

HOME COMING

BOOK II

# MAESTRO

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FORGOTTEN REALMS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

R.A. SALVATORE

**MAESTRO**

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FORGOTTEN REALMS®

HOMECOMING

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BOOK II

MAESTRO

R.A. SALVATORE



## MAESTRO Homecoming, Book II

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# Prelude

**B**Y LOLTH'S FURRY LEGS!" BRAELIN JANQUAY EXCLAIMED, SHAKING his head in disbelief at the sheer slaughter unfolding in front of him. Hundreds of demons, thousands of demons, had swarmed into a circular cavern in the Masterways, the complex of large passageways that were the main entrance of Menzoberranzan. They were just outside the city.

Dark elf wizards and priestesses lined the cavern walls. The bombardment of magic raining down upon the Abyssal forces was beyond anything Braelin had ever imagined, let alone witnessed. A hundred lightning bolts slashed an equal torrent of fireballs. Magical storms pelted the intruding demons—zombie-like manes and simian balgura—pounding them down, tripping them on the icy floor where they were finished off in a haze of steam as fireballs exploded atop them.

The drow trap had sprung to devastating effect, but the demons kept coming.

"Can they kill them all?" the astounded Braelin said.

"Be ready," Tiago snapped at him. "Some will get through, and if you fail me on the flank, know that I will not be merciful."

Braelin stared at the upstart Baenre noble for a few moments, doing well to hide his utter contempt. Jarlaxle and Beniago had warned him of Tiago's volatile temperament and haughty attitude. Jarlaxle knew the inner workings of the Baenre nobles better than anyone outside the immediate family, and Beniago was Tiago's cousin. Still, Braelin had spent the last decades serving in Bregan D'aerthe. He had lived more than half his ninety-five years with Jarlaxle's band, and most of those years had been outside the city. Now, back in the fold of Menzoberranzan, Tiago's arrogance, the venom dripping from his every word—and those of many of the other drow, particularly those nobles in House Do'Urden, where Braelin now served—appalled him.

Nothing had changed other than Braelin's escape from, and perception of, the stilted reality that was Menzoberranzan. He had been so

accustomed to it in his earlier days, so numb to it, but now every word jarred him, and it took all of his self-control to hide his true disgust at the nefarious ways of his own people.

The cavern walls continued shaking from the magical barrage being poured upon the attacking demon hordes in the larger chamber to the west. One brilliant flash set Tiago and Braelin back on their heels.

“Ravel and his lightning web,” Tiago remarked, managing a nod despite the sour look upon his face. Ravel, the former Xorlarrin House wizard now of House Do’Urden, was making quite a name for himself with that ritual addition to the common lightning bolt. Having witnessed it first-hand on several occasions, the two drow standing at the front of the corridor defense could only imagine the scores of demons now melting under its devastating effects.

No sooner had Tiago finished the remark than there came a cacophony of stunning proportions, ground-shaking and with explosions echoing along the corridor walls likely all the way back to Menzoberranzan. Even out here, some hundred strides from the battle, Braelin could feel the heat of the magical conflagration. He loosened his grip on his swords just a bit, having a hard time imagining that any demons would come out this end of that slaughterhouse.

“The magical confrontation nears its end, then,” Tiago added when the shaking at last abated. Like the wizardry displays in times of celebration, spellcasters always liked to end with a grand display.

Braelin nodded. Ravel had told them all that the lightning web would strike as the cavern slaughter was winding down, and the ensuing crescendo only confirmed that. Almost certainly, then, the demonic reinforcements had slowed to a trickle, and so the wizards and priestesses had pulled out their last great display.

“The slaughter in the cavern nears its end!” Tiago shouted.

His call carried back to all tendrils of the regiment with the weight of an undeniable command. As the weapons master assigned to this day’s primary war party, Tiago stood in full command of the warrior forces around him, including nearly a hundred foot soldiers and ten times that number of orc, goblin, bugbear, and kobold slaves.

Braelin listened carefully as Tiago barked orders, setting groups in place, organizing teams to go forward and cover the retreat of any wizards or priestesses who could not magically escape the cavern. Certainly there

were dimensional doors set up to get many back into the city, but those were to be used only by the extra spellcasters who had come out for the ambush. Many of the others, including those of House Do'Urden, had been assigned to the war party, and so would soon be returning to find their place among Tiago's command.

