

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE FIGHTERS

# MASTER OF CHAINS

JESS LEBOW



**Y**oung Lord Purdun stepped around a ruined tombstone and pulled his sword from its sheath.

“Quiet now,” Purdun said.

“What is this place?” asked Menrick.

“From the looks of it, I’d say it’s the entrance to a family tomb.” Purdun pushed aside the dried, thorny vines covering the façade of the stone building with the tip of his blade. The dark, dead plants made a light grinding noise as they slid across the decrepit, withered stone.

“Well, well,” said Lord Purdun. “What do we have here?”

Unlike the rest of the tomb, cracked and worn smooth from hundreds of years of rain and the elements, the stone underneath the hanging vines was a slick, polished black that shone like a mirror. Carved into its surface were hundreds

of tiny figures. Each of them had been crafted down to the most minute detail.

“Help me clear away the vines so we can get a better look.”

Menrick stepped up beside the young lord, and the two of them together cut down the dead vegetation.

A rectangular slab of jet black stone covered most of the front of the tomb. At the center of the wall an archway cut the slab in two. It looked to be outlining what must have been the entrance to the tomb, but the one-time doorway was now bricked up.

Menrick bent close to the stone, examining the carvings. “It appears to be obsidian.”

Lord Purdun ran his hands across the smooth, black stone. “This is remarkable. It looks to have been carved within the last tenday.” He took a step back and scanned the path leading up to the tomb. “But there isn’t so much as a single footprint or chip of stone. No one has visited this place for years.”

“My lord, the stone is likely enchanted,” said Menrick. “Judging from these carvings, whoever rests here left behind a lot of mourners.”

Purdun turned his attention back to the carvings. The figures were mostly human, though there were some dwarves, elves, and what appeared to be half-orcs depicted in the scene as well. All of them were looking toward a large ziggurat in the distance with a lone figure standing atop it. The figure was of a woman, wearing a cape with a thick collar. She held over her head a large box. Beams of energy or light radiated from the box, and the woman’s eyes gazed upon it in obvious adoration.

Carved in the middle of the box was a strange rune. It looked like two entwined threes, twisted and gnarled, reaching toward the ground—a bodiless, headless spider ready to sink its clawed legs into an unsuspecting victim.

On both sides of the archway, the scene was repeated in

exact detail. Same woman, same box, and same strange, twisted rune.

“Look at this.” Menrick ran his hand over the edge of the arch. “Oh my.”

Purdun took a step closer. A jagged, rather chaotic pattern was inscribed around the archway. It reminded Purdun of the golden illumination on the pages of one of his favorite books, back in the manor library.

“What am I looking at? This pattern?”

Menrick nodded.

“Yes, that’s very exciting,” said Purdun, shaking his head. “Whoever crafted this stone had a real flare for decoration.”

“This isn’t decoration, my lord. It’s an invocation.”

“A spell?”

Menrick nodded again, not taking his eyes off the carvings. “The spell that opens this doorway.”

Purdun squinted his eyes. “Why would a sealed doorway require an invocation to be opened?” The characters were so tiny, he couldn’t discern where one ended and the next began. “I don’t recognize the language.”

Menrick took a step back and crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s because it’s Infernal.”

“Infernal?”

Menrick looked down his long nose at his young master. “Yes, Infernal. And I don’t know why the door would need an invocation to be opened, but if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say it wasn’t a door that was meant to be opened more than once.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The invocation likely summons a spirit or phantasm,” explained Menrick, “some creature from another realm who can destroy the enchantment that guards this portal.”

Purdun smiled. “You’re saying this isn’t a tomb—it’s a vault, a treasure trove.”

Menrick cocked his head, a stern look on his face.

“Well, I don’t know, but . . . I would say it is quite likely. But I do not think it would—”

Purdun cut him off. “Can you open this door?”

“My lord, I really must protest—”

“Can you or can you not open this door?” demanded the young lord.

