



B.A. Salvatore's
WAR OF THE SPIDER QUEEN BOOK III

Condemnation



RICHARD BAKER



R. A. SALVATORE'S
War of the Spider Queen Book III: Condemnation

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Godspeed, Dad.



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The food was gone and with it the warmth. All was hollow and empty, save the call to break free. That came most insistently, a subtle urging growing into desperation.

Eight tiny legs answered that imploring call. Eight tiny weapons struck at the concave wall. Battering and tearing, following the lighter shade of gray in this dark place.

A hole appeared in the leathery surface and the eight legs coordinated their attacks at that very spot, sensing weakness. Weakness could not be tolerated. Weakness had to be exploited, immediately and without mercy.

One by one, ten by ten, a thousand by a thousand, a million by a million, tiny legs waved in the misty space between universes for the first time, tearing free of their circular prisons. Driven by hunger and ambition, by fear and an instinctive vileness, the millions of arachnids fought their first battle against a pliable, leathery barrier. Hardly a worthy adversary, but they fought with an urgency wrought of knowing that the first to emerge would hold a great advantage, knowing that they—all of them—were hungry.

And knowing there was nothing to eat but each other.

The warmth of the egg sac was gone, devoured. The quiet moments of solitude, of awakening, of first sense of consciousness, were past. The walls that had served as shelter and protection became an impediment and nothing more. The soft shell was a barricade against food, against necessary battle, against satiation on so many levels.

Against power.

And that, most of all, could not be tolerated by these blessed and cursed offspring. So they fought and tore and scabbled and scrambled to get out.

To eat.

To climb.

To dominate.

To kill.

To become. . . .

C h a p t e r



O n e

Streams of dust and sand hissed over old red stone. Halisstra Melarn drew her *piwafwi* close around her, and shivered in the bitter wind. The night was cold, colder than the deeps and caverns far below the world's surface, and the wind moaned mournfully through the weathered ruins, crouching dead and silent in arid hills. Once a great city stood there, but no more. Shattered domes and tottering colonnades whispered of a proud and skillful race, long gone. Vast ramparts still stood against the desert wind, and the broken stumps of towers reached for the heavens.

In different circumstances Halisstra might have spent days wandering the silent ways of the mighty ruins and pondering their long-lost tale, but at the moment a far greater and more terrifying mystery held her rapt with awe and horror. Above the black silhouettes of crumbling towers and crooked walls, a sea of stars glittered like cold hard ice in a black and limitless sky.

She'd heard of such things all her life, of course. Intellectually she understood the concept of an open sky in place of a cavern roof, and the

ludicrously distant pinpricks of light overhead, but to sit out in the open beneath such a sight and gaze on it with her own eyes . . . that was something else indeed. In her two hundred years she had never ventured more than a few dozen miles from Ched Nasad, and she had certainly never come within miles of the surface. Very few dark elves from the City of Shimmering Webs had. Like most drow, they largely ignored the world outside the endless intrigues, scheming, and remorseless self-interest of life in Ched Nasad.

She stared at the glittering lights above and bitterly savored the irony. The pinprick diamonds and the vast night sky were real. They had existed for some unimaginably long time, long before she had happened to look up in that forlorn, freezing desert and notice them, and they would doubtless continue long after she was gone. But Ched Nasad, the city of her birth, the city whose rivalries and loyalties and fortunes had completely absorbed all of her intellectual abilities and attention for her entire life, was no more. Not a day ago she had stood on the high balconies of House Nasadra and stared down in horror at burning stone and falling castles, witness to her city's catastrophic destruction. Ched Nasad, with its wondrous webs of stone and darkly beautiful fairy-castles clinging to the chasm walls—Ched Nasad, with its awesome arrogance and hubris, its darkly beautiful noble houses and its ceaseless veneration of the Spider Queen herself—Ched Nasad, the center of Halisstra's existence, was no more.

With a sigh, Halisstra tore her gaze away from the sky overhead and stood. She was tall for a drow, almost five and a half feet in height, and slender as a rapier. While her features lacked the alluring, almost rapacious sensuality many highborn drow women possessed, she was beautiful in an austere and measured manner. Even after hours of furious fighting and desperate struggle to escape fire, foe, and calamity, Halisstra moved with cold, absentminded gracefulness, the calm self-possession of a woman born to be a queen.

