

by Elaine Cunningham

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Daughter of the Drow
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Counselors and Kings

The Magehound
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Daughter
of the Drow

Starlight &
Shadows

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Elaine Cunningham



DAUGHTER OF THE DROW

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PRELUDE



There is a world where elves dance beneath the stars, where the footsteps of humanfolk trace restless paths in ever-widening circles. There is adventure to be had in this land, and magic enough to lure seekers and dreamers with a thousand secrets. Here there are wonders enough and more to fill a dragon's lifetime, and most who live in this world are content with the challenges life brings.

A few, however, remember the night-told stories that terrified and delighted them as children, and they seek out the whispered tales and grim warnings so they may disregard them. Intrepid or foolish, these hearty souls venture into forbidden places deep beneath the lands of their birth. Those who survive tell of another, even more wondrous, land, a dark and alien world woven from the fabric of dreams—and of nightmares. This is the Underdark.

In gem-studded caves and winding tunnels, turbulent waterways and vast caverns, the creatures of the Underdark make their homes. Beautiful and treacherous are these hidden realms, and perhaps chief among them is Menzoberranzan, fabled city of the drow.

Life in the dark elves' city has always been dominated by the worship of Lolth—the drow goddess of chaos—and by a constant striving for power and position. Yet in the shadows of the temples and the grand ruling houses, away from the Academy that teaches fighting and fanaticism, a complex and diverse people go about the business of life.

Here the drow, both noble and common, live, work, scheme, play, and—occasionally—love. Echoes of their common elven heritage can be seen in the artistry lavished on homes and gardens, the craftsmanship of their armor and ornaments, their affinity for magic and art, and their fierce pride in their fighting skills. Yet no surface-dwelling elf could walk among her dark cousins without feeling horror, and earning a swift and terrible death. For the drow, fey and splendid though they are, have been twisted by centuries of hatred and isolation into a macabre parody of their elven forebears. Stunning achievement and chilling atrocity: this is Menzoberranzan.

In a time some three decades before the gods walked the realms, the chaos and turmoil of the dark elves' city achieved a brief, simmering equilibrium. Wealthy drow took advantage of such intervals of relative calm to indulge their tastes for luxury and pleasure. Many of their leisure moments were spent in Narbondellyn, an elegant district of the city that boasted broad streets, fine homes, and expensive shops, all crafted of stone and magic. Faint light suffused the scene, most of it from the multicolored glow of faerie fire. All drow were able to conjure this magical light, and in Narbondellyn the use of it was particularly lavish. Faerie fire highlighted the carvings on the mansions, illuminated shop signs, baited merchandise with a tempting glow, and glimmered like embroidery on the gowns and cloaks of the wealthy passersby.

In the surface lands far above Menzoberranzan, winter was beginning to ebb, and the midday sun struggled to warm the harsh landscape. The Underdark did not know seasons and had no cycle of light and dark, but the drow still went about their business according to the ancient, forgotten rhythms of their light-dwelling ancestors. The magical warmth deep in the core of Narbondel—the natural stone pillar that served as the city's clock—was climbing toward

midpoint as the unseen sun reached its zenith. The drow could read the magic timepiece even in utter darkness, for their keen eyes perceived the subtlest heat patterns with a precision and detail a hunting falcon might envy.

At this hour the streets bustled with activity. Drow were by far the most numerous folk in Narbondellyn. Richly dressed dark elves wandered down the broad lane, browsed at the shops, or paused at chic cafes and taverns to sip goblets of spiced, sparkling green wine. City guards made frequent rounds mounted on large, harnessed lizards. Drow merchants whipped their draft animals—most often lizards or giant slugs—as they carted goods to market. And occasionally, the sea of activity parted to permit passage of a drow noble, usually a female riding in state upon a slave-carried litter or a magical, floating driftdisc.

A scattering of beings from other races also made their way through Narbondellyn: slaves who tended the needs of the dark elves. Goblin servants staggered after their drow mistresses, arms piled high with purchases. In one shop, bound with chains and prompted by three well-armed drow, a dwarf smithy grudgingly repaired fine weapons and jewelry for his captors. A pair of minotaurs served as house guards at one particularly impressive mansion, flanking the entrance and facing each other so their long, curving horns framed a deadly arch. Faerie fire limned the nine-foot creatures as if they were living sculpture. A dozen or so kobolds—small, rat-tailed relatives of goblins—lurked in narrow stone alcoves, and their bulbous eyes scanned the streets anxiously and continually. Every so often one of the creatures scurried out to pick up a bit of discarded string or clean up after a passing lizard mount. It was the kobolds' task to keep the streets of Narbondellyn absolutely free of debris, and their devotion to duty was ensured by an ogre taskmaster armed with whip and daggers.

One of these kobolds, whose back was lined with the recent marks of the ogre's whip, was busily engaged in polishing a public bench near the edge of the street. So anxious was the slave to avoid future punishment that he failed to notice the silent approach of a driftdisc. On the magical conveyance rode a drow female in splendid robes and jewels, and

behind her marched in eerie silence threescore drow soldiers, all clad in glittering chain mail and wearing the insignia of one of the city's ruling houses. The snake-headed whip at the female's belt proclaimed her rank as a high priestess of Lolth, and the haughty tilt of her chin demanded instant recognition and respect. Most of Narbondellyn's folk granted her both at once. They cleared a path for her entourage, and those nearest marked her passing with a polite nod or a bended knee, according to their station.