What struck Braelin most about Tiago's stream of orders was the tone of the weapons master's voice, one that showed him to be less than pleased by these events. Braelin had noted that combination of imperiousness and frustration from the beginning. His associate, Valas Hune, perhaps the greatest of Bregan D'aerthe's scouts, had come to them hours earlier with word of the vast demonic force approaching. Such information had elevated today's events above Tiago, had demanded magical communication with the city's rulers. Sorcere had emptied herself of wizards, Arach-Tinilith had sent forth all her priestesses-in-training, and many of the major Houses, including Baenre and Barrison Del'Armgo, had sent forth a cadre of their greatest spellcasters.

And that left Tiago sitting back in the peaceful corridor, clutching his unbloodied sword as a great victory was won in the ambush cavern in front of him. Braelin found himself truly amazed at how desperately this weapons master craved battle. And with demons, no less!

His anger was unrelenting, and Braelin knew it all stemmed from Tiago's failure to secure the head of Drizzt Do'Urden.

Movement in the corridor ahead signaled the return of the spellcasters. The priestesses came first, showing little urgency, which confirmed that the slaughter in the cavern had been near-complete—and which only deepened the scowl on Tiago's face. They, including Saribel Do'Urden, Tiago's wife, moved past Tiago and Braelin and the other melee commanders to take up their positions in the third rank—near enough to offer healing to any who might be wounded.

Then came the wizards, moving more swiftly, and with those in the rear of the procession glancing back somewhat nervously. Ravel led the way, along with Jaemas Xorlarrin, who was rumored to be the newest member of the Do'Urden House Court. Both stopped when they got to Tiago, Jaemas waving the others into position among the second rank of warriors.

"I have never seen such a horde," Ravel said to Tiago. "We obliterated them by the hundreds, but they simply kept coming."

“Kept coming without regard!” Jaemas exclaimed, seeming equally at a loss. “They marched without hesitation over the bodies of scores and hundreds of their Abyssal kin, and so they too were obliterated. The entire cavern is deep in the piled, empty husks of demons sent home.”

Ravel started to add to that, but could only shake his head.

“But there are more remaining?” Tiago asked, and it was obvious to Braelin and everyone else who heard him that he was hoping the answer would be yes.

“Balgura were spotted in the Masterways beyond the chamber,” Ravel confirmed, “rushing to join their comrades in oblivion.”

Braelin sighed, but tried to disguise it as a cough—unsuccessfully, he knew—when Tiago turned a glare over him. He had battled demons before, of course, as was true of every drow who had grown up in Menzoberranzan, but he counted balgura among his least favorite foes. They looked like some joke of the gods, resembling great apes with orange hair and massive limbs. Every balgura Braelin had ever seen stood as tall as the tip of his finger if he held his arm straight up over his head, and four times his weight. Yet, despite that imposing size and the sheer strength that accompanied it, balgura were surprisingly agile and quick, and while one alone could prove to be a dangerous adversary, these howling and scrambling beasts were pack hunters, fighting in frenzied coordination.

Frenzied—Braelin thought that a fitting word for this particular type of demon.

The drow was brought from his thoughts by screeching sounds echoing down the tunnel walls.

“They’ve seen the carnage in the cavern,” Ravel remarked. “It’s amazing that they find no deterrence in climbing over piles of dead comrades.”

“Perfect soldiers,” Tiago replied. “A pity we do not possess more of their ferocity in our own ranks.”

“You had no more tricks to play on this group?” Braelin dared to ask. “Balgura are better dispatched with magic than the blade.”

Tiago glared at him again.

“Everything is better dispatched with magic,” Ravel replied flippantly, and he gave a dramatic sigh and walked away.

Tiago turned to watch him go, letting his glare follow the wizard. “You are only next to me because of Jarlaxle’s assurances,” Tiago said to

Braelin. “Are those assurances worthless, then? Would it serve us both better for me to assign you to stand second to some other warrior?”

Braelin stared at the noble son of House Baenre for a long while. A big part of him wanted to take Tiago up on that offer, though he knew it wasn’t a sincere question and indeed, more of a threat. Still, to be away from Tiago would bring relief on so many levels . . .

But the Bregan D’aerthe warrior could not ignore the truth. There was no finer warrior to be found at House Do’Urden—none even close—and indeed, few in all of Menzoberranzan could match Tiago’s prowess in battle. Malagdorl, perhaps, and Jarlaxle when he was in the city, which was not often. Beyond that, were there any warriors, weapons masters even, who would serve better in battle than this young upstart noble beside him?

“Of course not,” he answered, and bowed politely. “I will show you my worth when the blood stains the stones.”