Sand pelted against the jet-black steel of her armor, while the wind caught at her cloak and tried to tug it away from her. Halisstra knew well the damp, chill motions of air in vast spaces under the earth, but the desert city was scoured by a relentless, stinging blast that buffeted her from a different direction moment to moment. She put the wind, the stars, and the ruins out of her mind, and silently drifted back to the others. They

huddled in the lee of a great wall in a small court studded with broken pillars. At one end of the plaza the empty remnants of a lordly palace stood. No furnishings had survived the centuries of sand and weathering that had scoured the city, but the colonnades and courts, high chambers and proud halls, indicated that the building had once been the residence of a family of some power in the city, perhaps even the rulers or lords of the place. Not far away within the sand-blasted walls stood a blank stone portal, an archway of strange black stone, that housed a magical gate leading back to Ched Nasad. Through that portal Halisstra and the others had made their escape from the sack of the drow city.

She paused and studied her six companions. Danifae, her lady-in-waiting, knelt gracefully at one side, her perfect face composed, eyes closed serenely. She might have been dozing lightly, or simply awaiting the next turn of events with equanimity. Fifteen years before, Danifae, a captive priestess from the city of Eryndlyn, had been gifted to Halisstra as a maidservant. Young, beautiful, and clever, Danifae had resigned herself to bondage with surprising grace. She had no choice, really—a silver locket over Danifae's heart enslaved the girl with a powerful enchantment. What passed behind those lustrous eyes and perfect features not even Halisstra could guess, but Danifae had served her as faithfully and as competently as her binding demanded, and perhaps even more than that. Halisstra found herself comforted to no small degree by the simple fact that Danifae was still with her.

Her remaining five companions did not comfort her in the least. The events of Ched Nasad's last days had thrown Halisstra in with a party of travelers from distant Menzoberranzan, a city that had in the course of time been Ched Nasad's enemy, rival, trading partner, and master. Quentel Baenre sat wrapped in her own thoughts, her cloak pulled close against the chill. A sister priestess of the Spider Queen, Quentel was a scion of House Baenre, the leading clan of Menzoberranzan. Of course, Quentel was no friend of Halisstra's simply because they both served as priestesses of Lolth; most drow noblewomen served the Spider Queen and spent their lives feuding for station and preeminence in her worship. That was the way of things for the drow, the pattern dictated by Lolth. If it pleased the Spider Queen to reward those who proved most ruthless, most ambitious in her service, then what else could a dark elf do?

Quenthel was in many ways the epitome of drow womanhood, a matriarch in the making who combined piety in Lolth's service with physical beauty, strength of character, and absolute ruthlessness. Of the five travelers from Menzoberranzan, she was by far the most dangerous to Halisstra. Halisstra, too, was the daughter of a matron mother and a priestess of Lolth, so she knew well that she would have to watch Quenthel closely. For the moment, they were allies, but it would not take much for Quenthel to decide that Halisstra was more useful as a follower, as a captive, or simply dead.

Quenthel commanded the loyalty of the hulking Jeggred, a draegloth of her own House Baenre. The draegloth was half-demon, half-drow, the son of Quenthel's elder sister and some unnamed denizen of the Abyss. Jeggred towered over the other drow, a four-armed creature of bestial aspect who held a murderous violence in check at all times. His face was drow-like, and he walked upright, but a gleaming silver pelt covered his dark skin at chest, shoulders, and loins, and his claws were as long and as sharp as daggers. Halisstra didn't fear Jeggred, as the draegloth was Quenthel's creature and would not lay a finger on her without his mistress's express command. He might be the instrument of Halisstra's death, if Quenthel chose to order it, but there was no point in regarding him as anything other than Quenthel's weapon.

The wizard Pharaun intrigued Halisstra greatly. The study of arcane lore was something that, like swordplay, was traditionally left to males. A powerful wizard merited a certain amount of respect despite the fact that he was male. In fact, Halisstra knew of more than one instance in which the matron mother of an important house ruled only with the consent of the powerful male wizards of the family, a situation that had always struck her as perverse and dangerous. Pharaun acted as if he commanded that kind of power and influence. Oh, he deferred to Quenthel quickly enough, but never without a sardonic smile or an insincere remark, and at times his disrespectful carriage verged on outright rebellion. That meant that he was either a complete fool—hardly likely, since he'd been hand-picked in Menzoberranzan for the dangerous journey to Ched Nasad—or he was powerful enough to hold his own against the natural tyranny of a noble female like Quenthel. Pharaun struck Halisstra as a potentially critical ally against Quenthel, if it turned out that she and Quenthel could not reach an understanding.