As the noble priestess glided down the street, reveling in the heady mixture of deference and envy that was her due, her gaze fell upon the preoccupied kobold. In an instant her expression changed from regal hauteur to deadly wrath. The little slave was not exactly blocking her path, but its inattention showed a lack of respect. Such was simply not tolerated.

The priestess closed in. When the driftdisc's heat shadow fell upon the laboring kobold, the little goblinoid grunted in annoyance and looked up. It saw death approaching and froze, like a mouse facing a raptor's claws.

Looming over the doomed kobold, the priestess drew a slender black wand from her belt and began to chant softly. Tiny spiders dripped from the wand and scurried toward their prey, growing rapidly as they went until each was the size of a man's hand. They swarmed over the kobold and quickly had it enmeshed in a thick, weblike net. That done, they settled down to feed. Webbing bound the kobold's mouth and muted its dying screams. The slave's agonies were brief, for the giant spiders sucked the juices from their victim in mere moments. In no more time than the telling might take, the kobold was reduced to a pile of rags, bones, and leathery hide. At a sign from the priestess, the soldiers marched on down the street, their silent elven boots further flattening the desiccated kobold.

One of the soldiers inadvertently trod on a spider that had lingered—hidden among the bits of rag—to siphon the last drop. The engorged insect burst with a sickening pop, spraying its killer with ichor and liquid kobold. Unfortunately for that soldier, the priestess happened to look over her shoulder

just as the spider, a creature sacred to Lolth, simultaneously lost its dinner and its life. The drow female's face contorted with outrage.

"Sacrilege!" she declaimed in a voice resonant with power and magic. She swept a finger toward the offending soldier and demanded, "Administer the law of Lolth, now!"

Without missing a step, the drow on either side of the condemned soldier drew long, razor-edged daggers. They struck with practiced efficiency. One blade flashed in from the right and gutted the unfortunate drow; the strike from the left slashed open his throat. In the span of a heartbeat the grim duty was completed. The soldiers marched on, leaving their comrade's body in a spreading pool of blood.

Only a brief silence marked the drow soldier's passing. Once it was clear the show was over, the folk of Narbondellyn turned their attention back to their own affairs. Not one of the spectators offered any challenge to the executions. Most did not show any reaction at all, except for the kobold slaves who scurried forward with mops and barrels to clear away the mess. Menzoberranzan was the stronghold of Lolth worship, and here her priestesses reigned supreme.

Yet the proud female's procession kept a respectful distance from the black mansion near the end of the street. Not a house like those known to surface dwellers, this abode was carved into the heart of a stalactite, a natural rock formation that hung from the cavern's ceiling like an enormous ebony fang. No one dared touch the stone, for on it was carved an intricate pattern of symbols that shifted constantly and randomly. Any part of the design could be a magic rune, ready to unleash its power upon the careless or unwary.

This stalactite manor was the private retreat of Gromph Baenre, the archmage of Menzoberranzan and the eldest son of the city's undisputed (if uncrowned) queen. Gromph, of course, had a room in House Baenre's fabulous fortress castle, but the wizard possessed treasures—and ambitions—that he wished to keep from the eyes of his female kin. So from time to time he retired to Narbondellyn, to enjoy his collection of magical items, to pore over his vast library of spellbooks, or to indulge himself with his latest mistress.

Perhaps even more than his obvious wealth and famed magical power, Gromph's ability to select his consorts was a testament to his status. In this matriarchal city, males had a decidedly subservient role, and most answered to the whims of females. Even one such as Gromph Baenre had to choose his playmates with discretion. His current mistress was the youngest daughter of a minor house. She possessed rare beauty, but little aptitude for clerical magic. The latter gave her low status in the city and raised her considerably in Gromph's estimation. The archmage of Menzoberranzan had little love for the Spider Queen goddess or her priestesses.

Here in Narbondellyn, however, he could for a time forget such matters. The security of his mansion was ensured by the warding runes outside, and the solitude of his private study protected by a magical shield. This study was a large high-domed chamber carved from black stone and lit by the single candle on his desk. To a drow's sensitive eyes, the soft glow made the gloomy cave seem as bright as noonday on the surface. Here the wizard sat, perusing an interesting book of spells he'd acquired from the rapidly cooling body of a would-be rival.

Gromph was old, even by the measures of elvenkind. He had survived seven centuries in treacherous Menzoberranzan, mostly because his talent for magic was matched by a subtle, calculating cunning. He had survived, but his seven hundred years had left him bitter and cold. His capacity for evil and cruelty was legendary even among the drow. None of this showed in the wizard's appearance, for thanks to his powerful magic he appeared young and vital. His ebony skin was smooth and lustrous, his long-fingered hands slender and supple. Flowing white hair gleamed in the candlelight, and his arresting eyes—large, almond-shaped eyes of an unusual amber hue—were fixed intently upon the spellbook.

Deep in his studies, the wizard felt, rather than heard, the faint crackle that warned him someone had passed through the magic shield. He raised his eyes from the book and leveled a deadly glare in the direction of the disturbance.

