

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

SIEGE OF DARKNESS
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK IX
RA
SALVATORE



By all appearances, she was too fair a creature to be walking through the swirling sludge of this smoky layer of the Abyss. Too beautiful, her features were sculpted fine and delicate, her shining ebony skin giving her the appearance of animated artwork, an obsidian sculpture come to life.

PROLOGUE

The monstrous things around her, crawling slugs and bat-winged denizens, monitored her every move, watched her carefully, cautiously. Even the largest and strongest of them, gigantic fiends that could sack a fair-sized city, kept a safe distance, for appearances could be deceiving. While this fine-featured female seemed delicate, even frail by the standards of the gruesome monsters of the Abyss, she could easily destroy any one, any ten, any fifty, of the fiends now watching her.

They knew it, too, and her passage was unhindered. She was Lolth, the Spider Queen, goddess of the drow, the dark elves. She was chaos incarnate, an instrument of destruction, a monster beneath a delicate facade.

Lolth calmly strolled into a region of tall, thick mushrooms clustered on small islands amid the grimy swirl. She walked from island to island without concern, stepping so lightly about the slurping sludge that not even the bottoms of her delicate black slippers were soiled. She found many of this level's strongest inhabitants, even true tanar'ri fiends, sleeping amid those mushroom groves, and rudely roused them. Inevitably, the irritable creatures came awake snarling and promising eternal torture, and just as inevitably, they were

much relieved when Lolth demanded of them only a single answer to a single question.

“Where is he?” she asked each time, and though none of the monsters knew of the great fiend’s exact location, their answers led Lolth on, guided her until at last she found the beast she was looking for, a huge bipedal tanar’ri with a canine maw, the horns of a bull, and tremendous, leathery wings folded behind its huge body. Looking quite bored, it sat in a chair it had carved from one of the mushrooms, its grotesque head resting on the upraised palm of one hand. Dirty, curved claws scratched rhythmically against its pallid cheek. In its other hand the beast held a many-tongued whip and every so often, snapped it around, lashing at the side of the mushroom chair, where crouched the unfortunate lesser creature it had selected for torture during this point of eternity.

The smaller denizen yelped and whined pitifully, and that drew another stinging crack of the merciless fiend’s whip.

The seated beast grunted suddenly, head coming up alert, red eyes peering intently into the smoky veil swirling all around the mushroom throne. Something was about, it knew, something powerful.

Lolth walked into view, not slowing in the least as she regarded this monster, the greatest of this area.

A guttural growl escaped the tanar’ri’s lips, lips that curled into an evil smile, then turned down into a frown as it considered the pretty morsel walking into its lair. At first, the fiend thought Lolth a gift, a lost, wandering dark elf far from the Material Plane and her home. It

didn't take the fiend long to recognize the truth of this one, though.

It sat up straight in its chair. Then, with incredible speed and fluidity for one its size, it brought itself to its full height, twelve feet, and towered over the intruder.

"Sit, Errtu," Lolth bade it, waving her hand impatiently. "I have not come to destroy you."

A second growl issued from the proud tanar'ri, but Errtu made no move for Lolth, understanding that she could easily do what she had just claimed she had not come here to do. Just to salvage a bit of his pride, Errtu remained standing.

"Sit!" Lolth said suddenly, fiercely, and Errtu, before he registered the movement, found himself back on the mushroom throne. Frustrated, he took up his whip and battered the sniveling beast that groveled at his side.

"Why are you here, drow?" Errtu grumbled, his deep voice breaking into higher, crackling whines, like fingernails on slate.

"You have heard the rumblings of the pantheon?" Lolth asked.

Errtu considered the question for a long moment. Of course he had heard that the gods of the Realms were quarreling, stepping over each other in intrigue-laden power grabs and using intelligent lesser creatures as pawns in their private games. In the Abyss, this meant that the denizens, even greater tanar'ri such as Errtu, were often caught up in unwanted political intrigue.

Which was exactly what Errtu figured, and feared, was happening here.

“A time of great strife is approaching,” Lolth explained. “A time when the gods will pay for their foolishness.”

Errtu chuckled, a grating, terrible sound. Lolth’s red-glowing gaze fell over him scornfully.

“Why would such an event displease you, Lady of Chaos?” the fiend asked.

“This trouble will be beyond me,” Lolth explained, deadly serious, “beyond us all. I will enjoy watching the fools of the pantheon jostled about, stripped of their false pride, some perhaps even slain, but any worshipped being who is not cautious will find herself caught in the trouble.”

“Lolth was never known for caution,” Errtu put in dryly.

“Lolth was never a fool,” the Spider Queen quickly replied.

Errtu nodded but sat quietly for a moment on his mushroom throne, digesting it all. “What has this to do with me?” he asked finally, for tanar’ri were not worshipped, and thus, Errtu did not draw his powers from the prayers of any faithful.

“Menzoberranzan,” Lolth replied, naming the fabled city of drow, the largest base of her worshippers in all the Realms.

Errtu cocked his grotesque head.

“The city is in chaos already,” Lolth explained.