It seemed to Halisstra that Ryld Argith was to Pharaun what Jeggred was to Quenthel. A powerfully built weapons master whose stature matched Halisstra's own, Ryld was a fighter of tremendous skill. Halisstra had seen that for herself in the escape from Ched Nasad. Like most males, he maintained a properly deferential demeanor in Quenthel's presence. That was a good sign to Halisstra. Ryld might easily transfer loyalties to another woman of high birth in a pinch. She couldn't count on Ryld turning against either Pharaun or Quenthel, but pure drow were less steadfast in their loyalties than the average draegloth. . . .

The last and the least of the party from Menzoberranzan was the scout, Valas Hune. A small, furtive male, he said little and observed much. Halisstra had seen his type before. Useful enough in the sort of tasks they excelled at, they wanted nothing to do with the machinations of priestesses and matriarchs and did all they could to stay well clear of the politics of the great Houses. At the moment, Valas was crouched over a small pile of dry brush, working to start a fire.

"Is there any chance we will be pursued?" Ryld said into the icy wind.

"I doubt it," Quenthel muttered. "The whole House fell after we used the portal. How could we be followed?"

"It is not impossible, dear Quenthel," Pharaun replied. "A competent wizard might be able to discern where the portal led to, even though it was destroyed. He might even be able to repair the portal sufficiently to make use of it. I suppose it depends on how badly we are missed in Ched Nasad." He glanced up at Halisstra and asked, "What about it, my lady? Don't you think it likely that your kinfolk will hold us to blame for the unfortunate events of the last few hours? Won't they go to great lengths to exact vengeance upon us?"

Halisstra looked at him. The question made no sense to her. Who could possibly be left to fix blame for the duergar attack on the party of Menzoberranyr? House Melarn had fallen, and House Nasadra as well. She became aware of a great weariness in her body, a leaden feeling in her heart and a fog in her mind, and she allowed herself to sink to the sand across from the others.

"Anyone still in Ched Nasad has greater things to concern herself with than your whereabouts," she managed.

“I think the lady has put you in your place, Pharaun,” Ryld said, laughing. “The world and all within it do not revolve around you, you know.”

Pharaun accepted the jibe with a sardonic grin and a gesture of self-deprecation.

“Just as well,” he said lightly. He turned to Valas, who patiently struck sparks at his pile of brush. “Are you sure that’s wise? That fire will be visible from quite a distance.”

“It’s not much later than midnight, unless I miss my guess,” the scout replied without looking up from his task. “If you think it’s cold now, wait until the hours before dawn. We need fire, regardless of the risk.”

“How do you know how late it is,” Quenthel asked, “or how cold it’ll get?”

Valas struck a spark and quickly crouched to shelter it from the wind. In a few moments, the brush crackled and burned brightly. The scout fed it carefully with more brush.

“You see the pattern of stars to the south?” he said. “Six of them that look a little like a crown? Those are winter stars. They rise early and set late this time of year. You’ll note that they’re near the zenith.”

“You’ve traveled on the surface before,” Quenthel observed.

“Yes, Mistress,” Valas said, but did not elaborate.

“If it’s the middle of the night, what is that glow in the sky?” she asked. “Surely that must be the dawn.”

“A late moonrise.”

“It’s not the sun coming up? It’s so bright!”

Valas looked up, smiled coldly, and said, “If that was the sun, Mistress, the stars would be fading from half the sky. Trust me, it’s the moon. If we stay here, you’ll come to know the sun soon enough.”

Quenthel fell silent, perhaps chagrined by her mistake. Halisstra didn’t hold it against her—she had made the same mistake herself.

“That raises an excellent question,” said Pharaun. “Presumably, we do not wish to stay here for very long. So, then, what shall we do?”

He looked deliberately at Quenthel Baenre, challenging her with his question.

Quenthel didn’t rise to the bait. She gazed off at the silver glow in the east, as if she hadn’t heard the question. Moon shadows faint as ghosts began to grow from weathered walls and crumbling columns, so dim that

only the eyes of drow accustomed to the gloom of the Underdark could perceive them. Quenthel reached down to the sand beside her and let a handful run between her fingers, watching the way the wind swept away the silver stream. For the first time, it occurred to Halisstra that Quenthel and the other Menzoberranyr might feel something of the same weariness, the same desolation, that lay over her own heart, not because they felt her loss, but because they understood that they had witnessed *a* loss, a great and terrible one.

The silence stretched out for a long time, until Pharaun shifted and opened his mouth as if to speak again. Quenthel spoke before he could, her voice cold and scornful.