To his consternation, he saw no one. The magical shield was little more than an alarm, but only a powerful sorcerer could

pass through with an invisibility spell intact. Gromph's white, winged brows met in a frown, and he tensed for battle, his hand inching toward one of the deadly wands on his belt.

"Look down," advised a lilting, melodic voice, a voice that rang with mischief and childish delight.

Incredulous, Gromph shifted his gaze downward. There stood a tiny, smiling female about five years of age, easily the most beautiful child he had ever seen. She was a tiny duplicate of her mother, whom Gromph had recently left sleeping in a nearby suite of rooms. The child's face was angular, and her elven features delicate and sharp. A mop of silky white curls tumbled about her shoulders, contrasting with baby skin that had the sheen and texture of black satin. But most striking were the wide amber eyes, so like his own, that regarded him with intelligence and without fear. Those eyes stole Gromph's annoyance and stirred his curiosity.

This, then, must be his daughter. For some reason that thought struck a faint chord in the heart of the solitary, evil old drow. He had no doubt fathered other children, but that was of little concern to him. In Menzoberranzan, families were traced solely through the mother. This child, however, interested him. She had passed through the magical barrier.

The archmage pushed aside the spellbook. He leaned back in his chair and returned the child's unabashed scrutiny. He was not accustomed to dealing with children. Even so, his words, when he spoke, surprised him. "So, drowling. I don't suppose you can read?"

It was a ridiculous question, for the child was little more than a babe. Yet her brow furrowed as she considered the matter. "I'm not sure," she said thoughtfully. "You see, I've never tried."

She darted toward the open spellbook and peered down at the page. Too late, Gromph slapped a hand over her golden eyes, cursing under his breath as he did so. Even simple spells could be deadly, for magic runes attacked the untrained eye with a stab of searing light. Attempting to read an unlearned spell could cause terrible pain, blindness, even insanity.

Yet the little drow appeared to be unharmed. She wriggled free of the wizard's grasp and skipped over to the far side of

his desk. Stooping, she fished a scrap of discarded parchment from the wastebasket. Then she rose and pulled the quill from Gromph's prized bottle of everdark ink. Clutching the pen awkwardly in her tiny fist, she began to draw.

Gromph watched her, intrigued. The child's face was set in fierce concentration as she painstakingly scrawled some wavering, curly lines onto the parchment. After a few moments she turned, with a triumphant smile, to the wizard.

He leaned closer, and his eyes flashed incredulously from the parchment to the spellbook and back. The child had sketched one of the magic symbols! True, it was crudely drawn, but she had not only *seen* it, she had remembered it from a glance. That was a remarkable feat for any elf, at any age.

On a whim, Gromph decided to test the child. He held out his palm and conjured a small ball that glowed with blue faerie fire. The little drow laughed and clapped her hands. He tossed the toy across the desk toward her, and she deftly caught it.

"Throw it back," he said.

The child laughed again, clearly delighted to have found a playmate. Then, with a lightning-fast change of mood, she drew back her arm for the throw and gritted her teeth, preparing to give the effort her all.

Gromph silently bid the magic to dissipate. The blue light winked out.

And the next moment, the ball hurtled back toward him, almost too fast for him to catch. Only now the light was golden.

"The color of my eyes," said the little girl, with a smile that promised heartache to drow males in years to come.

The archmage noted this, and marked its value. He then turned his attention to the golden ball in his hand. So, the child could already conjure faerie fire. This was an innate talent of the fey drow, but seldom did it manifest so early. What else, he wondered, could she do?

Gromph tossed the ball again, this time lobbing it high up toward the domed ceiling. Hands outstretched, the precocious child soared up toward the glowing toy, levitating with an ease that stole the archmage's breath. She snatched the ball out of the air, and her triumphant laughter echoed through the study as she floated lightly back to his side. At

that moment, Gromph made one of the few impulsive decisions of his long life.

"What is your name, child?"

"Liriel Vandree," she returned promptly.

Gromph shook his head. "No longer. You must forget House Vandree, for you are none of theirs."

He traced a deft, magical pattern in the air with the fingers of one hand. In response, a ripple passed through the solid rock of the far wall. Stone flowed into the room like a wisp of smoke. The dark cloud writhed and twisted, finally tugging free of the wall. In an instant it compressed and sculpted itself into an elf-sized golem. The living statue sank to one knee before its drow master and awaited its orders.

"The child's mother will be leaving this house. See to it, and have her family informed that she met with an unfortunate accident on her way to the Bazaar."

The stone servant rose, bowed again, and then disappeared into the wall as easily as a wraith might pass through a fog bank. A moment later, the scream of an elven female came from a nearby chamber—a scream that began in terror and ended in a liquid gurgle.

Gromph leaned forward and blew out the candle, for darkness best revealed the character of the drow. All light fled the room, and the wizard's eyes changed from amber to brilliant red as his vision slipped into the heat-reading spectrum. He fastened a stern gaze upon the child.

"You are Liriel Baenre, my daughter and a noble of the first house of Menzoberranzan," he announced.

The archmage studied the child's reaction. The crimson glow of warmth drained from her face, and her tiny, pale-knuckled hands gripped the edge of the desk for support. It was clear the little drow understood all that had just occurred. Her expression remained stoic, however, and her voice was firm when she repeated her new name.

Gromph nodded approvingly. Liriel had accepted the reality of her situation—she could hardly do otherwise and survive—yet the rage and frustration of an untamed spirit burned bright in her eyes.