He meant it, and he knew that he had to mean it. Tiago wasn’t keeping him close out of any favors to Jarlaxle—as far as Braelin could tell, Tiago didn’t think much of Jarlaxle at all. Tiago had accepted Braelin as his second because Jarlaxle had told him that he’d not find a more worthy battle companion. Now it was incumbent upon Braelin to live up to that billing.

Or perhaps, Braelin reminded himself, Tiago wanted him as second because Tiago wanted to keep Jarlaxle’s eyes and ears in House Do’Urden very, very close.

With that unsettling possibility in mind, Braelin pointedly reminded himself that if he did not acquit himself well in battle, Tiago would find a way to get him killed in battle. Perhaps Tiago would even do the deed himself if a balgura could not.

Braelin knew that beyond doubt once he looked again at Tiago’s expression.

The shrieks of the approaching beasts increased, and Braelin tossed that unsettling thought away. He had no room for such doubts now that battle was upon them, and his life was dependent upon the coordination between he and Tiago.

“Wife!” Tiago called, turning back and motioning Saribel forward. He swung back around just in time to duck behind his shield and catch a leaping balgura with it. The weight of the blow sent him skidding backward, the demon sliding, too, past Braelin’s right flank.

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Braelin stabbed with his right-hand sword, his left blade going forward to fend off the rush of another wild, orange-furred demon.

The balgura to his right hissed and spat in protest, and the sword sank in deeply indeed. That seemingly mortal strike didn't fell the creature, though, and it apparently did not even notice as it swung around at Braelin.

But then came Tiago, out from behind that strange and beautiful shield, with his magnificent sword sweeping down from on high to split the wounded demon's head in half.

Braelin somehow managed to fend off the clawed hands of the demon in front of him and extract his sword from the falling balgura's ribs. With both weapons in hand, the skilled drow warrior fast turned the flow of battle back against the ferocious beast.

Tiago came by him, yelling, "Forward!"

Braelin was about to argue—he didn't really have anywhere to go—but Tiago's deadly sword flashed out from under his shield, stabbing Braelin's foe in the side. So fine was that blade, Vidrinath by name, that a mere sweep of Tiago's arm had it slicing through the thick demon's torso, nearly cutting the thing in half.

Braelin tried unsuccessfully not to gasp, then to keep up as Tiago leaped at the incoming swarm of demons, even as they leaped at him.

He kicked aside the dying beast's last clawing strikes and went down to one knee, his swords in a double-thrust to stab up at a balgura that had leaped at him. The demon landed and stumbled, skidding on torn feet, easy prey for the drow warriors in the next rank.

Feeling quite pleased with his clever maneuver, Braelin started ahead once more. And then he wasn't so pleased with himself, and nearly forgot that battle was upon him as he noted the movements of Tiago Baenre Do'Urden. The drow noble more than matched the ferocity of his wild opponents. He leaped every which way, batting at clawing hands and biting maws with his fabulous shield, taking the life from one demon after another with that magnificent sword.

Engaged once more with a demon, Braelin lost track of Tiago's battles. After his balgura was finally dead, it took Braelin some time to locate and watch the leaping, scrambling blur that was Tiago. He shook his head in disbelief as he realized that for every attack Tiago blocked, one or more was getting through.

A gash opened on Tiago's arm—he nearly lost his grip on Vidrinath—but the wound closed almost as it appeared.

Braelin glanced back at Tiago's wife, High Priestess Saribel, to see her in a constant stream of spellcasting. With Tiago as her singular focus, waves of Lolth-given healing magic flowed at the noble son of House Baenre.

And Tiago trusted her, obviously. He had left his companion behind and recklessly rushed into the midst of their fierce enemies. If Sanibel let him die, Matron Mother Quenthel Baenre would not be merciful.

That realization, and the understanding that Tiago had planned this long before, brought an unsettling thought to Braelin. Though Tiago did not need him as a flanking protector, could he say the same? He did not have a high priestess standing behind him imparting unlimited healing.

And though he was of House Do'Urden now, was he really? Braelin Janquay was Bregan D'aerthe, minion to Jarlaxle, loyal to Jarlaxle.

Tiago had to know that.

Tiago wouldn't care if he died in this corridor outside of Menzoberranzan.

Tiago might even welcome that. Might, indeed, have made his attack in the hope of killing off Braelin.

All thoughts of catching up to the Baenre faded, and Braelin braced himself defensively, letting the monsters come to him.



