

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

LISA
SMEDMAN

ASCENDANCY
OF THE
LAST

THE
LADY PENITENT

BOOK
III



PRELUDE

The *sava* board hung in mid-air, a bridge across an endless divide.

On one side of this line lay the Demonweb Pits, a vast plain of tortured rock under a purplish-black sky. An enormous black spider with red eyes dominated this landscape: the goddess Lolth, in one of her eight aspects. Sticky white webs stretched from her body to points near and far within her realm. They zigzagged back and forth between the spires of black rock that twisted toward the sky, and filled the many jagged craters that pocked the ground. Tiny bulges pulsed through these hollow webs: creatures, mortal and otherwise, who had found their way into her realm, either through death or deliberate folly. Muffled screams and moans came from within, bleeding out into the sulfurous air.

On the other side of the divide stood a forest: Eilistraee's realm. A wind carried a whisper of song through tall trees, rustling branches heavy with moonstones. Half of the fruit-like orbs retained their original coloration—milky white with glints of shifting blue. The rest had darkened to a shadow black that drank in the moonlight dappling the forest. All lent a sweet perfume to the air.

Under these branches stood the goddess herself, a tall, lithe figure with coal black skin and moon-pale hair that hung to her ankles. Once, she had walked proudly naked through her realm, but now she wore a loose black shirt and trousers that hid her feminine curves. A mask—black, but glinting with moonlight as her breath stirred it—hid her face from the eyes down.

Eilistraee's twin swords hung beside her hips, suspended by song and magic. As the goddess contemplated the *sava* board, she played with an assassin's dagger, absently twirling the blade by its strangle cord.

Spotting something, she stiffened. "What is this, Lolth? Another of your distractions?"

Lolth paused in her web spinning, tore her abdomen free of the sticky strands, and scurried closer. Faint wails poured from the severed strands of silk that fluttered in her wake. She lowered her head until her palps brushed the board. "I see nothing amiss."

Eilistraee flipped the dagger and caught it by the hilt. She pointed the weapon at the *sava* board. "There."

"Ah." Lolth's spider mouth smiled.

On the board stood hundreds of thousands of playing pieces. Slaves, Priestesses, Wizards, and Warriors stood alone or in clusters on lines that radiated from the players' respective Houses. At the spot Eilistraee pointed to—a spot uncomfortably near the heart of her House—the board had grown spongy. One of her Priestess pieces was slowly sinking into this spot. Already it was ankle-deep.

Lolth chuckled. "Looks like you're going to lose more than one piece."

Other purplish-red stains appeared on the board, all of them close to Eilistraee's House. They bulged. Figures rose from them: priest pieces that had not been in play before. All had the faces of drow, but with bodies like blobs of hardened wax.

Anger blazed red in Eilistraee's eyes. "Ghaunadaur," she growled. "And his fanatics." The swords at her hips thrummed their displeasure. She pointed her dagger accusingly at Lolth. "Leave was neither asked, nor given, for another to enter our game."

"Do not accuse me of cheating, daughter," Lolth replied. "The Ancient One heeds no Mistress. Ghaunadaur was old even before Ao's time. The god of slime comes and goes as he will. I neither command nor compel him."

"You drove him from the Abyss once before."

"And like a boil, he rises once more. Perhaps this time, you'll lance him for me?"

Eilistraee fumed. She had no doubt that Lolth was behind this. Even as she watched, several of her other pieces sank knee-deep in the spongy board. These spots of corruption, as dark as bruises on fruit, were spreading, joining together. If left unchecked, they would completely encircle Eilistraee's House, cutting off a large number of her pieces from the rest of the board.

Lolth must have maneuvered Ghaunadaur into choosing this moment to strike, but why? Eilistraee scanned the *sava* board, searching for the answer.

Then she saw it: the move Lolth must have hoped she wouldn't spot.

Eilistraee reached for her strongest Priestess piece, the one that held the curved sword. When she saw Lolth flinch, she knew she'd made the right choice. She moved the piece forward along a path that allowed it to spiral into the very heart of Lolth's House. The move wasn't an attack on Lolth's Mother piece, but it accomplished the next best thing. It blocked the Mother piece completely, preventing it from moving. Unless Lolth found a way to take the Priestess, her Mother piece would be held out of play.