“What shall we do, Pharaun? We shall do whatever I *decide* we should do. We are exhausted and wounded, and I have no magic to restore our strength and heal our wounds.” She grimaced, and let the rest of the sand slip through her fingers. “For now, rest. I will determine our course of action tomorrow.”



Hundreds of miles from the desert ruins, another dark elf stood in another ruined city.

This was a drow city, a jutting bulwark of black stone that thrust out from the wall of a vast, lightless chasm. In arrangement it had once been something like a mighty fortress built upon a great rocky hilltop, only turned on its side to glower out over an empty space where foul winds from the unplumbed abyss below howled up into unseen caverns above. Though its turrets and spires leaned boldly out over a horrifying precipice, the place did not seem frail or precarious in any sense. Its massive pier of rock was one of the bones of the world, a thick spar rooted so securely in the chasm wall that nothing short of the unmaking of Toril would tear it loose.

Those few scholars who remembered the place knew it as Chaulssin, the City of Wyrmsadows, and even most of them forgot why the city was called that. In the lightless fortress on the edge of an abyss, the shadows themselves lived. Inky pools of midnight blacker than a drow’s heart

curled and flowed from tower to tower. Whispering darkness slithered like a gigantic, hungry dragon in and about the needle-like spires and the open-sided galleries of the dead city. From time to time the living shadows swallowed portions of the city for centuries, drawing a palace or a temple deep into a cold place beyond the circles of the world.

Nimor Imphraezl climbed deliberately through Chaulssin's deserted galleries, seemingly oblivious to the living black curtains that danced and writhed in the city's dark places. The maddening howl of the endless hurricane rising up past the city walls ripped at his cloak and sent his long silver hair streaming from his head, but he paid it no mind. This was his place, his refuge, and its perils and madness simply familiar features undeserving of his attention. Nimor wore the shape of a slim, almost boyish dark elf, which was to say that he was short of stature and slender as a reed. The top of his head would barely reach the nose of a typical female, and any female with a little height to her would tower over him head and shoulders.

Despite his graceful build, Nimor virtually radiated power. His small frame seemed to burst with a precise strength and lethal quickness far out of proportion to his body. His face was narrow but handsome, almost beautiful, and he carried himself with the supreme arrogance of a noble-born drow who feared nothing in his path. It was a part he played well, being a drow of a high House, a prince of his ruined city. If he was something else, something more, well . . . those few dark elves who lived there with him were much the same.

Nimor reached the end of the gallery and turned inward, climbing up a grand stairway cut through the heart of the monolithic spur to which Chaulssin clung. The cacophony of the winds outside faded quickly to a distant but deep whispering, sibilant and penetrating. There was no place one could go within Chaulssin to escape the sound. He set his hand on the hilt of his rapier and followed the spiraling black steps up into a great dark chamber, a vaulted cathedral of shadows in the heart of the city. Flickering torches of everburning fire in bronze sconces cast faint, ruddy pools of light along the ribbed walls, streaks of red that faded into the blackness of the vault overhead. Up there the shadows were close indeed, a roiling well of blackness that even Nimor's eyes could not penetrate.

"Nimor. You are late."

Standing in a circle in the center of the room, the seven Patron Fathers of the Jaezred Chaulssin turned as one to watch Nimor approach. On the far side of the circle stood Patron Grandfather Mauzzkyl, a hale old dark elf with broad shoulders and a deep chest, his hair thinning to a sharp widow's peak.

"The Patron Fathers do not wait on the pleasure of the Anointed Blade of the Jaezred Chaulssin," Mauzzkyl said.

"Revered Grandfather, my delay was unavoidable," Nimor replied.

He joined the circle in the place that had been left for him, offering no obeisance and expecting none from the others. As the Anointed Blade he answered only to the Patron Grandfather, and in fact stood higher among the Jaezred Chaulssin than any of the Patron Fathers except Mauzzkyl.

"I am lately come from Menzoberranzan," he added, "and tarried as long as I could to observe events before departing."

"How stand matters there?" asked Patron Father Tomphael. He was slender and rakish, much like Nimor in appearance, but he preferred the robes of a wizard to the mail of a fighter, and he possessed a streak of caution that sometimes verged on cowardice. "How does our revolt fare?"

"Not as well as I might like, but about as well as I expected," admitted Nimor. Tomphael's divinations had no doubt revealed that much. Did the Patron Father hope to catch the Anointed Blade concealing a failure? Nimor almost smiled at the simplicity of it. "The slaves were crushed easily enough. Gromph Baenre took an interest in things, and his agents seem to have destroyed or driven off our illithilich friend. On the positive side, we did expose something of the spider-kissers' weakness to the common Menzoberranyr, which is promising, and the priestesses obliged us by using a significant amount of their hoarded magic to destroy their own rebellious slaves. The city is weakened thereby."

