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Chapter One

Inthracis sat in his favorite chair, a high-backed throne made from bones packed together with a mortar of blood and pulped skin. Tomes and scrolls, the tools of his research, lay open atop the large basalt table before him. The soaring walls of the three-story library of Corpsehaven, his fortress, loomed on all sides.

Eyes stared at him from out of the walls.

Made from the heaped decay of thousands upon thousands of semi-sentient, magically-preserved corpses, Corpsehaven's walls, floors, and ceilings could have filled the cemeteries of a hundred cities. Bodies were the bricks of Inthracis's keep. He regarded himself as an artisan, a fleshmason who smashed and twisted the moaning forms into whatever contorted shape he needed. He was indiscriminate in his choice of materials; all manner of bodies had been pressed into the structure of his keep. Mortals, demons, devils, and even other yugoloths had found a home in Corpsehaven's walls. Inthracis was nothing if not a fair murderer. Any being that stood in his way on his rise through the ranks of the Blood Rift's ultraloth hierarchy ended up in one of his walls, decaying and near death, but still sensate enough to feel pain, still sensate enough to suffer and moan.

He smiled through his lip ridges. Being surrounded by his dead and his books always settled his mind. The library was his retreat. The pungent reek of decaying flesh and the piquant aroma of parchment preservative cleared both his cavernous sinuses and his cavernous mind.

And that was well, for he desired clarity. His research had revealed little, only tantalizing hints.

He knew only that the Lower Planes were in an uproar and that Lolth was at the center of it. He had not yet determined how best to capitalize on the chaos.

He ran a mottled, long-fingered hand over the smooth skin of his scalp and wondered how he might turn events to his advantage. Long had he waited to move against Kexxon the Oinoloth, Archgeneral of the Blood Rift. Perhaps the time for action was now, during the Lolth-spawned chaos?

He stared into the bloodshot, pain-filled eyes of his walls but the corpses offered him no answers, only lipless grimaces, soft moans, and agonized stares. Their suffering lightened Inthracis's spirit.

Outside Corpsehaven, audible even through the walls of pressed flesh and glassteel windows, the scream of the Blood Rift's blistering winds sang their song of agony – a high pitched, rising keen, similar to that made by the dozen or so mortals Inthracis had personally flayed. As the sound subsided, Inthracis cocked his head and waited. He knew that a planar tremor would follow hard after, trailing the wind's wail with the same certainty that thunder followed lightning in an Ethereal cyclone.

There.

A slow rumble began, just a soft shaking at first, but building to a crescendo that shook the entire fortress, a paroxysm that caused flakes of skinmeal and dried hair to rain like volcanic

ash from the high ceiling of the library. Intracis suspected that the entirety of the Blood Rift was shaking, that the entirety of the Lower Planes was shaking. Lolth had torn the Demonweb Pits free of the Abyss, he knew, and raw, purposeless power – reified chaos – was pouring into the Lower Planes and sending shudders throughout the cosmos.

The multiverse, Intracis knew, was in parturition, and the cosmic birthing was rattling the planes. Reality had been reorganized, entire planes moved, and the Blood Rift, Intracis's home plane, groaned under the resulting onslaught of energies. Ever since Lolth had begun her...activities, the barren, mountainous plane had suffered a plague of volcanic eruptions, blizzards of ash, and thunderous rockslides that could have buried continents on the Prime Material Plane. Fissures opened at random in the mountainous, rocky landscape, swallowing leagues of earth. The churning, gore-filled flow of the Blood River, the great artery that fed the body of the plane, roiled in its wide channel.

Given the upheaval, Intracis had several times increased the magical protections that shielded Corpsehaven from such threats, but still the danger gave him pause. Corpsehaven sat on a level ledge sculpted from the otherwise precipitously steep side of the Blood Rift's largest volcano, Calaas. It would not do for an unexpected landslide or volcanic spasm to send Intracis's life's work skidding down the mountainside.

The wind outside rose again, a low whine that grew to an unbearable keen before beginning to die. Behind the wind's wail of pain, Intracis could just make out the conspiratorial whisper of a word. He sensed it as much as heard it, and it was the same word he had been hearing intermittently for days:

Yor'thae.

Each time the gust hissed its secret, the corpses in his walls moaned through rotted lips, squirmed decayed arms loose from the wall to reach bony hands for rotted ears. With each utterance of the unholy word, the entirety of Corpsehaven wriggled like a hive of abyssal ants.

Intracis knew the word's meaning, of course. He was an ultraloth, one of the most powerful in the Blood Rift, and he was versed in over one hundred twenty languages, including High Drow of Faerun. The *Yor'thae* was Lolth's Chosen and the Spider Queen was summoning her Chosen to her side. Infuriatingly, Intracis had not been able to learn why.