This was his daughter, indeed.

CHAPTER ONE

TIME OF TURMOIL



Ignoring the muted cries of pain coming from the far side of the tower chamber, Nisstyre parted the heavy curtains and gazed down at the marketplace. The dark elf's eyes, black and unreadable in the faint light of the chamber, swept with a measured, calculating gaze over the scene below.

The Bazaar was one of the busiest places in all of Menzoberranzan, and as heavily guarded as any matron's stronghold. Today even more soldiers than usual were in evidence, keeping the peace with brutal efficiency. As captain of the merchant band Dragon's Hoard, Nisstyre usually appreciated the diligence with which the marketplace was patrolled; it protected local business and made trade such as his possible. Today, however, Nisstyre's sharp eyes also saw opportunity of another kind.

The drow merchant's lips curved as he watched a pair of guards drag away the body of a peddler. The merchant's offense had been slight: he had been a little too vehement in his bartering, and his drow customer had settled the matter with a poisoned dagger. Usually Menzoberranzan's shoppers

welcomed such bargaining as the sport that it was. Today, however, the volatile drow were like dry tinder awaiting the slightest spark.

To the casual observer, the bustle of the marketplace might appear normal enough. Certain goods were selling extremely well; in fact, demand for staple foods, weapons, and spell components was almost frantic. Nisstyre had seen market days like this many times before, usually up on the surface, when folk settled in for a particularly brutal winter or an expected siege. To his eyes, Menzoberranzan's drow were clearly preparing for *something*. Nisstyre doubted they knew what this something might be, but he recognized their unease and he intended to exploit it.

The Fox, his contacts on the surface world called him, and Nisstyre delighted in the name. He rather resembled that feral animal, with his sharp-featured black face, elegantly pointed ears, and unusual mane of coppery hair. He possessed his namesake's cunning in full measure. Unlike most drow, Nisstyre carried no weapons and indeed was rather unskilled in their use. His weapons were his mind—which was as agile and treacherous as the sword of a drow warrior—and his magic.

Once, many years ago, Nisstyre had lived in Ched Nasad, a city much like Menzoberranzan. Although he'd been a mage of considerable promise, the matriarchal society and the tyranny of Lolth had put limits on his ambitions, limits he did not intend to accept. He left the city and discovered a talent for trading; soon he had fought his way to the head of his own merchant band. His far-flung trade interests brought him wealth, but not the power he craved. *That* had come as a divine gift, and the divinity in question was Vhaeraun, drow god of thievery and intrigue. Nisstyre had embraced his god's directive—to establish a drow presence and power on the surface world—with all his heart. For once this kingdom was established, he, Nisstyre, planned to serve Vhaeraun as a king. But first his subjects must be recruited from the ranks of the discontented drow.

In these days, discontent was rampant. Nisstyre's many informers, and his own sharp eyes, told him that. The drow of

Menzoberranzan were still staggering from the disruption of magic during the Time of Troubles, and from their defeat at the hands of Mithril Hall's dwarves. They had gone to war, full of confidence in Matron Baenre and her Lolth-inspired vision of conquest and glory. And they had failed utterly, driven back into the ground by a ragtag alliance of dwarves, gnomes, and humans—lesser beings all—and by the cruel light of dawn. In the aftermath of defeat, the stunned drow felt betrayed, adrift, and deeply afraid. The powers that had ruled them so mercilessly had also kept the city secure from the dangers of the wild Underdark.

But what remained of these ruling powers? The ancient Matron Baenre, who had led the city for centuries, had erred in pursuing a surface war and had paid for this error with her life. Several of the most powerful houses were in turmoil. Under normal conditions, most of the city's drow cared little which eight houses sat on the Ruling Council. Now, however, the coming struggle for power threatened them all. Many feared the weakened and distracted city was vulnerable to attack, perhaps by the nearby illithid community, or perhaps by another drow city.

In Nisstyre's opinion, these fears were not groundless. Fully half of Menzoberranzan's twenty thousand drow had marched upon Mithril Hall, and no one knew for certain how many had returned. Few houses gave an accurate accounting of their private forces at any time, and no one wished to admit to diminished strength during this time of turmoil.

It was no secret that several of the city's strongest weapon masters—the generals of the individual house armies—were dead or missing. Nor were the losses limited to the city's professional soldiers. Hundreds of common folk had served as foot soldiers, and only a few dozen had returned to take up their labors. Magnifying this problem was the tremendous loss of life among the races who served Menzoberranzan's drow as slaves. Kobolds, minotaurs, and goblinkin had been drafted as battle fodder, and they had fallen by the thousand to the axes of Mithril Hall's dwarves and to the swords and arrows of their allies. The tasks these slaves once performed were now left undone.

Other cultures might pool labor and talents to fill the void, but such was beyond the sensibilities of the proud drow. Status was all, and no one was willing to set aside hard-won position for the common good. Menzoberranzan's drow could not unite to win the war, and they would not band together in its aftermath.

And therein, Nisstyre mused, lay *his* problem, as well. These dark elves could be motivated only by promise of personal gain. Status, power: these were the lures needed to coax the proud drow into the light. Although life was hard in the Underdark, and Menzoberranzan was facing a new and frightening level of chaos, most drow saw no other option. All the surface world offered was defeat, disgrace, and the searing horror that was the sun.