TIAGO ROLLED SIDELONG up over one hunched, simian demon and felt the explosion of pain as the balgura bit him hard on the hip. His fine adamantine armor kept the teeth from tearing too deeply, but oh, he felt the pain.

The exquisite pain followed by the ecstasy of healing warmth, the embrace of the goddess.

He rolled over the balgura's head, turning as he landed so that as the ape-demon turned to pursue, Tiago's readied sword cut it from belly to throat. A high sweep of Vidrinath took the head from the next demon in line.

He found himself laughing now as a trio of the beasts leaped at him to bury him under their bulk, in his turn he had noted Braelin Janquay.

Braelin understood now that Tiago considered him expendable, and that was a message the eager young weapons master wanted Jarlaxle to hear.

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“Bregan D’aerthe,” he spat from under the pile of clawing and biting ape demons, his shield, magically expanded to its fullest diameter now, keeping the bulk of the attacks away, his sword arm finding its openings to stab ahead and violate demon flesh.

And the pain continued, clawed hands and toothy maws finding their hold, and the pleasure of Saribel’s healing washed over him, and the young drow knew true ecstasy.



SARIBEL COULD ONLY hope that her tireless, frantic efforts would be enough to keep Tiago from great harm, or even death. If he perished here, the priestess would take her own life rather than face the wrath of the matron mother.

Tiago was doing this to her purposely, forcing her into servitude. There would be no gratitude for her efforts here, no words of praise, no tender appreciation later on. She would only know his contempt, forever his contempt.

“Until I am Matron Mother of House Do’Urden,” she resolutely managed to tell herself between spells, and she growled out her next as she nodded with determination. With patience and fortitude, she would gain the upper hand.

Or maybe she should just let him die out there, she thought briefly. How easily she could interrupt the healing spells and let the demons rend him to bits.

It was a fleeting thought, of course, and not just because of the threat to her life should he die. Her marriage to Tiago made her a Baenre as well as a Do’Urden, and that was something she would never jeopardize.

The thought was buried a moment later, as word filtered down that the matron mother herself had come onto the scene.

Saribel redoubled her efforts, throwing every breath into a spell, filling Tiago with the blessings of Lolth.

“What is that fool doing?” she heard behind her, and recognized the voice of the terrible Quenthel Baenre.

Globes of fire appeared in the air. Glorious flames, hotter than hellfire, rushed down in killing lines, incinerating demons all around the battling young weapons master.

A sweep of Vidrinath felled another, the last one near to Tiago. He leaped around, his face a mask of insulted rage. But that expression changed when he took note of Matron Mother Quenthel.

Indeed.

Quenthel motioned to Braelin, ordering him forward.

“He is reckless,” the matron mother whispered to Saribel as she turned to leave. “And ambitious.” She paused and caught Saribel’s gaze.

“He is brilliant,” Quenthel told her. “And you will bring him to me later, uninjured.”

Saribel wisely didn’t pause in her casting to even acknowledge the matron mother.



QUENTHEL BAENRE DID NOT magically flee the scene, as would have been expected of so important and powerful a figure. She walked openly down the corridors of the Masterways and back into Menzoberranzan, the Clawrift on her left and the huge side chamber that held Tier Breche along the wall to her right. Word had spread of the glorious victory in the tunnels, of course, and so she wanted her people to see her returning from the field of glory, humble and magnificent all at once.

Her sister, High Priestess Sos’Umptu Baenre, was waiting for her back in the main cavern, as ordered, along with a powerful contingent of the House Baenre garrison—enough to deter any murderous hopes some plotting matron mother might entertain.

The Baenres were cheered all the way back to their compound. Matron Mother Quenthel soaked in that glory, and understood that it was a necessary and not superfluous parade, both for the reputation of her House and her as matron mother. All along that path she was reminded of the damage that had come to her beloved city.

Destruction due to the idiocy of her missing brother.

Quenthel knew Gromph had summoned the Prince of Demons into Menzoberranzan, quite unannounced.

The monstrous behemoth had left now, but had cut a swath of absolute destruction in his wake. Demogorgon’s slashing tail had dug trenches in the walls of Sorcere, nearly toppling major parts of the structure. The beast had torn down the gates and walls of several houses,

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including two of the ranking Houses with matron mothers sitting on the Ruling Council.

And Demogorgon had dug a trench, for no apparent reason other than he could, halfway across the city and back—to this very exit into the wilds of the Underdark.

