

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

R.A. Salvatore's

WAR OF THE SPIDER QUEEN BOOK III

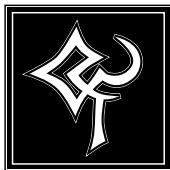
Extinction



LISA SMEDMAN



U b j a p t e r



U N E

Pharaun lay on the forest floor, staring up into the angry eyes of five hissing serpents. Their fangs bared and dripping with poison, their mouths open wide, the red-and-black-banded vipers strained against the whip handle from which they grew.

The woman holding the whip stared down at Pharaun with tightly contained rage. Taller and stronger than the Master of Sorcere, she was an imposing figure. Pharaun could not see her face—the bright light streaming down from the sky above flooded his vision, turning her into a dark silhouette with bone-white hair—but her tone was as venomous as her serpents' hisses.

“You stepped on that spider on purpose,” Quenthel said.

“I did not,” he spat back, wincing at the slush that was soaking through his elegant shirt, chilling his back. He was glad the other members of their group had scattered in different

directions to search—that they weren't there to observe him in such an undignified pose. "I can't see a gods-cursed thing in this wretched light. Would I have let my trousers get into such a state if I could see well enough to step around the brambles that tore them? If there was a spider on the path, I didn't know it was there."

He glanced to his left, at the spot Quenthel had indicated a moment before. As she looked in that direction, he slid his right hand out from behind his back.

One of the whip-serpents hissed a warning to its mistress, but too late. The moment Pharaun's hand was clear, he spoke the word that awoke the magic in his ring. Instantly, the steel band around his finger unfurled, elongating and expanding into a sword. Quick as thought, it spun in mid-air, slashing at the serpents.

The vipers recoiled, narrowly escaping the scything blade. Quenthel leaped back, her mail tunic clinking. Pharaun scrambled to his feet and pressed her with the sword.

"Jeggred!" Quenthel screamed, her *piwafwi* whirling out behind her as she dodged the dancing sword. "Defend me!"

Pharaun whipped a hand into a pocket of his own *piwafwi* and pulled out a pinch of powdered diamond. Flicking the sparkling powder into the air, he shouted the words of a spell, at the same time whirling in a tight circle to scatter the powder. A dome of force sprang up all around him, shimmering like an inverted bowl.

And not a heartbeat too soon. An instant after the magical dome had materialized, a vaguely drow-shaped form hurtled out of the forest. The draegloth leaped onto the dome, the claws on his oversized fighting hands screeching like the shrieks of the damned as they scrabbled for a hold on the diamond-hard surface. The half-demon jumped again and again onto the dome, sliding off.

Extinction

At last giving up, the draegloth crouched just outside the magical barrier, his smaller set of hands balled into fists on the ground while his larger hands flexed claws in frustration. He glared with blood-red eyes at Pharaun, then jerked his chin in defiance, sending a ripple through the coarse mane of yellow-white hair that cloaked his shoulders.

Pharaun winced at the stench of the draegloth's breath, wishing the magical barrier was capable of blocking odors.

Behind Jeggred, Quenthel kept a wary eye on the sword that hovered just over her head, shielding herself from it with the buckler strapped to her arm. The serpents of her whip hissed at it, one of them straining upward in a futile effort to snap at the weapon. Quenthel started to reach for the tube at her hip that held her scrolls, then paused. She seemed reluctant to waste the little magic she had left on such a petty quarrel.

"Call off your nephew, and let's talk," Pharaun suggested. Squinting, he glanced up at the harsh blue sky. "And let's get out of the sun, before it turns that pretty adamantine buckler you're wearing to dust."

Quenthel's eyes narrowed in fury at Pharaun's insubordination. No doubt she was thinking that though a Master of Sorcere he might be, as a male he should remember his place. Quenthel certainly lusted to use the spells once granted her by Lolth to pin Pharaun in a web and subject him to a thousand slow torments, but the Queen of Spiders had fallen silent. Save for her scrolls, Quenthel had no more spells to cast.