With a deep sigh, the merchant let the curtain fall and turned away to observe a spectacle of a very different nature. A drow male, a commoner of middle years and unremarkable appearance, sat bound with chains to a heavy stone chair. Around him crackled a sphere of faint greenish light, and over him loomed a black-clad drow male who stood, chanting, with eyes closed and hands outstretched. Clerical magic flowed from each of the dark elf's fingers, sizzling like dark lightning into the chained drow. The prisoner writhed in anguish as his tormentor—a priest of Vhaeraun, patron of thieves—plundered his memories and stole his secrets.

Finally the priest nodded, satisfied. The globe of light dissipated with a faint pop, and the prisoner sagged against his chains, moaning softly in a mixture of pain and relief.

Strange treatment, perhaps, for a trusted informer, but Nisstyre had little choice. The price of misplaced trust was high. In Menzoberranzan, anyone suspected of worshiping any god but Lolth was summarily put to death. Those who followed other gods, or none at all, were wise to keep their opinions to themselves.

Yet now, with their city in turmoil and their most basic assumptions suspect, there were a few drow who dared whisper the name of Vhaeraun, and who dreamed of a life free of Menzoberranzan's limitations. These drow Nisstyre was quietly seeking out. Some were like this tortured elf, whose

hatred of matriarchal rule was so bitter that he would willingly endure anything to see it end. But most drow required more: something that could eradicate bitter memories and offer opportunities for power and status far beyond anything they now enjoyed.

In time, Nisstyre vowed, he would find what was needed to sway the drow of Menzoberranzan to his cause. After all, the Dragon's Hoard was famous for procuring anything, without regard for the cost.



Menzoberranzan was not the only land struggling with conflict and war. Far away, in a rugged land of hills and forests in the fareastern reaches of Faerûn, the people of Rashemen knew their own time of turmoil. Magic—the force that ruled and protected their land—had recently gone treacherously awry. Ancient gods and long-dead heroes had walked the land, and a nation of dreamers had been tormented by strange nightmares and waking frenzies. Most dangerous of all, the mystic defenses crafted by the magic of the ruling Witches had faltered, and the eyes of many enemies turned once again upon Rashemen.

Of all Rashemen's warriors, perhaps none had felt this disruption so much as Fyodor. He was a young man, a pleasant fellow who had shown a steady hand at the swordsmith's forge and a steady nerve in battle. He was a hard worker, but by all reports a bit of a dreamer even by Rashemi standards. Fyodor was as quick with a song or a story as any traveling bard, and his deep, resonant bass voice often rang out over the sound of a clanging hammer as he worked. Like most of his people, he appreciated the simple joys of life and he accepted its hardships with resigned calm. His gentle nature and ready smile seemed ill-matched with his fearsome reputation; Rashemen was renowned for the might and fury of her berserker warriors, among whom Fyodor was a champion.

Rashemen's famed warriors used a little-known magic ritual to bring on their battle rages. By some quirk of fate, a stray bit of this magic broke free and lodged itself in young

Fyodor. He had become a natural berserker, able to enter an incredible battle frenzy at will. At first his new skill had been hailed as a godsend, and when the Tuigan horde swept in from the eastern steppes Fyodor stood beside his berserker brothers and fought with unmatched ferocity.

All would have been well, but for another lingering memory of the time of twisted magic. Fyodor, the dreamer, continued to be haunted by the nightmares that had plagued so many Rashemi during the Time of Troubles. He told no one of this, for many of his people—simple peasants for the most part—had deeply ingrained superstitions about dreams and saw in every ale-induced night vision detailed meanings, portents of doom. Fyodor believed he knew what dreams were, and what they were not.

Tonight, however, he was not so sure. He'd emerged from a nightmare to find himself sitting bolt upright on his pallet, his heart racing and his body drenched with cold sweat. Fyodor tried without success to return to sleep, for he would face the Tuigan again tomorrow and would need all his strength. He had fought today and fought well—or so he had been told. His comrades had tipped their flasks to him and boasted of the number of barbarians who had fallen to Fyodor's black sword. Fyodor himself did not remember much of the battle. He remembered less each time he fought, and that disturbed him. Perhaps that was why this nightmare haunted him so.

In it, he had found himself in a deep forest, where he'd apparently wandered in the confused aftermath of a berserker frenzy. His arms, face, and body had been covered with stinging scratches. He had a vague memory of a playful tussle with his half-wild snowcat companion. In his dream, it slowly dawned on Fyodor that the game must have awakened his battle frenzy. He could not remember the outcome of battle, but his sword was wet to the hilt with blood still warm.

Awake, Fyodor knew the dream, although disturbing, was no prophecy of a battle to come. He had indeed tamed a snowcat once, but that had been many years ago, and they had parted in peace when the wild thing had returned to its nature. But the dream haunted him, for in it he read his deepest fear:

would the time come when the battle rage gripped him entirely? Would he, in a mad frenzy, destroy not only his enemies, but those he loved?

Again and again Fyodor saw the light of life fading from the cat's golden eyes. Try as he might, he could not banish the image, or thrust away the fear that this might somehow come to pass.

And as he awaited the light of dawn, Fyodor felt the heavy weight of fate upon his young shoulders, and wondered if perhaps the dream held prophecy, after all.