Many drow had been slain on the beast's journey, Demogorgon's massive tentacles whipping out to grasp unfortunate dark elves, wrenching them in to be devoured or hurling them halfway across the city to splatter into a stalagmite or stalactite. Many others had clawed their own eyes out, driven mad by the gaze of the godlike demon.

All because of Gromph.

Quenthel could barely contain her growl.

"There were greater demons than the manes and balgura out in the caverns," Sos'Umptu informed her, something Quenthel had already suspected.

"Your priestesses spied them?"

"Lurking beyond the circular cavern, yes."

"Named beasts?"

Sos'Umptu nodded. "Beasts recognized, yes."

"And?"

"The spells of banishment failed," Sos'Umptu admitted.

Quenthel stopped her march and stared hard at the priestess. Sos'Umptu could only shrug.

"You should have been out there among the priestesses," Quenthel said, her voice betraying great concern.

"There were many high priestesses positioned in that cavern," Sos'Umptu replied with her typical lack of discernable emotion. "Their spells are as potent as my own. Though they knew the demonic names, they could not banish the beasts."

"They erred in identifying—"

"No," Sos'Umptu dared to interrupt. "It is as we feared, Matron Mother. The barrier of the Faerzress itself has been harmed. The demons cannot be banished."

Quenthel turned away, staring instead at the looming compound of House Baenre, her face showing that she was trying to process this startling and dangerous news.

"But we can kill them," Sos'Umptu offered. "When we return to your chambers, I will bring forth a magical divination of the circular cavern

where the battle was primarily waged. You will see, Matron Mother. The beasts are piled many deep—empty, destroyed husks.”

Quenthel looked at her incredulously.

“We won!” Sos’Umptu said, and she did a fair job of acting as though she cared. “A glorious victory! Few of our children of Menzoberranzan were wounded, fewer still killed, and the demon horde is piled high in death.”

Quenthel’s expression became very slightly more incredulous.

“A thousand Abyssal creatures dead, do you think?” Quenthel asked.

“Perhaps twice that,” Sos’Umptu replied.

“My dear Sos’Umptu, they are demons. Do you think the Abyss will run out?”



AN EXHAUSTED MINOLIN Fey walked into the nursery in her private quarters at House Baenre. She faltered immediately and nearly fell over, seeing a young woman standing over Yvonne’s small bed

“Who . . . ?” she started to ask, but stopped, her eyes going wide, as the woman—likely not yet twenty years of age—turned and flashed her a perfectly smug and wicked smile.

“You do not approve, Mother?” the girl, who was indeed Yvonne, asked.

“How?”

“It is a simple spell, though an old one,” Yvonne explained. “A version of a haste dweomer employed by wizards in the days before the Spellplague, before the Time of Troubles, even. A wonderful spell, speeding the movements and attacks of the recipient, but one that came with the unfortunate—or in this case, fortunate—side effect of aging the recipient as if a year had passed.”

Minolin Fey was only half-listening to the explanation. She was caught by the sheer beauty of this creature in front of her. Sheer beauty, she knew, beyond anything she could have imagined. Painful beauty; to look upon Yvonne was to despair because one could not be so beautiful as she. Her skin glowed with smoothness, like satin and steel woven as one, delicate yet impossibly strong. Her soft touch could ignite every nerve in one she seduced, teasing with softness even as her fingers closed around the moaning victim’s throat.

“Haste,” Yvonne said suddenly, and more emphatically, breaking Minolin Fey out of her near stupor.

“You . . . You know the arcane arts?” Minolin Fey stammered.

The young woman laughed at her. “I am one with the Spider Queen, who sought to make the Weave her own. Or have you forgotten?”

“N-no,” Minolin Fey stuttered, rather inanely, and trying to decipher the statement. Yvonnell claimed to be one with the Spider Queen? How high were her ambitions after all?

“You are often overwhelmed,” Yvonnell said with a nasty little laugh. “No matter, your most important duties are behind you now.”

She felt her expression turn curious.

“I am born, and clearly weaned,” Yvonnell explained. “I have no need to suckle at your breast, nor any such desire. Not for nourishment, at least.”

The way she finished that thought had the high priestess’s knees trembling. Despite the awfulness of the thought she knew that she could not begin to deny Yvonnell of anything she wanted. It took all of Minolin Fey’s willpower not to throw herself prostrate on the floor at that moment, begging Yvonnell to take her, or kill her, or do whatever she so desired.

In that moment of terror, not just of Yvonnell but of her own weakness in the face of this mighty being, Minolin Fey truly appreciated the girl’s claim that she was one with the Spider Queen.