He recognized that Lolth, like the Lower Planes, was undergoing a transmogrification. Perhaps she would be transformed, perhaps the transmogrification would annihilate her. The calling of the *Yor'thae* presaged events of significance, and the word was in the ear, on the tongues, and in the minds of all the powerful in the Lower Planes: demon princes of the Abyss, archdevils of the Nine Hells, ultraloths of the Blood Rift. All were positioning themselves to take advantage of whatever outcome resulted.

Despite himself, Intracis admired the Spider Bitch's temerity. Although he did not fully understand the stakes, he did understand that Lolth had gambled much on the success of her Chosen.

Such a gamble should not have surprised him overmuch. At her core Lolth was the same as any demon – a creature of chaos. Senseless risk and senseless slaughter were her nature.

Which is why demons are idiots, Intracis decided. Even demon *goddesses*. The wise took only well-calculated risks for well-calculated rewards. Such was Intracis's creed and it had served him well.

He tapped his ring-bedecked fingers on the polished basalt table and sparks of magical energy leaped from the bands. The legs of the table – human legs grafted to the basalt top –

shifted slightly to better accommodate him. The bones of his chair too adjusted to more comfortably sit him.

He looked upon the collective knowledge gathered in his library, seeking inspiration. Desiccated hands and arms jutted from the walls of flesh, forming shelves upon which sat in orderly rows an enormous quantity of magical scrolls, tomes, and grimoires, a lifetime's worth of arcane knowledge and spells. Intracis's multifaceted eyes scanned them in several spectrums. Multifarious colors of varying intensities emanated from the tomes, denoting their relative magical power and the type of magic they embodied. Like the dead in his walls, the books offered him no ready answer.

Another tremor rattled the plane, another wail trumpeted the promise or threat of Lolth's *Yor'thae*, another agitated rustle ran through the dead of Corpsehaven.

Distracted, Intracis pushed back his chair, rose from the table, and walked toward the library's largest window: an octagonal slab of glassteel wider than Intracis was tall, and magically melded with the bones and flesh of the wall. A lattice of thread-thin blue and black veins grew within the glass, a byproduct of the melding.

The veins looked like a spider's web, Intracis thought, and almost smiled.

The grand window offered a wondrous view of the heat scorched, red sky, a panorama of Calaas's side and the rugged lowlands of the Blood Rift far below. Intracis stepped close to the window and looked out and down.

Although he had flattened a plateau half a league wide into Calaas' side, he had raised Corpsehaven right at the edge of it. He had chosen such a precipitous location so that he could always look out and be reminded of how far he had to fall, should he grow stupid, lazy, or weak.

Outside, the unceasing winds whipped a rain of black ash into blinding swirls. Arteries of lava, fed from the eternal flow from the plane's volcanoes, lined the lowlands far below. Fumaroles dotted the black landscape like plague boils, venting smoke and yellow gas into the red sky. The winding red vein of the Blood River surged through the gorges and canyons of the plane.

Here and there, swarms of larvae – the form mortal souls took in the Blood Rift – squirmed along the broken landscape, wriggled up Calaas's sides. The larvae looked like pale, bloated worms as long as Intracis's arm. Heads jutted from the slime covered, wormlike bodies, the only remnant of the dead soul's mortal form. The faces wore expressions of agony that Intracis found pleasing.

Despite the ash storm and roiling landscape, squads of towering, insectoid mezzoloths, and several powerfully muscled, scaled, and winged nycaloths – all of them in service to one or another of the ultraloths – prowled the rockscape with long, magical pikes. With the pikes they impaled one larvae after another, collecting souls the way a spear fisherman hunted fish on the Prime. The stuck larvae squirmed feebly on the shafts, overwrought with pain and despair.

To judge from the heads on some of the nearby larvae, most of the souls appeared to be those of humans, but races of all kinds found their way to the Blood Rift, all of them damned to serve in the furnaces of the plane. Some of the souls would be transformed into lesser yugoloths to fill-out Intracis's or another ultraloth's forces. Others would be used as trade goods, food, or magical fuel for experiments.

Intracis looked away from the soul harvest and gazed down and to his left. There, barely visible through the haze of ash and heat, built into a plateau in Calaas's side not unlike that upon which Corpsehaven sat, Intracis could just espy the pennons of skin that flew at the

top of the Obsidian Tower, the keep of Bubonis. The ultraloth immediately below Intracis in the Blood Rift's hierarchy, Bubonis coveted Intracis's position as much as Intracis coveted Kexxon's. Bubonis too would be scheming; he too would be planning how to use the chaos to further his ascent up Calaas's side.