Shakti Hunzrin slumped deeper into the prow of the small boat and glared at the two young males laboring at the oars. They were her brothers, page princes whose names she only occasionally remembered. The three drow siblings were bound for the Isle of Rothe, a mossy islet in the heart of Donigarten Lake. House Hunzrin was in charge of most of the city's farming, including the herd of rothe maintained on the island, and Shakti's family responsibilities had increased fourfold in the tumultuous aftermath of war.

Yet the dark elf's mood was grim as she eyed her brothers, unblooded youths armed with only knives and pitchforks. Traveling with such a scant escort was not only dangerous, but insulting. And Shakti Hunzrin was ever alert for any insult, however slight.

The boat thudded solidly into the stone dock, jarring Shakti's thoughts back to the matter at hand. She rose to her feet, slapping aside the hands of her unworthy escorts and climbing out of the boat unaided. Donigarten might be off the traveled path for most drow, but here Shakti was at home and in command. She stood for a moment on the narrow dock, head thrown back, to admire the miniature fortress above.

The overseer's quarters loomed some hundred feet overhead, carved out of the solid stone that rose in a sheer wall from the water. Shakti's boat had docked at the island's only good landing site: a tiny cove unmarred by the sharp and rending rocks that surrounded the rest of the island. The

only way off the island was through the stone fortress, and the only way down to the dock was a narrow stairway carved into the rock wall. The water around the island was deep and cold, utterly black except for an occasional faint, luminescent glow from the creatures that lived in the still depths. From time to time, someone tried to swim these waters. So far, no one had survived the attempt.

Shakti ignored the stairs and levitated smoothly upward to the fortress door. Not only did this small flight grant her a more impressive entrance, but it also had a practical purpose. The proud drow, with their love of beauty, did not allow imperfect children to survive and had little patience for those who developed physical defects later in life. Shakti was extremely nearsighted and took great pains to conceal this fact. She did not trust her footing on the treacherous stairs, and was not certain which would be worse, the actual tumble down the steep incline, or having to explain why she had missed a step.

The overseer, a female from some lesser branch of the Hunzrin family tree, bowed deeply when Shakti walked into the vast center room. Shakti was somewhat mollified by this show of respect, and pleased to note that her brothers fell into guard position at either side of the entrance, as if she were already a respected matron.

She laid aside her own weapon—a three-tined pitchfork with a slender, rune-carved handle—and walked over to the far window. The scene beyond was not encouraging. Moss and lichen fields had been dangerously overgrazed, and the irrigation system was clogged and neglected. Rothe wandered aimlessly about, cropping here and there at the meager fodder. Their usually thick, long coats were ragged and lusterless. Shakti noted with dismay there would be little wool at shearing time. Even more distressing was the utter darkness that enshrouded the pasture.

“How many born so far this season?” Shakti snapped as she shrugged out of her *piwafwi*. One of her brothers leaped forward to take the glittering cloak.

“Eleven,” the overseer said in a grim tone. “Two of those stillborn.”

The priestess nodded; the answer was not unexpected. The rothe were magical creatures who called to prospective mates with faint, blinking lights. At this season, the rothe's courting rituals should have set the island aglow. The neglected animals were too weak and listless to attend to such matters.

But what else could she have expected? Most of the orcs and goblins who tended the rothe herds had been taken as battle fodder, without regard for the logical consequences. These were things the ruling priestesses did not heed, expecting meat and cheese to appear at their tables as if by magic. In their vaunting pride, they did not understand some things required not only magic, but management.

This Shakti understood, and this she could provide. She seated herself behind a vast table and reached for the ledger that kept the breeding records. A sharp, pleasurable feeling of anticipation sped her fingers as she leafed through the pages. Keeping this ledger had been her responsibility before she'd been sent off to the Academy, and no one in the city knew more about breeding rothe than she did. Perhaps no one else shared her enthusiasm for the subject, but the drow certainly enjoyed the fine meat, cheeses, and wool her expertise produced!

One glance at the current page dampened both her pride and her enthusiasm. In her years of absence, the records had been written in a small, faint hand. Shakti swore, squinting her eyes into slits in an attempt to read the careless writing. Her mood did not improve as she read.

While she had been exiled to Arach-Tinilith, studying for the priesthood and kowtowing to the Academy's mistresses, the herd had been sadly neglected. The rothe were highly specialized for life on the island, and carefully supervised breeding was essential.

Muttering curses, Shakti leafed to the back of the book, where the records of the slave stock were kept. These were considerably less detailed; in Shakti's opinion, the goblins could do whatever they liked provided their efforts produced enough new slaves. But according to the records, the birth rate among the usually fecund goblins was also dangerously

low. This Shakti could not afford. House Hunzrin could acquire more slaves by purchase or capture, but such things took time and money.

"How many goblins remain?" Shakti asked tiredly as she massaged her aching temples.

"About forty," responded the overseer.

Shakti's head jerked up as if pulled by a string. "That's all? Herders or breeders?"

"About half and half, but all of the goblins have been herding. To help keep order, the slaves have all been moved into the main hut."