She was—that was clear now. This was not a child standing in front of her, not even one infused with the memories of Yvonnell the Eternal. No, this was something much more.

With a deceptively childlike laugh, Yvonnell went through a series of movements and chanted softly. A slight glow came over her, and her hair, already thick and halfway down her back, grew a bit longer and curled at the bottom.

“I am two full decades of age now,” she said. “Do you think any young warriors would find me attractive?”

Minolin Fey wanted to answer that any living creature would fall before her, that any drow in Menzoberranzan—in all the world—would not resist her for more than a heartbeat.

“Twenty-five, I think,” Yvonnell remarked, and Minolin Fey looked at her with puzzlement.

“Twenty-five years,” the girl clarified. “I seek an age that will afford me the respect I need, but also an age of perfect beauty and sensuality.”

“Is there any age where you would not be such, either way?” Minolin Fey heard herself saying.

Yvonnell's grin let the high priestess know in no uncertain terms that she was caught within the web of this one's charms.

"You will do well when I am matron mother," Yvonnell said.

"I am . . ." Minolin Fey felt as if she had just been granted a great reprieve. "I am your mother," she stammered, nodding eagerly. "My pride . . ."

The girl waved her hand, and though she was across the room, the magical slap hit Minolin Fey so hard it sent her stumbling to the side.

"No more," Yvonnell said. "That duty is behind you and forgotten. You will survive and thrive, or you will fail, on your loyalty and service moving forward. I would think nothing of destroying you."

Minolin Fey cast her gaze down, staring at the floor as she tried to find some way out of this.

And then she felt a soft touch on her chin—and such a touch! A thousand fires of pleasure erupting within her as Yvonnell so easily lifted up her face to stare her in the eye. Minolin Fey feared that she would go blind, being so near such beauty.

"But you have an advantage, Priestess," the girl said. "I know that I can trust you. Show me that I can respect your service, too, and you will find a wonderful life in House Baenre. One of pleasure and luxury."

Minolin Fey braced herself, expecting another slap, another brutal reminder of how quickly that could be taken away.

It didn't come. Instead, Yvonnell gently brushed the tips of her fingers down the side of Minolin Fey's face, and that touch, so impossibly soft, so wondrously calling out to every nerve to bring them forth and lighting them with sensations of pure pleasure, left in its wake a line of pure ecstasy.

"Come," Yvonnell said. "I believe it is time for Quenthel to learn the truth of her niece."

"You wish an audience with the matron mother?"

"You will get me that meeting immediately," the girl answered. "I give you this one task. Do not fail me."

Minolin Fey held her breath then, feeling very trapped. The way Yvonnell had said that made it quite clear to her that it was one task for now, but there would be an endless stream of subsequent tasks later. And her personalization of the last remark, bidding Minolin Fey not to fail *her* instead of simply not to fail, showed the high priestess that this dangerous child would simply not accept failure.

## R . A . S A L V A T O R E

This strange little daughter to whom she had given birth was the promise of great reward and the promise of perfect pain, tantalizing and terrifying all at once.

It was bad enough for Minolin Fey that in Gromph's absence she survived only at the sufferance of Matron Mother Quenthel. But even worse was the thought that her only chance at flourishing might well be this dangerous child, whether reincarnation of Yvonne the Eternal or avatar of Lady Lolth herself—or some weird mixture of the two.

Dangerous. So very dangerous.



“WHO IS THIS that you bring to my private quarters?” Quenthel asked when Minolin Fey entered her chambers in House Baenre unannounced.

“Look closely,” the young drow woman said, holding her hand up to silence the high priestess, and surely that, even more than her sheer beauty, tipped Quenthel off to the truth, as was revealed deliciously to Yvonne by the expression on the matron mother's face.

“How . . . How is this possible?” Quenthel stammered.

“You were killed in battle by a rogue drow who still lives, and yet you, too, still live,” the young woman answered. “And you would ask me how a few compressed years of aging is possible? Do you think it impossible, Aunt?”

Quenthel's eyes flared with anger at that impertinence, being referred to as someone's aunt. She was the Matron Mother of Menzoberranza!

“Are you so meager in your understanding of magic, both divine and arcane, that such a minor feat seems impossible to you?” Yvonne prodded, and she couldn't suppress her sly grin as Minolin Fey gasped at the insult.

“Leave us,” Yvonne told the high priestess.

“Stay!” Matron Mother Quenthel roared, for no better reason than to counter the demands of the upstart young woman.