Menrick stood silent for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, my lord. I can.”

Purdun stepped aside. “Then open it.”

“My lord—”

“Open it.”

Menrick bowed his head. “As you wish.”

The old wizard pushed back the sleeves of his white robe and fished around inside his pack, eventually pulling a handful of scrolls from the cluttered sack. Unrolling them one at a time, he scanned the text until he located the correct passage.

Menrick cleared his throat then began reading. He spoke softly at first. So softly that Purdun could barely hear him. But slowly his voice rose in volume, until eventually Menrick was shouting. Lord Purdun still didn’t understand the words his manservant spoke, but the sounds he made were familiar. They had the same tenor and pitch as words Purdun himself used every day.

Menrick fell silent. The runes inscribed so tightly around the edge of the archway began to glow a pale green and the pattern changed shape, transforming from a jumble of lines and curves into recognizable letters and words.

“Thank you,” said Purdun. Then it was his turn to read.

*Handmaidens of Lolth  
Ghouls of Baphomet  
Harbingers of death and despair  
Bring forth the suffering*

*Release the shackles of night  
Bear down the walls of Dis  
Evade the hunters,  
The Bebilith, the Retriever, the Vrock*

*Come now from your places of darkness  
As once you were born from good  
Return now to do thy bidding*

*Flaming Balor in the bowels of the Abyss  
Accept mine invitation  
From the pit I command of you  
Tanar'ri come forth*

Purdun finished intoning the last word and the ground began to rumble. Rolling waves of earth washed through the ruined cemetery like the wake of a ship slapping up against the shore. Headstones crumbled. Partially collapsed mausoleums moaned under the assault as if the dead themselves were lamenting this intrusion. Trees shook, birds scattered, and both the young lord and his companion were tossed from their feet by the shaking ground.

A hole opened in the dirt just in front of the old tomb. It was rimmed in the same pale green light as the runes inscribed on the archway. A thick gas spilled out, covering the ground like fog. Then the earth went still. All was quiet except for a scraping noise that grew louder and louder.

Purdun swallowed hard, unable to take his gaze off the glowing pit.

The foggy gas swirled, disturbed from the inside. A shadow filled the cloud, nearly blocking out the green glow. And out of the shadow a hideous beast emerged.

"Glabrezu," whispered Menrick. His voice sounded far away, strangled, as if he had tried to hold back the foul word, but it had been pulled forcibly from his lips.

The demon's skin creaked as it stretched and moved across piles of muscle. Standing almost three times the height of a man, the creature turned its massive bulk, shifting its entire body to look at Purdun and Merrick. Its eyes, glowing with the color of rotting flesh, were little more than withered and wrinkled husks. They seemed ready to fall from the demon's oversized eye sockets, attached by stretched, desiccated tendons that looked more frail than a thin strip of vellum.

Its head was like that of a dog's. Long, sharp, dripping fangs protruded from under a blackened lip that ran the length of its pointed snout. It snarled at the two men, revealing two more jagged rows of teeth behind rotting, pockmarked gums.

Lord Purdun got to his feet and drew his sword. He took a step forward, but Merrick's hand on his calf held him back.

"This is a fight we cannot win," said the wizard. Merrick pushed his chin in the direction of the demon. "And this creature is bound to us."

"Bound to us?" Purdun shook his head. "This is a beast of the Abyss. How is it bound to us?"

"The invocation," explained Merrick. "Its words bind the creature as well as summon it." He looked at the young lord. "This beast is here to open this door. Nothing more."

As if the glabrezu heard and understood Merrick's words, the demon turned toward the mausoleum and placed its four hands—two ending in jagged claws, two in crablike pincers—on the sides of the archway. A spark of green energy jumped from the stone into the creature, and the beast let out a wail. Purdun had to cover his ears against the agonizing sound.

The carved obsidian wall began to glow yellow-green—all of it except for the lines of power coming out of the box, suspended in the air by the worshiped woman at the top of both carvings. This light was a ghostly blue-white.