That was more bad news, for it meant the goblins lacked both the time and the privacy needed to procreate. Not that goblins required much of either, Shakti noted with distaste as she turned back to the ledger. Once again, she cursed the fate that had taken her away from the work she loved. At least the war had accomplished one thing: the rules that kept students sequestered at the Academy had been relaxed, for many of the young fighters, wizards, and priestesses were needed at home. The students had unprecedented freedom to come and go, and permission to leave was not difficult to obtain from the distracted masters and matrons.

At that moment a drow male clad in the rough clothes of a common laborer burst into the room. He slammed the heavy door behind him and bolted it in place.

"The goblins are revolting!" he cried.

The voice was familiar to Shakti; it belonged to a handsome drone who provided her with an occasional dalliance. She recognized the tone: a gratifying mixture of fear and disbelief. The faint, coppery smell of his blood drifted toward her. She was familiar with that, too. But these pleasant memories registered only on the edges of Shakti's thoughts; her concern was with the herd and her nearsighted eyes remained fixed on the page. "Yes, they certainly are," she agreed absently.

The male fell back a step, his jaw slack with astonishment. He well knew that Shakti Hunzrin was capable of a good many things, but humor was simply not among them. For a moment even the shock of the goblin uprising paled.

Yet a second look at Shakti's peevish, squinting countenance convinced the drow of his error.

He brushed aside his momentary surprise and strode toward the desk. He thrust his wounded arm close to Shakti's eyes, so the myopic priestess could make out the marks of goblin fangs, the long red scores of their claws.

"The goblins are revolting," he repeated.

At last, he had her attention. "You've sent a message to the city guard?" Shakti demanded.

He hesitated, a bit too long. "We have."

"And? What did they say?"

"Donigarten has its own protections," the drow quoted tonelessly.

Shakti let out a burst of bitter laughter. Translated, that meant only that the ruling matrons had more important matters on their minds than the loss of a few goblin slaves and the premature slaughter of some of the rothe. The rest of the city was safe from any unpleasantness that might occur on the island, for the only egress from Donigarten was by boat, and the only boat was secured, docked behind the office. Which meant, of course, the goblins would attack this very room.

Shakti snatched up her magic pitchfork—the weapon of choice for the Hunzrin family—and acknowledged her fate with a grim nod. It had come to this: the house nobles were forced to do battle with their own slaves.

At once there was a scrabble at the door, the sound of goblins clawing at the stone with their small, taloned fingers. The Hunzrin princes flanked their sister and raised their unblooded weapons. Shakti, however, had no intention of waiting out the little monsters. It never occurred to her she might flee. The rothe herd must be cared for, and that was what she intended to do.

So Shakti leveled her pitchfork at the door. Bracing the weapon against her hip, she covered her eyes with her free hand. The tines of her weapon spat magic. Three lines of white flame streaked toward the door, and the heavy slab of stone exploded outward with a spray of fragments and a thunderous roar.

For several moments all was a confusion of blinding light, cries of pain, and smoke heavy with the smell of charred flesh. Then the surviving goblins rallied and came on. A half dozen of the creatures roiled into the room, brandishing crude weapons fashioned of rothe bone and horn bound together with dried sinew.

Shakti's youngest brother leaped forward, pitchfork leading. He impaled the nearest goblin and flung it over his shoulder like a forkful of straw. The wounded goblin soared, flailing and shrieking, out the back window. There was a long, fading wail as it tumbled toward the luminous creatures waiting below, then a splash, then silence. Wild grins twisted the Hunzrin brothers' faces, and they fell upon the remaining goblins, pitchforks flashing as they reaped the grim harvest.

Shakti stood back and allowed the boys their fun. When the first rush of goblins had been dealt with, she stepped into the blasted doorway to meet the next attack. A gangling, yellow-skinned female was the first to come. Holding high a bone dagger, the goblin flung itself at the waiting drow. Shakti coolly sidestepped the thrust and jabbed her pitchfork forward, stabbing through her attacker's uplifted arm.

At a word from the young priestess, magical lightning lit the pitchfork's tines and streaked into the goblin's body. With the first jolt, the slave's fierce scowl melted into an almost comical look of surprise. Lank strands of hair rose and writhed about its head like the snakes of a medusa, and the goblin's scrawny body shuddered convulsively. The lightning flowed on and on, and although the goblin shrieked and wailed in anguish, it could not pull free of Shakti's pitchfork. Another goblin grabbed the yellow female's imprisoned wrist—whether to rescue its companion or to steal its weapon was unclear—and it, too, was held fast by the lethal energy flow. Two more goblins, trying to edge past the shrieking couple into the room, were caught in the chain of malevolent magic.

With practiced ease, Shakti held her grip on the pitchfork and its magic. A few goblins managed to slip past the barrier of crackling energy and burning flesh. These were promp-

skewered by the Hunzrin brothers and flung to the creatures waiting silently below.

Finally no more goblins came. Shakti wrenched her pitchfork from the charred flesh of her first victim. The chain of goblins fell into a smoking pile. The drow walked over their bodies and through the door, her still-glowing weapon held before her like a spear.

A few goblins—far too few!—remained, cowering and creeping slowly away. Murderous rage rose in Shakti's heart as she surveyed her disgusting foe, and only with difficulty did she refrain from striking again. The goblins were thin, exhausted, in no better shape than the cattle. The drow's practical nature acknowledged that the slaves might have seen no option other than to revolt. Yet when Shakti spoke, necessity, not compassion, governed her words.

