint shadow, a trophy of her recent victory: Vhaeraun's mask.

As Eilistraee waited for her opponent to move one of her *sava* pieces, a hint of red glinted in her otherwise moon-white eyes.

Lolth, seated on her black iron throne and currently wearing her drow form, smiled at the flash of irritation in her daughter's eyes. Instead of making the move she'd been contemplating, Lolth lifted a hand and watched, idly, as a spider spun a web between her splayed fingers. Other spiders scurried across her dark skin or nested in her long, tangled hair. One of these nests erupted like a boil as she dallied, releasing a cloud of tiny red spiders into the air. They drifted away on the wind, hair-thin strands of web trailing in their wake.

When the web between her fingers was complete, Lolth flicked the spider away and licked its spinnings from her fingers, savoring both the stickiness and her opponent's rising irritation.

“Patience, daughter.” Her chiding voice reverberated with the echoes of her other seven aspects. “Patience. Just look where your brother’s rash actions brought him to.”

Lolth gestured. A window opened onto the Astral Plane. In the distance of that silver void, moldering fragments drifted: the body of a god, sliced to pieces by Eilistraee’s swords. A fragment that might have been the head groaned faintly, then stilled.

Lolth feigned sadness as she stared at the corpse. “No redemption for him. Not now.”

Eilistraee’s jaw clenched. Beneath the shadow of her brother’s mask, her lips were a thin line. But she would give her mother no satisfaction.

“Sacrifices are sometimes necessary,” she said. “Vhaeraun gave me no choice.”

Lolth waved her hand again, and the window closed. She stared across the *sava* board at Eilistraee, one eyebrow mockingly raised. “You’re getting more like him, every day,” she taunted. “Too ‘clever’ for your own good. It won’t be long, now, before you make a similar mistake.”

That said, she casually leaned forward and picked up one of her Priestess pieces. The piece—shaped like a drow female, but with a bestial face and eight spider legs protruding from its chest—cringed under her touch. Lolth moved it next to another of her pieces, one that had remained motionless for millennia—a piece that had not been moved, in fact, since the game began. That piece, a massive Warrior with bat wings and horns, blazed to life as Lolth’s retreating hand brushed against it. Lurid orange flames danced over its black body and its wings unfolded with audible creaks.

“Not yet, my love,” Lolth whispered, her breath heavy with spider musk. “Not yet.”

The demonic Warrior piece stilled. Its wings folded back against its body. The flames turned a dull red, then vanished.

Eilistraee, studying the board, spotted a path along its web-shaped lines that would allow her to capture the piece that had just stirred. She could do it with one of her Priestess pieces. Taking out Lolth's Warrior would involve several preparatory moves, some of them risky feints, but ultimately the Priestess piece could move into a position where it could strike the Warrior from behind.

As Eilistraee made the first of those moves, a ripple formed at the place where her domain met Lolth's. Both goddesses started and looked up from their game. Eilistraee's perfect nose crinkled at the scent that seeped from the ripple as it solidified into a dark crack—a sickly sweet odor, laden with millennia of dust and ash—the scent of death.

A voice whispered from the crack between the domains. It had the sound of something produced by vocal cords long since gone tight and dry. "You play . . . without me?"

A burst of cackling laughter followed. It danced at the edge of madness, then was gone.

Eilistraee's and Lolth's eyes met across the board.

"Kiaransalee," Eilistraee whispered.

Lolth cocked her head in the direction of the disturbance and raised one eyebrow. "Shall we let her join our game?"

Eilistraee gave careful thought to the question. Kiaransalee, goddess of vengeance and queen of the undead, hated Lolth as much as Eilistraee pitied her. The once-mortal necromancer queen had, after her ascension to demigod status, joined Lolth's assault on Arvandor, but her fealty to the Spider Queen was fitful and forced. Since Lolth's assumption of Moander's hegemony of rot, death, and decay, Kiaransalee had smoldered with jealousy—and had lashed out in anger more than once against her former ally. If Kiaransalee entered the game, Lolth would have to watch her back.

"On whose side would you play?" Eilistraee asked.

"Neither side," Kiaransalee croaked. Another cackle of laughter burst from the gap between realms: a dry sound,

like bones rattling in a cup. “I’ll play against both of you at once.”

Eilistraee nodded. She’d expected this. Kiaransalee knew that Eilistraee and Lolth would never unite their forces. And her hatred of both of them ran deep. Eilistraee felt certain it would be a three-way game to the bitter end.