The tiny carved humans, dwarves, and elves in the relief pictures began to shift and move. They raised their hands to the sky, milling around each other as if they were alive. They moved with a purpose, executing some sort of ancient dance or mass summoning ritual. Then, as a group, the entire throng on both sides dropped to their knees, bowing down before the glowing woman at the top of the two daises. The box she held over her head rotated and the lines of energy shooting out of it cast a pale white light over all the worshiping subjects below. Shadows rippled and moved over the collected group as they raised their hands then dropped their foreheads to the ground.

“May Ilmater protect us,” whispered Purdun.

Two glowing white boxes, held aloft by two identical carvings of the heavily robed woman, stopped rotating. Their beams of white light lifted off the wall and fell upon the demon. The beast clenched its claws and pincers, crushing handfuls of obsidian in its powerful grip and opening its mouth as if to scream.

But no sound came out.

The light danced over its flesh, illuminating parts that had likely not left darkness for thousands of years. The demon, its mouth still agape, its eyes raised to the heavens as if praying to the gods to save it from such torture, began to tremble. Its whole body shook and blue-white light began to pour from cracks in its flesh. The glow grew until it encompassed the creature’s entire body. Then in a flash of brilliant light, the demon exploded.

Lord Purdun threw his arm over his face, covering his eyes from the intense glare. Despite the shield of skin and bone, the light penetrated Purdun’s flesh. He could see the red blood coursing through his veins, the bones holding his body upright, and the muscles that made him move. A shiver went down his spine.

The light vanished, and Purdun’s arm went dark. Cautiously uncovering his face, the young lord nudged



Menrick with his elbow. "It's safe."

Both men stared in awe at the mausoleum. The carved figures had gone still. The adored woman stood stoically holding her rune-inscribed artifact, unmoving. The glowing lights, the shadowy hole, and the demon were gone. All that was left in their place was a blackened circle on the ground where the glabrezu had stood and an open archway leading into the mausoleum.

Purdun looked to Menrick. "Shall we?"

Menrick got to his feet. "This is a bad idea."

Ignoring his manservant, Purdun crossed through the archway into the inky darkness. Two steps across the threshold, the hallway burst into light. Purdun dropped into a defensive stance, bearing his blade before him, prepared to fend off any unseen attacks.

But nothing came.

Eerie torchlight cast shadows into the cracks in the walls and along the flagstones of the floor. A single torch hung at about head height from a sconce. It did its best to push back the oppressive darkness, illuminating a small circle before the door. It was enough to see by, but little more.

"Isn't that nice," quipped Purdun. "Whoever built this tomb thought of everything." The young lord straightened himself and pulled the torch from its sconce.

"My lord," said Menrick, "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Nonsense." Purdun lifted the torch to extend its reach. "We had to summon a demon just to get in. Nothing and no one has been inside here for hundreds of years. What could happen?"

"I can think of many things," replied the wizard.

"You worry too much." Purdun pointed the torch down the hall. "Come on."

They continued deeper into the mausoleum. With each step the crackling circle of yellow light revealed more of the tomb, one brick at a time. Behind them their

footprints were swallowed by the shadows. The hallway continued on for some time, the surroundings changing little. Only the cut of the stones and the accumulation of dust gave any indication that they were making progress. Finally, the floor tilted down, becoming a set of descending stairs.

With little more than a glance over his shoulder at Menrick, Lord Purdun headed deeper into the tomb.

“Stay close.” As he descended, the air grew heavy. Gone was the fresh, flowing breeze on the banks of the Deepwash. In its place were the stale, last breaths of the dead.

The dust on the ground grew thicker and their surroundings colder as they descended. When Purdun finally stepped off the last stair, he found himself in a large, open room.

The young lord thrust the torch out into the darkness. The wavering, shadowy edges of several rectangular polished-stone structures materialized in the dim light. Their sides reflected the glow, scattering the torchlight.