"You might have taken a more direct hand in the affair," said Patron Xorthaul, who wore the black mail of a priest. "If you had slain the archmage's lackeys—"

"The revolt we sponsored still would have been crushed, and I would have put them on their guard too soon," Nimor interrupted. "Remember, Patron Xorthaul, this was never intended to be anything other than a simple feint, easily deflected, by which we might assay the real strength

of the matron mothers of Menzoberranzan. The next blow will be the one that beats down their guard and slices deep into flesh." He decided to turn the topic and set someone else on the defensive. "As I am the last to arrive, I have no news of how affairs proceed in the other cities. What of Eryndlyn? Or Ched Nasad?"

Cold smiles twisted cruel faces. Nimor blinked. It wasn't often that the patron fathers encountered an event in which they could collectively take pleasure. Grandfather Mauzzkyl himself broke the news.

"Eryndlyn proceeds much as we expected—Patron Father Tomphael brought tidings not dissimilar to your own—but Ched Nasad. . . . From Ched Nasad, Patron Father Zammzt returns in triumph."

"Really?" drawled Nimor, impressed despite himself.

He restrained a hot flash of jealousy and turned to face Zammzt, a dark elf of such unremarkable appearance he might have been a lowly armorer or swordsmith, a common artisan barely a step above a slave. Zammzt merely folded his arms across his chest and inclined his head in recognition of Grandfather Mauzzkyl's remark.

"What happened?" asked Nimor. "Ched Nasad should not have fallen so easily."

"As it happened, Anointed Blade, the stonefire bombs your duergar allies provided us had a devastating effect on the calcified webs upon which Ched Nasad was built," Zammzt said, doubtless feigning his humility. "Just as flame consumes a cobweb, the stonefire devoured the very structure of the city. With their castles and their palaces plummeting to the bottom of the cavern like burning sparks of paper, the Ched Nasadans could organize no real defense at all. No strong point of any significance survived the fires, and few of the House armies escaped from the conflagrations to contest the cavern."

"What is left of the city?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. A few isolated districts and outlying structures relegated to side caverns survived the fire. Of the city's people, I would guess that half perished in the fall and roughly one-third fled into the outer tunnels, where they will doubtless come to a variety of bad ends. Most of the survivors belong to those minor Houses allied with us, or minor Houses who were quick to appreciate the new order of things in the city."

Nimor stroked his chin and said, "So, from a city of twenty thousand, only three thousand remain?"

"A little less, after the slaves fled the city," Zammzt replied, allowing himself a fierce grin. "Of the spider-kissing females, nothing remains."

"Likely some number of Lolth priestesses escaped with those who fled into the Underdark," Nimor mused. "They won't all die in the tunnels. Still, that is great news, Patron Father. We have freed our first city from Lolth's dominion. Others are sure to follow."

Patron Father Xorthaul, the mail-clad priest, snorted in dissent.

"What's the point of removing the Lolth-worshippers from a city if you must level the city to do it?" he asked. "We may rule Ched Nasad now, but all we rule is a smoking chasm and a few dispossessed wretches."

Mauzzkyl shifted his weight and said sharply, "That does not matter, Xorthaul. We have spoken before of the costs of our efforts. Decades, even centuries of misery are nothing if we achieve our ends. Our master is patient." The revered grandfather offered a hard, cruel grin. "We have in two short months accomplished something our fathers among the Jazred Chaulssin have worked toward for centuries. I would gladly repeat a dozen Ched Nasads all across the Underdark if it succeeded in breaking the Spider Queen's stranglehold over our race. Ched Nasad may be in ruins, but when the city rises again it will rise in our image, its society molded by our beliefs and guided by our secret hand. We are not mere assassins or anarchists, Xorthaul, we are the cold and deliberate hand that culls the weak, the blade that sculpts history."

The collected dark elves nodded assent. Mauzzkyl turned to face Nimor.

"Nimor, my Anointed Blade, Menzoberranzan cries out for the cleansing fire that has purged Ched Nasad. Do not fail in this."

"Revered Grandfather, I assure you that I will not," Nimor said. "I have already prepared my next move. I have reached an understanding with one of the great Houses. They will support us, but they require a demonstration of our resolve and competence. I am reasonably confident that I can oblige them. Within days, one House of Menzoberranzan will be lacking a matron mother and another will be ensnared in our net."