Taking out the Priestess piece Eilistraee had just moved, however, didn't seem likely. It was in an unassailable position, protected on all sides.

Eilistraee leaned back, satisfied. "Your move."

Lolth's palps twitched. Her abdomen pulsed restlessly, and the webs of her realm quivered in response. She studied the board with her unblinking eyes. At last she rocked back on her eight legs, resting her bulbous abdomen on the ground.

"Perhaps luck will favor me," she said. She shifted into her drow aspect and reached for the dice. They were as they had been since Eilistraee had made her throw, earlier in the game: two octahedrons of translucent moonstone, each with a spider trapped deep within. Seven sides bore numbers; the eighth, a full-moon symbol representing the numeral one. One circle was the solid white of a full moon; the other dark, with only a new-moon sliver of white on one side.

"One throw per game," Lolth said. "I'll take it now."

"I thought you preferred to weave your own destiny."

"That I do, daughter," Lolth said in a silken voice. She rattled the dice in cupped hands.

Eilistraee waited, tense and silent. If Lolth threw double ones, Eilistraee would be forced to sacrifice one of her pieces. She knew which one Lolth would choose: the Priestess that threatened Lolth's Mother piece. Yet there was little cause to worry. The odds of both dice landing circle-uppermost were sixty-three to one. An unlikely throw. Except that Eilistraee herself had accomplished it earlier in the game, forcing Lolth to sacrifice her champion, Selvetarm. And now it was Lolth's turn to try.

Eilistraee nodded at the dice Lolth rattled between her slim black hands. "No tricks," she warned. "If I see any web sticking to those dice, I'll demand a re-roll."

Lolth arched a perfect white eyebrow. She wore the face of Danifae, her Chosen—the female she had consumed upon ending her Silence. Her features were beautiful: the lips seductive, the cheekbones high, the eyes a delicate hue. Yet her expression was as cold as winter ice.

“No webs,” Lolth promised.

Then she threw.

The dice clattered onto the board between the pieces. One die rolled to a stop immediately, full moon symbol uppermost. The second came to rest against one of Lolth’s Priestess pieces. The die lay edge-uppermost, balanced halfway between the eight and the one.

“The die is cocked,” Eilistraee said. “The roll is—”

The spider inside it twitched.

The die toppled, landing moon-uppermost. The new moon. Slowly, its stain spread throughout the die, rendering it as black as the Spider Queen’s heart.

“You cheat!” Eilistraee cried.

“Of course,” Lolth said with a smile.

Eilistraee turned her face skyward. “Ao! I require a witness, Lord of All, and your judgment. Lolth has broken the rules, and must forfeit the game.”

Ao’s reply came not in words or gestures, but as a sudden knowing. The dice, he revealed, had always been loaded. Moonlight had tipped the balance, the first time. Lolth had arranged this—a form of cheating, it was true—but the first result had been in Eilistraee’s favor. The second die roll would also stand.

Ao had spoken.

Eilistraee stared at the empty place on the *sava* board where the Spider Queen’s champion had once stood. “You *wanted* Selvetarm to die. You arranged it.”

Lolth gave a lazy shrug. “Of course. And now it’s your turn to lose a piece of *my* choosing.”

“No,” Eilistraee whispered. A tear squeezed from eyes that had turned a dull yellow. It trickled down the goddess’s face, and was absorbed by Vhaeraun’s mask.

“Yes.” Lolth answered. Smiling cruelly, she extended a web-laced hand to point at a Priestess piece. “That one. I demand her sacrifice. Now.”