All of the Blood Rift's elite ultraloths laired on Calaas. The relative height of an ultraloth's fortress along Calaas's side indicated the owner's status within the Blood Rift's hierarchy. Kexxon the Oinoloth's fortress, the Steel Keep, sat highest of all, perched among the red and black clouds at the very edge of Calaas's caldera. Corpsehaven sat only twenty or so leagues below the Steel Keep, and only two or three leagues above the Obsidian Tower of Bubonis.

Intracis knew that the day would come when he would face a challenge from Bubonis, when he would himself challenge Kexxon. For the hundredth time in the last twelve hours, he wondered if the time was now. The thought of throwing Kexxon's corpse down the Infinite Deep amused him. The Infinite Deep descended to the center of creation and its rocky sides were so sheer, so unbroken by any shelf or ledge of significance, that when things that fell there, they fell forever—

Without warning, darkness descended on the library, darkness so intense that even Intracis's eyes could not penetrate it, though he could see in virtually all spectra. Sound quieted; the wind seemed to offer its wail as though from a great distance. Intracis could hear the walls squirming in the darkness. His hearts beat faster.

He was under attack, he realized. But who would dare?! Bubonis?

The words to a series of defensive spells rose to the front of Intracis's mind and he whispered the syllables in rapid succession, all while weaving his fingers through the air in a series of intricate gestures. In the span of three breaths, he was warded with spells that would protect him against mental, magical, and physical attacks. He slid from his cloak a metal wand that fired a stream of acid upon command, levitated toward the high ceiling, and listened.

The walls of Corpsehaven rustled with a wet susurrance. Decayed hands reached down from the ceiling to paw his robes, as though seeking reassurance. Their touch gave him a momentary start. He heard nothing save his own soft breathing.

It occurred to him then that someone or something had managed to penetrate the intricate wards set about Corpsehaven without triggering any alarms. He knew of no one, not even Kexxon himself, who could have done so.

Worry took hold of him. His grip on the wand tightened.

Within the darkness, a sudden heaviness manifested, a palpable presence of power. Intracis's ears popped; his head throbbed; even the corpses in his walls uttered a cracked scream.

The darkness seemed to grow substantive, to caress him, its touch lighter than that of the corpses, more seductive, but also more threatening.

Something was in his library.

Despite himself, Intracis's three hearts hammered in his chest.

With sudden certainty, he realized that he was sharing the darkness with a divine power. Nothing else could have so easily invaded his fortress. Nothing else could have so terrified him.

Intracis knew immediately that he was overmatched. Fighting would be pointless. A god, or perhaps a goddess, had come for him.

He lowered himself to the floor. While it was not quite in him to abase himself, he managed to offer the darkness a stilted bow.

“Your respect is insincere,” said a soft, oily male voice in High Drow.

At the sound of the voice, another irritated rustle ran through the corpses, another moan escaped their decayed lips.

“*Their* respect, however, is genuine,” said the voice.

Inthracis did not recognize the speaker by voice, but given the word on the wind outside, given the speaker’s use of High Drow, Inthracis could infer the speaker’s identity. He chose his next words with care.

“It is difficult to offer the proper respect when I do not know to whom I am speaking.”

A chuckle. “I think you know who I am.”

At that, the darkness lightened somewhat, enough that Inthracis’s eyes could pierce it. Sound too returned, and the howl of the wind rose.

A masked male drow sat atop Inthracis’s basalt table, legs dangling off the edge and not quite reaching the floor. Shadows alternately lightened and darkened around the drow’s lithe form, swallowing parts of him in blackness for one moment before coughing them back up to visibility the next. A short sword and dagger hung from his belt, and leather armor peeked out from under his tailored, high-collared cloak. Long white hair, highlighted with red, surrounded an angular, vengeful face. He wore a haughty smile on his thin lips; it did not reach the holes of his eyes, which were visible even through his black mask.

Inthracis’s eyes registered the arcane power emitted by the drow’s blades, the armor, his very flesh. He recognized the avatar and it was as he had suspected.

“Vhaeraun,” he said, and was irritated that he did not quite keep the awe from his voice. He was looking upon Vhaeraun the Masked God – Lolth’s son, and Lolth’s enemy. His hearts hammered still more; his legs felt weak though he managed not to show it. In the flitting shadows about the drow, he saw that the avatar’s hand was severed at the wrist. The stump seeped blood onto the table.

Inthracis did not care to contemplate how a god might have been so wounded. He also did not care to contemplate why Vhaeraun would be manifesting in Corpsehaven. Inthracis rarely had contact with drow, living or dead, mortal or divine. Drow souls did not typically end up in the Blood Rift.