Yvonne looked over to see Minolin Fey trembling with uncertainty and palpable fear.

“Go,” she said softly. “I will win in here, and I assure you, if you remain, I will remember your hesitation.”

“You will remain here,” Quenthel said firmly, “or you will feel the scourge of the matron mother!”

Minolin Fey wept and shook at the conflicting demands, appearing as if she would just crumble on the spot.

“Ah yes, the five-headed scourge of Quenthel Baenre,” Yvonnell said. “A fine weapon for a high priestess, but a meager baton for a matron mother. I am sure I will do better.”

Quenthel’s eyes and nostrils flared as she reached for the scourge and brought it forth; the five snake heads of the whip, each imbued with the life essence of an imp, swayed eagerly and hungrily.

Yvonnell laughed at her and told Minolin Fey to go.

Still some dozen strides away, Quenthel grabbed her other weapon from her belt—a magical hammer—and with a growl, she brought it swinging about.

An image of that hammer appeared in the air behind Minolin Fey as she turned; it cracked her on the shoulder, sending her sprawling. From her hands and knees, she couldn’t help looking back at Quenthel, as did Yvonnell.

“I did not give you permission to smite her,” the girl said evenly.

With a growl, Quenthel swung again, more forcefully. Yvonnell crossed her arms in front of her and waved them out wide. Again the hammer appeared, this time aiming for Yvonnell’s face. But as the spectral image descended, it hit a shimmering field the girl had enacted. As it plunged through, it came out instead in front of Quenthel, and she yelped as her own hard strike smacked her in the face and sent her stumbling backward to the ground.

Not even bothering to stand back up, Minolin Fey scrambled away, making curious mewling noises all the way to the door. She slammed that door behind her as she exited.

“You dare!” Quenthel cried, unsteadily trying to stand, blood streaming from one nostril and from the side of her face.

“I ‘dare’? You think that a simple trick?”

“Some dimensional warp of space,” Quenthel spat, blood coming with every word.

“Against the likes of a spectral hammer?” said the girl incredulously. “Do you not understand who I am?”

Quenthel found solid footing then and hoisted her snake-headed scourge, replacing the hammer on her belt. She advanced, growling with every step.

Yvonnell put her hands on her hips, as petulantly as she could manage, and shook her head and sighed.

“Really, must it come to this?”

“You are an abomination!” Quenthel retorted.

“You have so quickly forgotten the Festival of the Founding in the House of Byrtyn Fey?”

That stopped the advance of the matron mother, and she stood there, suddenly unsure, her eyes darting about.

“Expecting a yochlol?” Yvonnell teased.

They both knew the truth now.

“Did you not tell your brother to marry Minolin Fey so that I would be born in and of House Baenre?” Yvonnell asked. “You even named me, did you not? Oh yes, except that you were instructed as such. Yvonnell the Eternal, born once more to be your successor, yes?”

Now Quenthel was herself looking for an escape.

“And here I am.”

“You are a child!”

“I am, in body.”

“No!” Quenthel demanded. “Not now, not yet! You are not old enough—even with your magical physical advancement, you are but half the age to begin your training in Arach-Tinilith.”

“My *training*?” Yvonnell asked with an incredulous laugh. “Dear Quenthel, who in this city will train me?”

“Hubris!” Quenthel said, but there was not much conviction in the roar.

“Yngoth is the wisest of the snakes on your scourge,” said Yvonnell. “Go ahead, High Priestess, ask her.”

“High Priestess?” Quenthel yelled in protest. She came forward, closing the ground, lifting the scourge for a strike.

“High Priestess Quenthel,” came the response, but not from Yvonnell. It came from one of the heads on her scourge, from Yngoth.

Quenthel looked at the snake in shock.

“She believes herself matron mother,” Yvonnell said to the snake. “Tell her the truth.”

Yngoth bit Quenthel in the face.

She staggered back, trying to sort it out, but not quickly enough understanding the terrible danger to her. Yngoth bit her again, and by that time, the other four scourge heads had also sunk their fangs into

Quenthel's tender flesh. Fires of poison burned through her. She should have thrown the scourge aside, of course, but she couldn't think quickly enough in that terrible moment.

The snakes struck again, and again after that, each bite filling her with enough venom to kill a score of drow.

She stumbled, but still she held the scourge, and still the snakes bit at her.

She fell backward, the weapon falling beside her, and as she writhed in fiery agony, the snakes bit her again.

And again.

She had never known such pain. She cried out for death to take her.