CHAPTER 1

*The Month of Ches
The Year of the Cauldron (1378 DR)*

T'lar slipped silently into the blood-warm river and clung to a gnarled tree root so the sluggish current wouldn't carry her away. The river slid smoothly over her skin without impediment; upon acceptance in the Velkyn Velve, she had shaved her body from scalp to ankle—there would be no incriminating flashes of white to give her away. Floating on her back, she pulled a tangle of dead creeper vines across her naked body to conceal herself. She stared up at the sky, awash with the light of thousands of stars, and listened to the rustling of the night's predators and the startled screeches of their prey. The World Above was a noisy place compared to the cool silence of the Underdark, but even over this restlessness she could hear the soft murmur of voices: the wild elf, and the female T'lar had been sent to kill.

She let go of the root. The current caught her. As she drifted toward the voices, concealed under the tangle of vines, she adjusted the grip of her fingers on her spike-spiders, two walnut-sized metal throwing balls filled with poison and studded with hollow metal needles. A prick from either would numb her hands. Used against someone who hadn't built up an immunity to their poison, they would render the entire body as rigid as petrified wood.

Through the veil of creeper vine, T'lar observed her target: a drow female standing on the river bank, turned sideways to the water, her attention focused on the strange-looking male who squatted at her feet. The female was about T'lar's size, but there the resemblance ended. The priestess had long, bone white hair, wound in a tight coil and bound by a black web-lace hair net at the back of her head. Black gloves embroidered in a white spiderweb design covered her hands and arms up to the elbow. She wore a thin silk robe, cinched at the waist by a belt from which hung a ceremonial dagger and whip. The whip's three snake heads twisted beside her hip, forked tongues tasting the air, alert for danger.

T'lar's target was a noble of House Mizz'rynturl. T'lar knew her slightly. She had once been of that House, and had even played with Nafay on occasion when both had been girls—games like Stalking Spider and Flay the Slave. But T'lar had given up all other allegiances the day she was shorn. From her second decade of life, she had served Lolth alone.

And Lolth had decreed that Nafay must die.

T'lar hadn't asked why—to have done so would have been insolence bordering on suicide. But she'd heard the whispers: that Nafay, who had only recently joined the Temple of the Black Mother, served Lolth only superficially. That her true devotions lay elsewhere—with Vhaeraun, it was rumored—though a female being accepted into the Masked Lord's faith was about as likely as the moon turning into a spider and scuttling away from the sky.

Still, Nafay had done something to incur Lolth's wrath. Something that had prompted the *valsharess* to set T'lar on the hunt. And what a long chase it had been. Guallidurth lay more than four hundred leagues from here, as the spider crawled. What had drawn Nafay to the World Above and prompted her to seek the company of such a strange-looking male?

The wild elf was heavily built—almost as muscled as a drow female. He had duskier skin than most surface elves. Yellow paint ringed his eyes, and his hair hung in tiny braids, each tipped with a tuft of downy white feathers. His only clothing was a baglike loincloth that accentuated his genitals. From its string ties hung a dart pouch. He squatted before the priestess, arms resting on his knees, holding a blowpipe, and spoke in a high-pitched, melodic voice that reminded T'lar of the chirping of a cave cricket.

The priestess answered him in the same language.

T'lar gave a silent mental command. Her earlobe tickled as the spider-shaped black opal on her earring stirred to life. She tilted her head slightly, encouraging the spider to crawl into her ear, and waited as it spun a web that thrummed like a second eardrum in time with the voices. Then she listened.

“. . . lead me to it,” the priestess said.

The male shook his head. “They will kill you. Strangers are not even permitted within the forest, let alone at the *yathzalahaun*.”

The word had the cadence of High Drow. T'lar's spider-earring translated it as “temple of first learning.”

“Yet I *am* here, within the Misty Vale.”

“Yes.”

The priestess leaned closer to him. “And you *will* lead me to the temple.”

The male sighed. “Yes,” he whispered. He gave her a tortured look of equal parts anguish and anticipation, as if she had promised him something—something he would pay dearly for.

T'lar drifted even with the spot where Nafay stood; in another moment or two, the current would carry her past. She

exhaled and sank beneath the surface, letting the tangle of creeper vine drift on alone. She kicked, sending herself shoreward, then twisted so that her feet touched bottom. She burst out of the water hands-first, and in the same motion hurled the spike-spiders. One struck the male square in the forehead. He immediately stiffened and toppled sideways. The second sailed toward the priestess. Before it struck, one of Nafay's whip vipers reared. It snapped the spike-spider out of the air and swallowed it.