Purdun stepped forward and, sheathing his sword, placed his hand on top of one of the structures. The rectangular box was seemingly carved right out of the stone of the floor.

“Sarcophagi,” he whispered. Moving closer to the center of the room, he waved the torch slowly from side to side, trying to take it all in. In long, straight rows, with just enough space between them for a man to walk, the sarcophagi filled the space from wall to wall.

“There must be over a hundred people buried here.”

In the middle of the room, perched above the others on a stepped dais, sat a larger, gem-encrusted coffin. The rubies and sapphires sparked brilliantly even in the faded orange light of Purdun’s torch.

“You see that,” said the young lord. “I told you this was a treasure trove.”

“My . . . my lord,” stuttered the wizard. “This tomb is not empty. It is unwise to disturb the dead.”

Purdun smiled. “Do not worry. They will not miss what we take.” He patted his manservant on the shoulder then bounded to the top of the dais to get a closer look at the coffin.

Unlike the bland, rectangular stone boxes along the floor, the coffin was carved and embellished to resemble a human woman. No detail had been spared to make it look as if it were in fact a princess who had just been laid down for a final rest. She was dressed in what appeared to be a long, flowing blue gown rimmed with silver accents and gemstone inlays. Long black hair spilled over her shoulders and ran along her pale, resting arms. And on her lapel was the same twisted rune that had adorned the artifacts on the front of the mausoleum. The woman’s eyes were closed, but the carving was so remarkably detailed it looked as though she might open them at any moment.

Purdun moved quietly up to the head of the coffin. He was gripped by the feeling that any sudden movement might wake the sleeping beauty, and he would be scolded like an impetuous, thoughtless child. He placed his hand gently against the side of the woman’s pale cheek, but instead of the soft warmth of human flesh, he felt the cold solidity of wood. Startled by the contrary sensation, the young lord knocked on the woman’s hair with his knuckles. It made the familiar deep, hollow sound of a wooden coffin.

Menrick stepped up on the dais. “My lord, we should not be here.” He grabbed Purdun by the shoulder and spun him away from the coffin. “It is not unheard of for the dead to rise again. We have seen it here in Ahlarkham many times.” His voice quivered as he spoke. Looking around the room, he took in the rows of sarcophagi. “The invocation may have triggered spells that will awaken them. We should not be here if that happens.”

Purdun took another look at the carved beauty beside him. "I . . . I . . ." He felt compelled to touch her in the flesh, to see what was under the carved wood. He struggled with the feeling. It was like an itch that he just had to scratch. Placing both hands on the lid of the coffin, he lifted.

"No, my lord!" Menrick lunged, trying to stay Purdun's hand. But it was too late.

The wooden box creaked as it opened, and Lord Purdun looked down on a resting woman. Her long black hair and porcelain skin matched perfectly the carving on the lid of the coffin. Her arms were folded over her chest, and her lips were turned up at the corners, as if she were in the midst of a pleasant dream.

"She's beautiful," said Purdun. He reached in to touch her hair. Unlike the coffin he'd touched before, her hair was soft and supple—the way he wanted it to feel. Running his hand down her cheek, he felt his heart sink. "She's very cold."

"She's dead, my lord," replied Menrick.

Purdun shook his head. He was gripped with a deep desire. "No. She can't be. I don't want her to be." Though he knew it to be false, he felt he'd known this woman his entire life. He started to feel sympathy for her, all alone, deep within the bowels of that musty, awful place. "I want her to wake up. To take her away from here." He leaned down to put his face close to hers.

Her beauty was entrancing.

As if granting the young lord's wish, the woman slowly opened her eyes. They were a deep jade green, and they stared up lovingly at Purdun.

"What devilry is this," shouted Menrick. The wizard tried to push the young lord aside. "We must flee."

But Purdun stood firm.

The woman sat up, and Purdun leaned back to give her room. A smile crossed her lips as she gazed at the young lord, and he felt his heart jump within his chest.