"It is clear," Shakti began in a cool, measured tone, "there are not enough slaves to tend the herd. But what have you gained by this foolish attack? How much harder will you have to work, now that you have foolishly depleted your numbers? But know this: the rothe herd comes first, and all of you will return to your duties at once. New slaves will be purchased and all successfully bred goblin females will be granted extra food and rest privileges; in the meanwhile you will adhere to a strict schedule of labor." She hefted her pitchfork meaningfully. "Go now."

The surviving goblins turned and fled. The priestess turned to her brothers. Their eyes gleamed with excitement from their first battle. She knew just how to deepen that sparkle.

"The patrol of fighters from Tier Breche should have stopped this little rebellion before it got this far. If any of them are still alive, they've got no right to be. You, Bazherd. Take my pitchfork and lead the hunt."

The young male leaped forward to claim the powerful magic weapon. Shakti's lips firmed in a smile as she handed it over. Any blow against the drow Academy pleased her. She had no quarrel with Tier Breche in general, and usually conceded that the academies did well enough training fighters and wizards. But noble females were sent to the clerical school, and Shakti's resentment of her lot was deep and implacable. Oh,

she would become a priestess, for that was the path to power in Menzoberranzan. But if another way presented itself, Shakti Hunzrin would be the first to take it.



At the appointed hour, every wizard in Menzoberranzan worthy of the name slipped away to a private spot to answer an unprecedented summons. One by one, each took a vial bearing the symbol of House Baenre, broke the seal, and watched as mist poured forth and shaped itself into a shimmering doorway. And one by one, the drow wizards stepped through these magic doorways. Each one emerged into the same large, lavishly appointed hall, perhaps somewhere in Menzoberranzan, perhaps in some distant plane. All the wizards knew for certain was that this was Gromph Baenre's audience chamber, and they had little choice but to attend. Even House Xorlarrin, famous for its wizardly might, was there in force. Seven Xorlarrin wizards were masters in the Sorcere, the school of magic; all seven sat uneasily on the luxurious chairs provided them.

As the wizards awaited the city's archmage, they eyed their colleagues with wary interest. Some had not seen each other since they'd trained together at Sorcere, for wizards hoarded their magical secrets to serve the power and prestige of their individual houses. Status was all, even among the city's mages. Glittering house insignias were much in evidence, and those whose heritage did not grant such a display settled for enspelled jewelry. Hundreds of gems flickered in the dim light of the hall, their colors reflected in the glittering black folds of the *piwafwi* cloaks worn by all. Some of the wizards were accompanied by their familiars: giant spiders, deep bats, magically altered beasts, even imps or other creatures of the Abyss. The large room filled up quickly, yet the silence seemed only to deepen, to become more profound, as each wizard entered the magic chamber.

When the last chair had been taken, Gromph Baenre stepped out of nothingness and into the center of the room. As usual, Gromph was garbed in the glorious cloak of the

archmage, a many-pocketed *piwafwi* that reputedly held more magical treasures and weapons than most drow wizards saw in a lifetime. Two magical wands were prominently displayed on his belt, and no one doubted many more were hidden about his person. Gromph's most powerful weapons, however, were his beautiful, tapered hands—so dexterous in weaving spells of death—and the brilliant mind that had brought him to the height of wizardly power . . . and doomed him to a life of discontent. In many other cultures, one such as he would be a king. And of all Menzoberranzan's wizards, only Gromph had the power to call such a meeting.

"It is not customary for the wizards of this city to gather in one place," Gromph began, speaking aloud the thoughts of all present. "Each of us serves the interests of his own House, according to the wisdom of his matron mother. This is as it should be," he said emphatically. The archmage paused and lifted a single eyebrow, perhaps to spice his assertion with a dash of irony.

"Yet, such alliances are not unknown. The city Sshamath is ruled by a coalition of drow wizards. We of Menzoberranzan could surely do as well if the need arises."

Murmurs, ranging from the excited to the appalled, filled the magical chamber. Gromph held up a hand, a simple gesture that commanded—and received—instant silence.

"*If the need arises,*" he repeated sternly. "The Ruling Council will see to the troubles of the city. Our task is to wait and watch."

Again he paused, and all present heard the silent message. The Ruling Council—the matron mothers of the eight most powerful houses—was little more than a memory. Matron Baenre, the most powerful drow in the city, was no more. Triel, her eldest surviving daughter, would assume the leadership of House Baenre, but she was young and would almost certainly face challengers. Recently, the third-ranked house had been utterly destroyed by creatures of the Abyss, but not before its renegade leader had slain the matron and the heir of the fourth house. Auro'pol Dyrr, the leader of the fifth-ranked house, had fallen during the war. Since orderly succession was a rarity, each of these houses might well be ravaged by internal strife before new matrons finally took

power. These matrons would then face challenges on all sides. Seldom in the long history of Menzoberranzan had so many Council seats been open at one time, and at least a dozen houses could be counted on to go to war in an attempt to advance their status. Overall, the struggle to restore the Ruling Council could take years—years the faltering city could not spare.

"You know the problems Menzoberranzan faces as well as I do," Gromph continued softly. "If the city falls into anarchy, we wizards may well be her best chance of survival. We must stand ready to assume power."

Or to seize it.

These words were also left unspoken, but every drow in the room heard them, and marked them well.