The whip viper thrashed wildly as the spike-spider jammed in its throat. The other two snake heads hissed in fury.

Nafay whirled. The holy disk hanging from her neck whipped around like a pendulum. She shouted a prayer and wove her hands together, glaring at T'lar through the tangle of her fingers.

T'lar felt the spell brush against her body. It pulled at her abdomen, bloating it unnaturally. It teased two strands of flesh from her left side, attempting to twist them, together with her left arm and leg, into thin insectoid legs. Her mind was yanked toward the priestess. Web-sticky fingers plucked at her thoughts, trying to weave them to Nafay's will.

T'lar fought back with all her will. With a jolt, her body returned to normal. She leaped from the water. In mid-leap she used the *dro'zress* within her to pass into invisibility. A mid-air tumble and a kick off a tree trunk placed her where the priestess wouldn't expect her. She jabbed stiffened fingers into the priestess's upper-left abdomen, into the vital spot over the blood-sac. Her other hand punched into Nafay's throat.

The priestess gagged and buckled at the knees, unable to breathe and bleeding within. She grasped her holy symbol and tried to flutter her fingers in a silent prayer, but T'lar spun and slammed a heel into Nafay's temple. The priestess collapsed, unconscious.

One of the whip's heads lashed out. T'lar leaped back. The snake's poison-filled fangs snapped at air. T'lar stepped carefully around the whip and crouched behind the priestess. She

pressed hard against the neck, where the blood flowed, and choked off the pulse. Nafay's legs kicked once, and then her body relaxed. She was dead.

"*Lolth thu malla,*" T'lar whispered, giving the ritual thanks for a successful kill. "*Jal ultrinnan zhah xundus.*"

Two of the whip's snake heads spat furiously at her. The third had stiffened; two of the snake-spider spines had pierced its scaly skin from within and were protruding out of its body. T'lar picked up the wild elf's blowpipe and used it to nudge the whip aside. Later, after she collected her gear, she would bag the whip and carry it back to Guallidurth as proof of her kill, together with Nafay's holy symbol. She slipped the pendant off the dead female and hung it around her own neck.

Then she turned her attention to the wild elf. His body remained stiff, but his hands trembled and his eyelids fluttered. He was stronger than T'lar had expected. The poison would relinquish its hold on him soon. T'lar knelt beside him and placed her hands on his throat, then hesitated. She knew she should kill him now. Finish the job. But curiosity gnawed at her. She yearned to know what had brought Nafay to this place, what was so valuable to the priestess up here on the surface. A temple, the wild elf had said.

Instead of tightening her grip, T'lar released the wild elf's throat. She wouldn't kill him—yet. She would force him to show her this temple first. She knew this might mean uncovering secrets the *valsharess* would prefer remained buried, but if that meant T'lar's death upon her return to Guallidurth, so be it. She would go to the altar willingly, certain in the knowledge she had served Lolth well.

She plucked the spike-spider from the wild elf's forehead. She removed the pouch from his string belt, sniffed the darts—they were poisoned—and set them aside. Then she drew Nafay's spider-pommel dagger and used it to cut strips from the priestess's silk robe. She used these to bind the wild elf's wrists behind his back, and to hobble his ankles. She wadded more silk into his mouth and tied this makeshift gag tightly in

place. Then she waited. From time to time, she slapped him. When he at last flinched, she grabbed him by the hair.

“Blink twice if you understand me,” she said. She spoke in High Drow; the earring only allowed her to understand the wild elf’s language, not to speak it.

The wild elf glared. The whites of his eyes had a yellowish tinge, signifying a malaise deeper than just the poison, one that had been affecting his vitals for some time. She rolled him over, inspecting his body. She found what she’d been looking for on his left thigh and calf: a series of small, raised red lumps. Spider bites. She touched one of them, and found it felt hot. Without healing, he would be dead by the time the sun rose.