"Jeggred," she snapped. "Withdraw."

Reluctantly, Jeggred backed away from the barrier.

"That's more like it," Pharaun said.

He lifted his right hand, fingers extended, and spoke a command word. His sword shrank, then streaked through the air toward his hand and coiled into a ring once more. He started

the gesture that would lower the barrier, then paused as he saw Jeggred tense.

“I should remind you, Quenthel, that I could kill this demon spawn with a single word,” Pharaun cautioned.

“Jeggred knows that,” Quenthel said, indifference turning her beautiful face into an expressionless mask. “He makes his own choices.”

Jeggred growled—whether at Quenthel or Pharaun, it wasn’t clear—and spat against the magical dome. Rising to his feet, he stalked back into the forest.

Pharaun let the barrier fall.

“Now then,” he said, straightening his elegant but travel-worn clothes and smoothing back an errant lock of white hair from his high forehead. “I apologize for stepping on one of Lolth’s children, but I assure you it was entirely an accident. The sooner we leave the Lands of Light, the better. Not only did we just stir up all of Minauthkeep by killing the high priest of House Jaelre—”

“Your decision, not mine,” Quenthel spat. Then, after a moment, she smiled. “Though Tzirik did deserve to die.”

The serpents in her whip hissed their assent.

Pharaun nodded, glad that she was in agreement that the death had been necessary. Tzirik’s magic had allowed their group to travel through the Astral Plane to the Demonweb Pits, domain of the goddess Quenthel served—a goddess who had fallen alarmingly silent, of late. There, they had discovered why Lolth’s priestesses could no longer draw upon her magic: the goddess had disappeared. Her temple appeared to have been abandoned, its door sealed with an enormous black stone carved in the likeness of her face.

There had been no time, however, to learn whether that was a situation of Lolth’s own choosing. As Pharaun had expected,

Extinction

Tzirik betrayed them, using his magic to gate in the god he served. Vhaeraun had attacked the stone face and nearly succeeded in breaching it when Lolth's champion—the god Selvetarm—appeared to defend it.

Realizing that Tzirik had no intention of letting them return, Pharaun had ordered Jeggred to kill Tzirik—telling the draegloth the order came from Quenthel. The priest's death had ejected Quenthel's group out of the Demonweb Pits, leaving only the gods behind. For all Pharaun knew, Selvetarm and Vhaeraun were battling there still.

If Vhaeraun won and succeeded in destroying Lolth, it would be the beginning of a new era for the drow. The Masked Lord favored males opposed to the matriarchy; his victory would no doubt spur the disenchanting males of Menzoberranzan to an even greater insurrection than the one that city had recently seen. But if Selvetarm succeeded in defending the Spider Queen, Lolth might one day return and restore her web of magic, lending power to her priestesses' spells once more. Whatever happened, Pharaun wanted to be on the winning side—or appear to be serving its interests, anyway.

“As I was saying,” Pharaun continued, “not only is House Jaelre seeking us, but this forest is infested with wood elves. The sooner we get below ground, the better.”

He paused to glance at the forest, squinting against the sunlight that bounced harshly off the white, slushy snow that covered trees and ground alike. The wizard regretted his decision to teleport the group there. His spell had allowed them to escape House Jaelre's keep, but the portal he'd hoped to use to put even more distance between them only functioned in one direction. They were trapped on the surface at the mouth of a shallow, dead-end cave.

“I wonder if any of the others have found a way down yet,” Pharaun muttered.

As if in answer, Valas Hune appeared from out of the forest, emerging from a tangled clump of underbrush with a silence that was only in part due to the enchanted chain mail the scout wore. A pair of magical, curved kukri daggers hung at his hip, and to his vest was pinned a miscellany of enchanted talismans fashioned by more than one Underdark race. The mercenary, his amber eyes watering slightly as he squinted against the sunlight, had a squared-off jaw that seemed permanently clenched. He habitually held himself tensed and ready, as if he expected to take a punch. His ebony skin was crisscrossed with dozens of faint gray lines, fading legacies of two centuries' worth of battles.