“As you would have it,” Errtu put in, and he snickered. “As you have arranged it.”

Lolth didn’t refute that. “But there is danger,” the beautiful drow went on. “If I am caught in the troubles

of the pantheon, the prayers of my priestesses will go unanswered.”

“Am I expected to answer them?” Errtu asked incredulously.

“The faithful will need protection.”

“I cannot go to Menzoberranzan!” Errtu roared suddenly, his outrage, the outrage of years of banishment, spilling over. Menzoberranzan was a city of Faerûn’s Underdark, the great labyrinth beneath the world’s surface. but though it was separated from the region of sunlight by miles of thick rock, it was still a place of the Material Plane. Years ago, Errtu had been on that plane, at the call of a minor wizard, and had stayed there in search of Crenshinibon, the Crystal Shard, a mighty artifact, relic of a past and greater age of sorcery. The great tanar’ri had been so close to the relic! He had entered the tower it had created in its image, and had worked with its possessor, a pitiful human who would have died soon enough, leaving the fiend to his coveted treasure. But then Errtu had met a dark elf, a renegade from Lolth’s own flock, from Menzoberranzan, the city she now apparently wanted him to protect!

Drizzt Do’Urden had defeated Errtu and to a tanar’ri, a defeat on the Material Plane meant a hundred years of banishment in the Abyss.

Now Errtu trembled visibly with rage, and Lolth took a step backward, preparing herself in case the beast attacked before she could explain her offer. “You cannot go,” she agreed, “but your minions can. I will see that a gate is kept open, if all the priestesses of my domain must tend it continually.”

Errtu's thunderous roar drowned out the words.

Lolth understood the source of that agony. A fiend's greatest pleasure was to walk loose on the Prime Material Plane, to challenge the weak souls and weaker bodies of the various races. Lolth understood, but she did not sympathize. Evil Lolth never sympathized with any creature.

"I cannot deny you!" Errtu admitted, and his great, bulbous, bloodshot eyes narrowed wickedly.

His statement was true enough. Lolth could enlist his aid simply by offering him his very existence in return. The Spider Queen was smarter than that, however. If she enslaved Errtu and was, indeed, as she expected, caught up in the coming storm, Errtu might escape her capture or, worse, find a way to strike back at her. Lolth was malicious and merciless in the extreme, but she was, above all else, intelligent. She had in her possession honey for this fly.

"This is no threat," she said honestly to the fiend. "This is an offer."

Errtu did not interrupt, still, the bored and outraged fiend trembled on the edge of catastrophe.

"I have a gift, Errtu," she purred, "a gift that will allow you to end the banishment Drizzt Do'Urden has placed on you."

The tanar'ri did not seem convinced. "No gift," he rumbled. "No magic can break the terms of banishment. Only he who banished me can end the indenture."

Lolth nodded her agreement. Not even a goddess had the power to go against that rule. "But that is

exactly the point!” the Spider Queen exclaimed. “This gift will make Drizzt Do’Urden want you back on his plane of existence, back within his reach.”

Errtu did not seem convinced.

In response, Lolth lifted one arm and clamped her fist tightly, and a signal, a burst of multicolored sparks and a rocking blast of thunder, shook the swirling sludge and momentarily stole the perpetual gray of the dismal level.

Forlorn and beaten, head down—for it did not take one such as Lolth very long to sunder the pride—he walked from the fog. Errtu did not know him, but understood the significance of this gift.

Lolth clamped her fist tight again, another explosive signal sounded, and her captive fell back into the veil of smoke.

Errtu eyed the Spider Queen suspiciously. The tanar’ri was more than a little interested, of course, but he realized that most everyone who had ever trusted the diabolical Lolth had paid greatly for their foolishness. Still, this bait was too great for Errtu to resist. His canine maw turned up into a grotesque, wicked smile.

“Look upon Menzoberranzan,” Lolth said, and she waved her arm before the thick stalk of a nearby mushroom. The plant’s fibers became glassy, reflecting the smoke, and a moment later, Lolth and the fiend saw the city of drow. “Your role in this will be small, I assure you,” Lolth said, “but vital. Do not fail me, great Errtu!”

It was as much a threat as a plea, the fiend knew.

“The gift?” he asked.

“When things are put aright.”

Again a suspicious look crossed Errtu’s huge face.

“Drizzt Do’Urden is a pittance,” Lolth said. “Daermon N’a’shezbaernon, his family, is no more, so he means nothing to me. Still, it would please me to watch great and evil Errtu pay back the renegade for all the inconveniences he has caused.”

Errtu was not stupid, far from it. What Lolth was saying made perfect sense, yet he could not ignore the fact that it was Lolth, the Spider Queen, the Lady of Chaos, who was making these tempting offers.

Neither could he ignore the fact that her gift promised him relief from the interminable boredom. He could beat a thousand minor fiends a day, every day, torture them and send them crawling pitifully into the muck. But if he did that for a million days, it would not equal the pleasure of a single hour on the Material Plane, walking among the weak, tormenting those who did not deserve his vengeance.

The great tanar’ri agreed.