Mauzzkyl smiled in cold approval and said, "I wish you good hunting, then, Anointed Blade."

Nimor bowed once, and turned to leave the circle. Behind him, he could hear the patron fathers dispersing, each to return to his own hidden House in cities scattered over thousands of miles through the Underdark. Secret cabals of the Jazred Chaulssin existed in at least one minor House of most drow cities. Each patron father ruled absolutely over a conspiracy of faith and gender that spanned generations, centuries, and the formidable hatred of one drow for another. The glaring exception was Menzoberranzan. There, the old Matron Baenre who had ruled absolutely for so long had never allowed the assassin House to gain a foothold. While eight patron fathers returned to cities where there were dozens of loyal killers and priests of Lolth-hating gods at their command, Nimor Imphraezl went alone to Menzoberranzan to resume the destruction of a city.



Sunrise was splendid and terrible. For an hour or more before dawn it had been growing lighter, as the stars paled in the rose-streaked sky and the frigid blast of desert wind slackened toward a fitful calm. Halisstra waited for it, watching from the top of a rambling, half-buried wall. Long before the sun broke over the horizon she was astounded by how far she could see, picking out dark jagged mountains that might have been ten miles or a hundred miles away. When the sun finally rose, it was like a fountain of liquid gold exploding across the barren landscape, in the space of a moment blinding Halisstra completely. She gasped and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, which ached from that single brief glimpse as if someone had shoved white daggers into her head.

“That was unwise, my lady,” murmured Danifae from close by. “Our eyes were not meant to look on such a sight. You might do yourself an injury . . . and without Lolth’s favor, it may prove difficult to heal such a thing.”

“I wished to see a dawn,” Halisstra said.

She turned away from the light of day and shaded her eyes, then dropped lightly to the sand in the shade of the great wall. In shadow she could tolerate the brilliance of the sun, but what would it be like in the

middle of the day? Would they be able to see at all, or would they all be blinded completely?

“Once,” she said, “our ancestors gazed on the daylight world without fear of the sun. They walked unafraid beneath the sky, beneath the fires of day, and the darkness was what they feared. Can you imagine such a thing?”

Danifae offered a demure smile that did not reach her eyes. Halisstra knew the look well. It was an expression the maid used to indulge her mistress, agreeing to a remark to which she had no response. Danifae indicated the ruined palace and its courts with a tilt of her head.

“Mistress Baenre has called Pharaun and the others to attend her,” the battle captive said. “I believe she means to decide what to do next.”

“She sent you for me?” Halisstra asked absently.

“No, Mistress.”

Halisstra looked up sharply. Danifae offered a shy shrug.

“I thought you might wish to be present anyway.”

“Indeed,” replied Halisstra.

She smoothed her cloak and glanced around once more at the crumbling ruins that stretched as far as she could see. In the long shadows of sunrise, the wall tops glowed orange, and pools of blackness lay behind them. Since the wind had died, Halisstra became aware of a sense of watchfulness, of old hostility perhaps, waiting somewhere in the walls and broken domes.

The two women picked their way back to the party’s camp in the stone-flagged courtyard and quietly joined the discussion. Quenthel glanced at them as they approached, but kept her attention on the others.

“We have learned that the priestesses of Ched Nasad have lost Lolth’s favor, just as we have. We did not learn why. We learned that Houses allied to us through trade and blood had elected to appropriate our much-needed property for their own, turning their backs on us. We failed to restore the flow of trade to Menzoberranzan—”

“A failure for which we can hardly be held accountable,” Pharaun interrupted. “The city is completely destroyed. The status of Baenre trade interests in Ched Nasad is now moot.”

Quenthel continued as if the wizard had not spoken, “Finally, we find ourselves in some godsforsaken portion of the World Above, at some unknown distance from our home, low on provisions and stranded in a hostile desert. Have I accurately summed up events?”

Valas shifted uncomfortably and said, "All but the last, I think. I believe that we are somewhere in the desert known as Anauroch, in fact in its northwestern portions. If I am correct, Menzoberranzan lies perhaps five hundred miles west of us, and somewhat . . . down, of course."

"You have been here before?"

"No," the scout said, "but there are only a few deserts in Faerûn, especially at so northerly a latitude, so it is a very good bet that Anauroch is where we must be. There is a range of snow-capped mountains perhaps forty or fifty miles to our west, which you can see quite clearly in the daylight. Those I believe to be the Graypeak or Nether Mountains. They could be the Ice Mountains, but if we were so far north as to see them, I would think we would be in the High Ice, and not in this sandy and rocky stretch of the Great Desert."