T’lar pointed at the priestess. “She promised to cure you, didn’t she?” She touched the platinum disk that hung against her bare chest, fingers caressing the embossed spider, then pointed at the bites. “Would you like *me* to cure you?”

The wild elf stared at her. He couldn’t speak while gagged, but T’lar caught the slight widening of his pupils. He understood her meaning, if not the words themselves. He believed she could cure him. He obviously hadn’t dealt with the drow before now. He grunted something from behind the gag and jerked his head in a nod.

She yanked him to his feet. “*Yathzalahaun,*” she ordered, giving him a rough shove.

He stumbled away from the river, into the forest. She followed.

They walked for some time, the wild elf forced by his hobble to take short, shuffling steps. With his arms bound behind him, he fell frequently. T’lar yanked him back to his feet each time and forced him on. The moon rose, round and full, throwing the forest into stark patches of light and shadow. T’lar squinted against the glare and carefully noted the direction they traveled. She would need to find her way back, later, to the cleft near the river that led back to the Underdark.

Fortunately, this region of the World Above had many landmarks. They passed a number of mounded hills, each

capped by a thick tangle of trees and vines, and chunks of weathered stone half-buried in the ground. T'lar clambered over a fallen obsidian column, carved in the shape of a person with four arms folded across their chest. Whether it was meant to represent male or female, T'lar couldn't tell; there were no obvious genitalia. Moonlight threw the glyph carved into its forehead into shadow. T'lar was no scholar—she couldn't read the glyph itself—but she recognized it as an archaic form of Espruar. She glanced around at the hills and realized they were the ruins of ancient structures. So perversely fertile was the World Above that soil and vegetation had completely hidden the tumbled buildings under a thick, loamy skin.

The wild elf halted before one of the hills and gestured by jerking his head in that direction. One of the trees sprouting from the hill had fallen, leaving a hole in the mound that revealed the masonry beneath. T'lar peered into the hole and saw a glint of metal: an adamantine door. Its hinges had torn free of the crumbling stone, allowing the door to fall inward. Now the metal formed a natural ramp into the darkness at the mound's hollow center.

The wild elf glanced back at her, obviously reluctant to venture into it. T'lar shook her head. She snapped a kick at the back of his legs, knocking him to his knees, and pointed. "Inside."

The wild elf glared at her, but complied. He wormed his way forward on his belly, into the hole. T'lar crouched and followed cautiously, Nafay's dagger in hand. She smelled damp earth, and spider musk. A cobweb brushed her face. But the attack she had anticipated didn't come. Though webs were everywhere, the inside of the ancient building did not contain a spider.

There was enough room inside to stand. T'lar looked around. The black marble floor had a bowl-shaped depression at its center. A tracery of white veins threaded through the marble: hair-thin lines reminiscent of a tangled web. The walls were carved, three of them in glyphs she couldn't read

that ran in narrow rows from ceiling to floor. The fourth wall bore a mural topped by a glyph T'lar did recognize: Araushnee. Lolth's original name.

This was clearly an ancient temple.

T'lar fell to one knee and turned her head, exposing her neck. "Dark Mother of all drow, your servant offers herself."

This ritual performed, she rose and studied the mural. It depicted an enormous spider with a drow face superimposed upon its abdomen. Eight drow arms radiated from its body. Each ended in a hand with eight fingers. Lines extended from each hand, linking the central figure to four pairs of smaller spiders, each with a face on its abdomen. The faces of the first pair were masked, while the second pair had gaunt, almost skeletal features and hollow eyes. The third pair had faces like melted wax, sagging and distorted, while the fourth pair had mouths open and spider arms lifted, as if they were singing the larger spider's praises. The eight lesser spiders dangled from the central figure's finger-webs like newly hatched spiderlings twisting in the wind.

The imagery was like nothing T'lar had ever seen before. It felt old, archaic. Not quite right. Yet strangely compelling. And Lolth had woven a path for her to this place. Why?

Using Nafay's dagger, she pricked each of her fingers. She pressed her fingertips against the abdomen of the large spider, leaving small dots of blood. "Hear me, Dark Mother. Show me your will."