Vhaeraun hopped off the table and sniffed the air. His dark eyes narrowed.

“Even the air *here* stinks of spider,” he said.

To that, Inthracis said nothing. He dared not speak until he knew exactly what was happening. A dozen possibilities danced through his mind, none of them desirable.

“I require a service, yugoloth” Vhaeraun said, and the whisper of his voice went hard.

Inthracis stiffened. Not a favor, not a request – a service. It was worse than he had feared. He ran his long forked tongue over his lip ridges while he tried to formulate a suitably vague response.

The darkness swallowed Vhaeraun, and in the next heartbeat the avatar stood behind Inthracis, his breath hot in Inthracis’s upper left ear.

“Would you refuse me?” Vhaeraun asked, his soft words dripping menace.

Inthracis dared not move.

“I would not, Masked Lord,” he answered, though he would have if he could have.

While yugoloths *were* mercenaries, even they had their limits when it came to patrons. Inthracis had no desire to get involved in whatever divine conflict Vhaeraun may have been engaged in with his mother.

The next moment Vhaeraun was no longer behind him but across the room near one of Intracis's bookshelves. Rather than reach to caress him, the corpses in the wall recoiled as much as their contorted forms allowed at the nearness of the god. Dead eyes stared out of the wall in horror. Even those dead whose hands and arms formed the bookshelf tried to squirm back into the wall, and a score of priceless tomes clattered to the floor. Vhaeraun eyed them and tsked.

Intracis wondered how his corpses perceived Vhaeraun's appearance. Surely not that of a drow male.

Vhaeraun looked up and said suddenly, "Listen." He cocked his head to the side and his eyes went hard. "Do you hear it?"

The wind outside rose and fell, carrying its message of Lolth's Chosen. The corpses near Vhaeraun moaned again.

Intracis nodded. "I hear it, Masked Lord. *Yor'thae*. It says *Yor*—"

Vhaeraun hissed and held up a hand, silencing Intracis. The eyes of the corpses in the walls went wide at the demonstration of divine pique.

"Once is enough, ultraloth," said Vhaeraun. "So you hear the word, but do you know its meaning?"

Intracis nodded slowly, fear growing in his gut, but Vhaeraun went on as though he had answered in the negative.

"The *Yor'thae* is the chosen vessel of the Spider Bitch," Vhaeraun said. "And this, all this..." With alarming suddenness, the avatar again stood behind Intracis, hissing angrily in his ear as the fortress shook once more. "...is the effort of the Queen of the Demonweb Pits to summon her Chosen and transform herself."

Intracis gulped, sensing the god's rage, sensing the danger he was in.

Vhaeraun reappeared in the shadows across the room and Intracis allowed himself a breath. Vhaeraun reached out with his good hand and ran his fingertips along the bodies in the wall. They squirmed, moaning anew. Vhaeraun's fingers came away glistening, and he smiled.

"What do you want of me, Masked Lord?" asked Intracis, though he knew he would not like the answer.

In an instant, Vhaeraun stood before him, teeth bare, face hot with rage. "What I want, you insignificant insect, is my mother's heart fed to demons and shat out for my amusement! What I want, you speck of a creature," and here he brandished the stump of his wrist before Intracis's face, "is Selvetarm's obsequious brain torn from his foul head so that I can use his empty skull as a piss pot."

Intracis said nothing, merely stared, stood rigid, and held his breath. He was an instant from death. Even the corpses stood still and silent, as though too terrified even to moan.

Vhaeraun took a breath, visibly calmed himself, and offered Intracis an insincere smile. "But first things firstly, Intracis the ultraloth. Let me be direct: there are three potential candidates for *Yor'thae*. See them now."

"Wait, Masked Lord—"

But Vhaeraun did not wait. The avatar closed his eyes and pain knifed through Intracis's brain. Through the pain an image of three drow females formed in his head, and three names: Quenthel Baenre; Halisstra Melarn; Danifae Yauntyrr.

The pain subsided, though the image remained, burned into his brain with a divine brand.

Vhaeraun said, “Each of the three are trying to find their way to the city of the Spider whore. My mother is calling them, you see, drawing them to her, testing them as they come. One will be Chosen, one will be her—“

The wind howled anew and another tremor shook the plane. The word *Yor'thae* sounded through the chamber.

“Yes,” Vhaeraun said, and an irritated tic caused his eye to spasm. He focused on Intracis and said, “What I require of you is that you kill all three of the candidates.”

Once again, Vhaeraun was suddenly across the library, behind a large lectern.