"I've come to trust your sense of direction, but I can't say I relish the prospect of marching half a thousand miles across the surface lands to get home," Ryld Argith said, rubbing his hand over his short-cropped hair. He moved stiffly in his armor, bruised and battered beneath the mail from their desperate fight to escape Ched Nasad. "Citadel Adbar, Sundabar, and Silverymoon would all stand in our way, and they have very little love for our kind."

"Let them try to stop us," growled Jeggred. "We'll travel by night, when the humans and the light-elves are blind. Even if someone should stumble into us, well, the surface dwellers are soft. I don't fear them. Neither should you."

Ryld bridled at the draegloth's remark, but Quenthel silenced him with a raised hand.

"We will do what we have to do," she said. "If we have to spend the next two months creeping across the surface realms under cover of night, we will do exactly that."

She turned gracefully and paced away, gazing thoughtfully at the ruined court around them.

The party fell silent as each of the dark elves watched Quenthel's back. Pharaun pushed himself erect and wrapped his *piwafwi* closer around his lean torso. The black cloak flapped in the bitter wind.

"The question that vexes me," the mage said to no one in particular, "is whether we have accomplished what we set out to do. I do not relish

the idea of crawling back to Menzoberranzan with nothing more to show for months of effort than news of Ched Nasad's fall."

"No priestess of the Spider Queen holds the answers we seek," said Quenthel. "We will return to Menzoberranzan. I can only trust that the goddess will make clear the meaning of her silence when it suits her."

Pharaun grimaced and said, "Blind faith is a poor substitute for a plan by which you might win the answers you seek."

"Faith in the goddess is the only thing we have," Halisstra snapped. She shifted half a step closer to the master of Sorcere. "You have forgotten your place if you address a high priestess of Lolth in such a manner. Do not forget it again."

Pharaun opened his mouth to frame what would no doubt have been an even more inflammatory retort, but Ryld, sitting next to him, simply cleared his throat and scratched at his chin. The wizard paused a moment under the eyes of his companions, and shrugged.

"All I meant was that it seems clear to me that the Spider Queen means for us to puzzle out her silence for ourselves."

"How do you suggest we should do that?" Quenthel asked. She folded her arms and pivoted to glare at Pharaun. "In case you have forgotten, we've toiled for months to discern the cause of the Silence."

"But we have not exhausted all avenues of investigation, have we?" Pharaun said. "In Ched Nasad, we spoke of seeking the assistance of a priest of Vhaeraun, possibly Master Hune's acquaintance Tzirik. We drow have other deities beside Lolth, after all. Is it so unreasonable to speculate that another god might be able to explain Lolth's unusual silence?"

The circle fell still. The wizard's words were not ones commonly heard in Menzoberranzan. Few dared utter such thoughts in the presence of the Spider Queen's clergy.

"I see no need to go begging favors of a male heretic worshiping a miserable whelp of a god," Quenthel said. "I doubt that Lolth has deigned to confide her purposes in any lesser powers."

"You are probably correct," said Pharaun. "She certainly hasn't confided them in you, after all."

Jeggred snarled at the wizard, and Pharaun raised his hands in a placating gesture, rolling his eyes.

Valas licked his lips nervously and offered, “Most of you have spent the great majority of your lives in Menzoberranzan, as is fit and proper for drow of your respective stations. I have traveled more widely, and I have visited places that secretly—even openly, in some cases—permit the worship of gods other than Lolth.” He noticed the gathering thunder in Quenthel’s face, mirrored in Halisstra’s. The scout winced but pressed on. “Under the wise rule of the matron mothers, the worship of drow gods other than Lolth has hardly flourished in Menzoberranzan, and so you may not hold a high opinion of the practice, but I can attest to the fact that the priests of the lesser gods of our race can call upon spells and guidance from their deities, too.”

“Where might we find Tzirik?” Ryld asked Valas.

“When last I met him, he lived among outcasts in a remote region known as the Labyrinth, south and west of the Darklake by perhaps a hundred miles. This was some time ago, of course.”

“Outcasts,” snorted Halisstra.

She was not the only one to express disgust. In the endless game played between the great Houses of the drow, of course there were losers. Most died, but some chose flight over death, taking up a hardscrabble and ignominious existence in the remote stretches of the Underdark. Others abandoned their home cities for different reasons—including, Halisstra supposed, the veneration of gods other than Lolth. She found it hard to believe that anyone so weak as to have been run out of her home city could offer much help at all.