She heard a muffled voice behind her: the wild elf, trying to say something against his gag. She turned and saw a fist-sized spider descending from the ceiling on a thread of silk. The spider was night black, with a red hourglass on its abdomen. As it descended, purple faerie fire blossomed in a flickering halo around its body. The wild elf threw himself to the side, rolling away from it.

Lolth had made herself known.

T'lar strode to the wild elf and caught him by the hair, dragging him to the bowl-shaped depression. The spider halted

in its descent, twisting around on its thread, just over T'lar's head. Watching. T'lar held up Nafay's dagger and kissed the blade. Then she yanked the wild elf's head back, bending his body in an arc that exposed his throat. He screamed—a wild wail that forced itself past the gag. He fought T'lar with all his strength, trying to hurl himself backward, to tear free and escape, but her grip was relentless.

She touched her dagger to his throat. She pricked it, making a puncture that barely broke the skin.

“Accept this sacrifice, Dark Mother,” she intoned.

She jabbed again. A little deeper, this time. His muffled wail grew shriller. He fought with the frenzy of a trapped animal, but T'lar's grip remained as strong as adamantine. The wild elf twisted around and kicked her legs. She neatly sidestepped the thrashing limbs.

“Taste his fear.”

Another thrust, a little deeper.

“Feast upon him.”

Blood trickled down his throat. She stabbed a fourth time.

“Feast upon his blood.”

Another thrust.

“Consume him.”

She stabbed again.

“Rend his soul.”

She thrust again. Deep enough, this time, to pierce the windpipe. His breathing grew rapid with panic. Blood bubbled in a froth from the wound.

“Take him!”

On her eighth and final thrust, the blade plunged to the hilt. She yanked it free, releasing a hot spray of blood. She jerked his head to the side, letting blood splash the mural. Then she forced the weakly squirming sacrifice down into the depression in the floor. The wild elf died then, and blood stopped pulsing from the wound. T'lar lifted him by the ankles and waited as he bled out. The bowl-shaped depression filled with blood. She cast the corpse aside and kissed the blood-slick

dagger a second time, tasting his blood. Then she watched as the purple-limned spider resumed its descent.

It plunged into the bowl of blood. Faerie fire rippled upon the surface of the bright red pool, turning it the color of an old bruise. Then the blood drained away. The depression in the floor was as it had been before the sacrifice: empty and waiting.

T'lar heard the sound of stone grating on stone, coming from the direction of the mural. She whirled, dagger still in hand. Lolth's abdomen was sinking into the wall. Abruptly it fell away, crashing to the floor of whatever chamber lay beyond this one and sending up a cloud of stale dust. For several moments, there was silence. Then T'lar heard a scrabbling sound. She braced herself, preparing for whatever the goddess was about to hurl at her. Lolth was fond of testing her supplicants—and failure usually meant death.

A voice, as dry as ancient leather, creaked out of the opening a female voice, pitched too low for T'lar to make out most of the words. One came through clearly, however: the name of the goddess. Lolth.

“Spider Queen!” T'lar cried exultantly. “I am your willing servant.”

Something moved in the space beyond the mural, something large and dark, forcing itself into the hole T'lar's sacrifice had opened. It squeezed through headfirst, then halted, its shoulders too broad to pass. A bestial face, more demon than drow, stared out at T'lar and snarled. Blood trickled out of the opening and puddled at the base of the wall. The opening suddenly widened, then contracted, forcing the demonic creature through. It landed on the ground, gasping.

The demon-drow was twice as large as T'lar was tall, and female, with eight spider legs protruding from her chest. Her hair was a matted tangle that looked like old spider silk. Under each of her eyes was a hairy bulge, from which a fang-tipped jaw curved, the points meeting above the mouth. The jaws gnashed as she lay on the floor, moaning.

T'lar was certain the demon-drow was Lolth's, though she'd never seen anything like her. "What are you?" she asked. "One of Lolth's handmaidens?"

The demon-drow looked up. "Lolth's *handmaiden*?" she croaked. The word wrenched itself from her mouth. Her wild cackle filled the hollow temple and sent a thrill down T'lar's spine. The laugh was chaos itself, uncontrolled and as dangerous as a rock fall.