Intracis could do nothing else, so he nodded. Privately, he wondered why Vhaeraun not kill the three candidates himself.

The answer occurred to Intracis a moment after the question: since the so-called Time of Troubles, the Overgod had forbade the gods from directly affecting the existences of mortals. Thus, Vhaeraun needed an ally unbound by the Overgod’s edict, a non-divine ally.

The mercenary in Intracis started to overcome his fear. He saw opportunity and took it.

“And for me, Masked Lord?” he asked, with the proper amount of deference.

Vhaeraun vanished from behind the lectern to appear beside him. Intracis looked straight ahead, not daring to face the god.

Whorls of shadows curled around them both, black snakes that slithered along Intracis’s leathery skin. Vhaeraun held his unwounded hand before Intracis’s face, and Intracis saw that the arm was as incorporeal as a shadow up to the elbow. With a smile, Vhaeraun reached *into* Intracis’s body and clutched one of his three hearts. It stopped cold.

Agony raced through Intracis; his breath caught; his muscles spasmed. He arched his back, gritted his teeth, but dared not move farther or protest.

“For you?” Vhaeraun whispered in his ear. “For you this: my gratitude, something that is beyond price.”

Vhaeraun clutched Intracis’s second heart, stopping it.

Intracis’s vision went blurry; he struggled to draw breath.

“Oh,” Vhaeraun said, “and also the destruction of Kexxon and your ascendance to the position of Oinoloth and Archgeneral.”

Hearing those words, Intracis could not contain a grin. Despite the agony, he managed to hiss, “You are most gracious, Masked Lord.”

Still wearing the same smile, Vhaeraun set Intracis’s hearts again to beating with a flick of his forefinger and withdrew his arm, which became instantly corporeal.

Intracis inhaled sharply, sagged, and kept his feet only through sheer pride. After he had recovered himself, he located Vhaeraun – now across the room at the desk again– and asked, “What size force is appropriate, my lord?”

“An army,” replied Vhaeraun with a derisive wave. “Muster on the new Demonweb Pits, on the *Ereilir Vor*, the Plains of Soulfire. My mother is not yet sensate enough to muster her own forces to stop you.”

Intracis debated with himself before asking, “And what of Selvetarm, Masked Lord?”

Vhaeraun’s face twisted in anger and he said, “What of him?! He will not trouble you. My mother has removed the Pits to their own location in the multiverse and sealed them against entry by the divine – *any* divine. Events are beyond the reach of the gods, now. I cannot enter to destroy her, but neither can Selvetarm enter to protect her. Unless he has guessed at my ploy,” Vhaeraun’s contemptuous tone indicated that he did not think Selvetarm could guess the sum of two and two, “you will face the candidates alone.”

Inthracis dared one more question.

“What will occur if the *Yor’thae* reaches the Spider Queen?”

Vhaeraun’s eyes narrowed. “Because they will not reach her,” he replied, “the answer is irrelevant.”

Inthracis said nothing but took Vhaeraun’s reply to mean that even the god did not know what would occur. That did not bode well.

He bowed and said, “It is my pleas—“

Vhaeraun vanished without further words. The red light of the Blood Rift refilled the room. Inthracis took several deep breaths. Even the corpses in the wall seemed relieved. All that remained of Vhaeraun’s presence in the room was a smear of blood on the basalt table and lectern. Inthracis summoned an invisible servant armed with a cloth, caused it to absorb the blood, and teleported the cloth to his laboratory. He was certain he could use divine blood as a component for one spell or another. The exercise helped calm him.

He gathered himself and prepared to send word to his generals to sound a muster.

Vhaeraun had said to muster an army. Inthracis would use his best shock troops, the Black Horn Regiment.

Despite the underlying fear of what might occur should he fail Vhaeraun, he felt a certain exhilaration. If he was successful, and if Vhaeraun kept his word – a large *if* – Kexxon would be destroyed and Inthracis would unseat him as the Archgeneral of the Blood Rift.

Even as those seductive thoughts coursed through his mind, a more sober voice advised caution. It occurred to him that all of Vhaeraun’s scheming may have been in accordance with Lolth’s plan. The Masked God had said that Lolth was testing her priestesses as she called them toward the Pits. Perhaps Inthracis and Vhaeraun would be doing nothing more than creating another challenge for the *Yor’thae* to overcome? Or perhaps Vhaeraun was mistaken and none of the three priestesses was to be the *Yor’thae* at all?

Perhaps, Inthracis thought and sighed.

Caught between one god and another, though, he knew he had no choice but to obey. He would do as Vhaeraun had demanded because to do otherwise would result in certain death. Or worse.

Outside, the wind howled its message.

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