“We’ll solve our own problems,” she said.

Pharaun glanced up at Halisstra, cold humor dancing in his eyes.

“I forgot that you now have some experience with the peculiar misfortune of being deprived of a home city,” he remarked. “And I applaud your celerity in including yourself in ‘our’ discussions and ‘our’ problems. Your selflessness is laudable.”

Halisstra shut her mouth, stung by the words. There would be many hundreds, even thousands of survivors from Ched Nasad scattered in as many tunnels and bolt-holes in the black caverns and passages around the city. Most of those would end their lives in the jaws of mindless monsters, or perhaps fall into wretched slavery as captives of drow from other cities, duergar, or even more horrible Underdark races like the mind flayers or

the aboleths. And a few might hope to find some kind of life for themselves through their own wits and resourcefulness. It was not unknown for a House to take into its ranks a defeated enemy who had demonstrated her usefulness. House Melarn was dead. Wherever Halisstra journeyed next, she would be starting from square one. The advantages of her birth, the wealth and power of her city, all that meant nothing anymore.

She considered her reply carefully, conscious of the acute interest of the other drow around her, and said, “Spare me your pity.” She spoke in a murderous hiss, putting iron in her voice that she did not feel. “Unless I miss my guess, Menzoberranzan doesn’t stand so very far from Ched Nasad’s fate, else you never would have come to seek our aid. Our difficulties are your difficulties, are they not?”

Her words had the desired effect. The wizard looked away, while the other Menzoberranyr shifted nervously, studying each other’s reactions. Quenthel visibly flinched, her mouth tightening into a fierce scowl.

“Enough, both of you,” she said, turning to Valas. “This outcast priest of Vhaeraun—why would he aid us in any way? He is not likely to entertain an especially charitable attitude toward our cause.”

Valas replied, “I couldn’t say, Mistress. All I can do is bring you to him. What happens after that depends on you.”

The ruined courtyard fell silent. The sun was a double handspan into the sky, and blinding shafts of pure light sliced through the darkness of the ruined court from crumbling embrasures in the high walls. The ruins were apparently not as desolate as Halisstra had thought. She could hear the furtive sounds of small creatures scurrying across sand and rubble, faint and small in the distance.

“The Labyrinth lies only a hundred miles from the Darklake?” Quenthel asked. The scout nodded once. The priestess folded her arms and thought. “Then it’s not very far from our homeward course, in any event. Pharaun, do you command any magic that might speed our travel? Fighting our way home across the surface realms appeals to me no more than it does the weapons master.”

The wizard leered and rose to his feet, preening under Quenthel’s request for help.

“Teleportation is risky,” he said. “First, the *faerzress* of the Underdark makes it dangerous to attempt transport spells. More to the point, I have

never visited the Labyrinth, and so have no idea where I would be going. I would almost certainly fail. I know a spell to transform myself or others into different shapes more suited for travel, though. Perhaps if we were dragons or giant bats or something that would fly well by night. . . .” The wizard tapped his chin, considering the problem. “Whomever we press into service as a mount would have to stay in that shape until I changed him back, of course, and we’d still be looking at a couple of tendays of travel. Or . . . I know a spell of walking through shadows. It’s dangerous, and I couldn’t take us straight to the Labyrinth, as I have never been there and the spell is best employed to reach places you know well. I could take you to Mantol-Derith, though, which is hard by the shores of the Darklake. It would shorten our journey considerably.”

“Why didn’t you mention that before, when we were discussing months of marching across the surface?” said Jeggred, shaking his head in irritation.

“If you recall, we had not yet decided where we were going,” Pharaun replied. “I intended to offer my services at the appropriate time.”

Ryld said, “You could have transported us from Menzoberranzan to Ched Nasad in the first place. Why in the world did we walk?”

“Because I have good reason to fear the plane of shadow. As a younger and more impulsive mage I learned—the hard way—that shadow walking confers no special protection against the attentions of those creatures that dwell in the dark realm. In fact, I was very nearly devoured by something I would not care to meet again.” The wizard offered a wry grin and added, “Naturally, I now regard shadow walking as an option of last resort. I only suggest it now because I deem it slightly less dangerous than tendays of travel across the surface world.”

“We will exercise all due caution,” Quenthel said. “Let’s be about it, then.”

“Not so fast. I must prepare the spell. I will require about an hour to make ready.”

“Do so without delay,” Quenthel said. She glanced around at the ruins, and shaded her eyes. “The sooner we are back below ground, the better.”