Lolth swept a hand over the board and its hundreds of thousands of pieces, and spoke to Kiaransalee. “What use have you for the drow, banshee? Have you suddenly developed a taste for the living?” She scoffed. “I thought you preferred to line your bed with the husks of the soulless. After all . . . who else would have you?”

Inarticulate rage boiled out of the crack between realms. Abruptly, it switched to wild, mocking laughter. “*Spider Queen*,” it burbled. “Who else would have *you*, but insects?”

Lolth reclined lazily on her throne. “You betray your ignorance, banshee,” she retorted. “Spiders are not insects. They are creatures unto themselves. Arachnids.”

A pause, then, “‘Arachnids’ they may be, but they squish just as messily as insects.”

Fury blazed in Lolth’s coal-red eyes. “You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed.

“I just did,” Kiaransalee gloated. “Squish. Squish squish.” A babble of taunting laughter followed. “Aren’t you sorry now, for yanking my domain into yours?”

Eilistraee interrupted the tirade. “Let her play.”

Lolth looked up sharply. Her eyes bored into Eilistraee’s for several moments. Then her gaze drifted to the *sava* board. She pretended to look at it idly, but Eilistraee could tell that Lolth was studying the pattern of pieces intently. The Spider Queen wasn’t stupid. She would know what Eilistraee hoped: that Kiaransalee’s chaotic moves would provide a screen for Eilistraee’s own, more careful maneuvers.

Lolth smiled. A spider the size of a bead of sweat crawled across her upper lip, then disappeared into the crack between her parted teeth. “Yes, indeed,” she breathed. “Why not?”

“With Ao as witness,” Eilistraee added. “And under the same terms that we agreed to. A contest to the death. Winner take all.”

Kiaransalee’s voice issued from the crack between realms. “To the death,” she chortled.

The crack widened, revealing the goddess and her realm.

Kiaransalee was horrible to look at, gruesome as any mortal lich. Her coal-dark skin stretched tight over a near-skeletal face, and her hair was lusterless as bleached bone. The rotted silks that hung from her wasted body had faded to gray, mottled with mold. A multitude of silver rings hung loose on her bony fingers. She sat cross-legged on a slab of marble: a tombstone whose inscription had been obscured by moss. A field studded with other gravestones stretched behind it, under an ice-white sky.

Kiaransalee pulled a maggot from her flesh and shaped its soft, dough-like mass into a Mother piece, giving it the form she wore when appearing before her worshipers: that of a beautiful drow female. As it darkened to black, she placed it on the *sava* board, then swept an arm in a scythe-like motion. A host of lesser pieces appeared in the crook of her arm: skeletal Slaves, slaving ghoulish Warriors, lich-like Wizards, and Priestess pieces in black robes with hooded cowls. These she sprinkled across the board, letting them fall like a scattering of ashes over an open grave.

“My move!” she cried. Leaping from her tombstone, she shoved two pieces forward at once, neatly flanking the Priestess piece Eilistraee had planned to use, leaving it with only one avenue of escape: one that would force it to move against the Warrior sooner than Eilistraee had planned.

Eilistraee turned her eyes to the space above the *sava* board. “You permit this?” she raged.

Ao was silent.

Loth laughed. “She is playing against both of us at once, daughter. Two moves seems only fair.”

Eilistraee's mask hid the thin line of her lips.

Lolth leaned forward. "My turn, now." Deliberately, savoring Eilistraee's growing unease, she picked up the demonic Warrior piece. She held it up for Eilistraee to see, then slid it in front of the Priestess, cutting off her line of escape.

Eilistraee fumed. If her Priestess piece went down, a host of other pieces would follow. Lolth's Warrior, once again animate and blazing with unholy glee, was poised to cut a swath right through them.

Was there no move she could make to prevent this?

Her gaze fell on a piece that stood well outside her House. Half off the board, it appeared to have been taken out of play. But in truth, it had not yet been removed. If her opponents made the moves she expected, the path between it and one of Kiaransalee's most important pieces would soon be clear.

Several of Eilistraee's own pieces would have to be sacrificed along the way. But if it worked, the result would be worth it.

She moved a Priestess forward—a piece that wore Vhaeraun's mask. It was a less than perfect move, one that would probably be easily countered. But it would buy her time. If she were lucky, it would serve as a distraction for the move she planned to make—the one that would end this game.