And there was the child, Yvonnell, she saw through bleary, bloody eyes, standing over her, looking down at her, smiling down at her.

Darkness closed in from the corners of her vision. She did see Yvonnell reaching down; she did feel Yvonnell grasping the gathering of her gown. She felt light as darkness engulfed her. She was light, she believed, because Yvonnell lifted her up with just that one hand, so easily hoisted her from the floor.

A pinprick of light broke the darkness—perhaps the tunnel to the Demonweb Pits and eternity.

But that pinprick widened, and Quenthel felt as if cool waters poured over the burning venom coursing in her veins. It was impossible! No spell could defeat that amount of deadly poison so quickly.

But the light widened and Quenthel realized that she was in her chair again, in her throne, the throne of the matron mother. And there was the young woman, Yvonnell, staring at her, smiling at her.

“Do you understand now?” Yvonnell asked.

Quenthel's mind wheeled—she was terrified that Yvonnell was reading her every thought. She should be dead. The poison of any of her snakes would kill a dark elf. The repeated bites of all five would kill a dark elf in mere moments.

“You live,” Yvonnell answered the obvious question. “Yet no priestess could have administered enough healing, divine or alchemical, to pull you back from the death brought by your snakes' venom.”

Quenthel's eyes widened as her gaze drifted lower, as her eyes focused on the scourge, her scourge, that Yvonnell carried. The five snakes wrapped lovingly around Yvonnell's beautiful black arms.

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“Fear not, I will fashion my own scourge,” Yvonnell explained. “Indeed, I look forward to it.”

“Who are you?”

“You know.”

Quenthel shook her head helplessly.

“You wonder why you are alive,” said Yvonnell. “Of course you do! Why would you not? Wouldn’t I be better served to let you die? Oh, I see,” she said with a perfectly evil grin. “You fear that I saved you from the snake poison so that I might make your death even *more* painful!”

Despite herself, Quenthel began to tremble and to gasp for air.

“Perhaps it will come to that, but it need not,” said Yvonnell. “You are fortunate, in that I do not wish to yet reveal myself to the Ruling Council and the city, and thus, I desire your services. You see, for all who look upon House Baenre, you will remain the matron mother. Only you and I will know better.”

She paused there and cast a grin at Quenthel. “You do know better,” she said.

Quenthel swallowed hard.

“Who am I?” Yvonnell asked, and those five snake heads of Quenthel’s scourge unwrapped from the girl’s arm and came up hissing and swaying ominously, reaching Quenthel’s way.

“The dau—” Quenthel started to reply, but stopped when she noted Qorra, the third and most potent viper, moving to strike.

“Think carefully,” Yvonnell said. “Prove to me that you are not too stupid to properly serve my needs.”

Quenthel forced herself to close her eyes, to reach into the memories and wisdom of Yvonnell the Eternal.

“Take your time, my aunt, my sibling, my daughter. Who am I?”

Quenthel opened her eyes. “You are the Matron Mother of Menzoberranzan.”

The girl’s smile sent a thousand waves of warmth cascading through Quenthel, and the snakes slithered back into the loving embrace of Yvonnell’s arm.

“Only you and I will know that,” Yvonnell explained. “Prove your worth to me. I will be in need of powerful high priestesses, of course, and perhaps a new headmistress of Arach-Tinilith. Are you worthy of such a position?”

Quenthel wanted to reply, indignantly, that she was already the matron mother. How could she not be worthy?

But she said no such thing. She nodded meekly, and accepted the scourge when this young woman, this mere girl, handed it back to her.

“Other Houses hold you in contempt,” Yvonne explained, walking aside as Quenthel composed herself and straightened in her throne. “They hold the name Baenre in contempt. That cannot hold, of course. They will conspire, and if those conspiracies come to fruition, you will be their target, for now at least.” She spun gracefully on her heel, her smile wide. “Perhaps they will kill you,” she said happily. “But perhaps not. And in that event, and if you have served me well in the tendays coming, then you will survive this. You will serve in my House Baenre, and in my Academy, and you will know honor and glory and great power.”

“You see, I do not fear you, because you know now, do you not?”

Quenthel nodded.

“You will never turn against me, because nothing any of them can do to you will be as awful as what I would happily do to you.”

Yvonne bounced over and kissed Quenthel on the cheek, and as she pulled back, the five snakes of Quenthel’s scourge came up beside her other cheek, their flicking tongues tickling her.

“Go back to your matron mothering,” Yvonne said, skipping away. “I will inform you when I need you and what I need from you.”

And with that, she was gone.