Then the demon-drow began to sing.

The song was harsh, as if the creature's throat was tight and parched. Yet the notes filled the temple with magic that plucked at the spiderwebs and made them vibrate like the strings of a lyre. T'lar could feel it within her own body: a thrumming surge of power. The demon-drow had been withered and gaunt when she fell out of the hole in the wall, but she rose to her feet plumped and visibly stronger. When her song ended, she stood solid and strong. She stared down at T'lar.

"What month is it? What year?"

T'lar met the demon-drow's gaze unflinchingly. Lolth hated weakness, and so did the demons that served her. "The month of Ches, in the Year of the Cauldron—1378, by the reckoning of the World Above."

The demon-drow shook her head. "Five months." She stared down at her hands and arms, then abruptly clenched her fists. "Who are you?"

T'lar bowed. "T'lar Mizz'rynturl of the Velkyn Velve, assassin of the Temple of the Black Mother."

The demon-drow looked down at her, an expression of open amusement on her face. "Assassin?" she said. "Were you sent to kill me?"

"Indeed no! I serve Lolth."

"That's fortunate." The demon-drow's voice dropped to a harsh whisper, and she leaned closer, leering. "No mortal can kill me—though many have tried." She reared back and shouted, "The void itself has no effect on me!"

T'lar was starting to suspect that this was something much more powerful than a yochlol. Some new form of demon that Lolth herself had spawned. "By what name should I address you, Mistress?"

The demon-drow was silent for several moments. Her spider jaws gnashed. At last she answered, "The Lady Penitent."

It sounded like a title a powerful being might use. "Are you a demon lord?"

The Lady Penitent snapped out a laugh. Her eyes looked wild. "More than that. Much more." She waved a misshapen hand at the mural on the wall. "I even have my own temple."

T'lar nodded, her chest tight with excitement. Had she just played midwife to some ancient and long-forgotten deity? She kept her face expressionless, despite the surge of emotion that left her near giddy. The Spider Queen must have been watching when Nafay died. And again when T'lar offered up her sacrifice. Lolth was known for her caprice. It would not be unheard of for the goddess to reward a mere assassin with power that would make a priestess weep. The services of a demigod's avatar, for example.

"Your song," T'lar said. "I felt its power."

"Lolth's dark chorus? *Bae'qeshel*?"

T'lar hadn't heard the word before, but to admit that would be to show weakness. And deities spawned of chaos and blood despised the weak. She nodded and spoke boldly. "I want to learn it. Teach me."

The Lady Penitent cocked her head. For a moment, her expression seemed melancholic. Almost mortal. "You remind me of someone. A young female, heir to the throne of House Melarn. She asked the same thing, once."

"What happened to her?" T'lar asked.

The Lady Penitent bared jagged teeth. "She died."

T'lar refused to be cowed. "She was unworthy, then."

"Yes," the Lady Penitent said in a harsh whisper. "She was . . . weak." Her lips twisted into a grimace.

T'lar stood firm before the Lady Penitent. "In me, you will find strength. And determination. I journeyed all the way from Guallidurth to do my *valsharess's* bidding."

"Guallidurth? The city with as many sects as an egg sac has hatchlings?"

T'lar felt a sliver of apprehension. The deity was challenging her—testing her faith. Fortunately, T'lar's commitment was strong. The Temple of the Black Mother was one of the youngest in the city. It had splintered away from the *Yorn'yathrins* a mere six decades ago and had yet to rise to prominence, but rise to prominence it would. Especially under the tutelage of a demigod's avatar.

"The priestesses of the Black Mother are fervent in their devotions," she assured the Lady Penitent. "They will serve you well."

The avatar lifted an eyebrow. "Will they?" A dark chuckle rose from her throat like a bubble of blood. "Guallidurth," she whispered, her eyes hungry.

T'lar nodded her head in a bow. "What is your pleasure, Lady Penitent? Shall I return to Guallidurth and announce your birth?"

The Lady Penitent smiled, a feral gleam in her eye. "Yes. Do that."