Valas jerked his head in the direction from which he'd just come and said, "There's a ruined temple a short distance away. It's built around a cave."

Quenthel's eyes glittered, and the serpents in her whip froze in rapt attention.

"Does it lead to the Realms Below?" she asked.

"It does, Mistress," Valas said, offering a slight bow.

Pharaun strode forward and clapped an arm around the scout's shoulders.

"Well done, Valas," he said in a hearty voice. "I always said you could smell a tunnel a mile away. Lead on! We'll be back in Menzoberranzan in no time, quenching our well-earned thirst with the finest wines that—"

"I think not." Quenthel stood with hands on her hips, the serpents in her whip matching her venomous stare. "The goddess is missing, possibly under attack. We must find her." Her eyes narrowed. "You are not suggesting, are you, Pharaun, that we turn our backs on Lolth? If so, I'm sure the matron mother will see to it you receive proper punishment."

Valas glanced between Pharaun and Quenthel, then took

a slight step to the side, dislodging Pharaun's arm from his shoulder.

"Turn my back on Lolth?" Pharaun asked, chuckling to hide his nervousness. "Not at all. I'm merely suggesting we follow the matron mother's orders. She bade us find out what's happened to Lolth, and we have. We may not have all of the answers yet, but we have some pretty important pieces of the puzzle. The matron mother will no doubt want us to report what we've found out so far. Since the archmage is no longer answering my sendings, we can't be certain he's receiving our reports. I assumed we would report in person."

"Only one of us need go," Quenthel said. "But it won't be you. There are other, more important things for you to be doing." She paused for a moment, thinking. "You have the ability to summon demons, do you not?"

Pharaun raised an eyebrow.

"I have summoning spells, yes," he said. "But what does that have to do w—"

"We will return to the Demonweb Pits—in the flesh, this time," answered Quenthel. "And with a more trustworthy guide than Tzirik."

Valas shuddered and asked, "A demon?" The normally taciturn scout saw Quenthel's glare, seemed suddenly to realize he'd spoken aloud, and bowed. "As you command, Mistress."

Pharaun was more blunt.

"Assuming I do summon a demon, how can we possibly hope to prevent it from tearing us limb from limb, let alone coerce it into becoming a tour guide for some little jaunt to the Abyss? Even Archmage Gromph wouldn't think of whistling up a demon without a golden pentacle to bind it. We're in the wilderness—in the Realms of Sunlight, in case you hadn't noticed. Where am I supposed to get the spell components to—"

“Jeggred.”

Pharaun blinked, wondering if he'd heard Quenthel correctly.

“Jeggred,” she repeated. “We'll use his blood. You can draw the summoning diagram with that.”

“Ah . . .” Pharaun cursed silently as he realized that Quenthel was, unfortunately, right. The blood of a draegloth could indeed bind a demon, but only one: the demon who had sired Matron Mother Baenre's half-demon son. The demon that was Jeggred's father.

Pharaun had no desire to meet him, in the flesh or otherwise, but he could see he had little choice in the matter. Not if he wanted to maintain his delicate balancing act of apparent loyalty to Lolth—necessary if he was to keep his position as Master of Sorcere. Just as Valas had done, Pharaun bowed.

“As you command, Mistress,” he said—with just enough of a sarcastic twist on the final word to remind her that her title was a hollow one. Mistress of Arach-Tinilith she might be, back in Menzoberranzan, but he was hardly one of her quivering initiates. He swept a hand in the direction Valas had indicated earlier. “Let's do the spellcasting below ground, shall we? I'd like to get out of this wretched sunshine.”

As Valas and Quenthel set off, Pharaun pretended to follow them. He paused, picked up a twig, and used it to collect a bit of spiderweb from the trail. Lolth might be silent, but the sticky nets woven by her children were still useful; spiderweb was a component in more than one of his spells. Tucking the web-coated twig into a pocket, he hurried after the others.