Her eyes seemed to dig right into him, as if she could read his thoughts and know his desires. The feeling was more exciting and terrifying than anything the young man had ever experienced.

Their eyes remained locked for a moment more, then Purdun had to look away. He didn't want to, but her beauty was too much for him to bear. He felt as if he would wither if he continued to look.

Menrick shoved Purdun again. The young lord was off balance, and he had to take a step back to gather himself. In that brief instant, the old wizard stepped into the gap and drew a dagger. Lifting it, he shouted the words to a quick spell. Purdun didn't recognize them all, but the last four he did.

“... the bane of the unliving.”

Menrick's dagger began to glow with a blue-white light. The mage wasted no time in bringing it down on the woman with both hands, impaling its tip in her shoulder.

“What are you doing!” shouted Purdun. He grabbed the wizard's hands, but Menrick leaned into his dagger, forcing it deeper into the wound.

The woman reeled from the blow, but no blood poured from the wound. She flailed, her arms swinging wildly. One of them hit Purdun in the gut. The woman's arm had the strength of ten men, and the blow knocked the young lord backward off the dais. He landed on his back and the room grew darker as the torch clattered to the floor next to him.

With her other arm, the pale woman grabbed Menrick by the neck and lifted him off the ground.

“Who dares wake Shyressa?” The woman spoke her words with a quiet hiss, as if forming them without the help of air.

She shook the wizard. The empty blackness surrounding the woman began to shimmer and move, lighting the room in a dim purple glow. Her smooth, porcelain cheeks

withered and turned gray. Her paper-thin skin shriveled, pressing tight against her cheekbones and pulling away from her gums to reveal long, sharp fangs. Her lustrous blue-black hair slipped away, leaving in its place random clumps of graying straw clinging to a cracked, purplish scalp. The flowing gowns that had covered her soft, curved body became tattered and worn, leaving nothing more than a torn, hole-filled rag hanging from her bony frame. Her beauty and youth drifted away, leaving in their place a hard, hideous visage.

Purdun leaped to his feet, drew his sword, and charged up the dais. The woman held Menrick off the ground with one hand, and with her other she slapped at the oncoming lord. Her sharpened claws caught Purdun on the left side of his face and once again he was sent flying. His sword skidded across the dusty floor, and he landed hard on his back between two stone sarcophagi, the wind knocked from his lungs.

Seeming to float, Shyressa stood up inside her coffin, keeping her one-handed hold on Menrick's throat. Her claws dug in deeply and blood ran down his neck, staining the collar of his white robes. The old wizard's eyes were closed, and he struggled against her grip, scratching at her hand with his fingers. His lips moved feverishly, as if he were trying to coax the air into his lungs by talking to it.

Shyressa reached up and pulled Menrick's dagger from her shoulder. It left a deep wound, but had apparently hit nothing vital. Tossing it to the ground, she glared up at the wizard in her grip.

"You will pay for that." She shook him again.

Menrick looked like a child's toy, his legs flopping as if they had no bones while he dangled from the withered woman's grasp. He struggled, letting out a coughing, gurgling sound. Then his body seemed to relax, and he opened his eyes. His hands lit up with yellow-white fire, and five glowing orbs of energy, each a different color,

appeared circling his head. With a nod, the wizard sent the orbiting projectiles flying down on Shyressa.

The crypt lit up from the impact, the mix of colors sending hideously deformed shadows out to all corners of the room. The decrepit woman let out a hissing scream as the spells splashed over her skin.

Turning as best as he could, Menrick looked down on Purdun, who was still struggling to regain his breath.

“Run . . . my lord,” Menrick spat out in a strangled voice. His eyes seemed to bulge in his head.

Shyressa shook her head, obviously hurt and angered by the wizard’s attack. Her withered skin smoked where it had been struck and tattered bits of it fell from her face, revealing the stark white bone beneath. She let out an angry hiss and drew Menrick to her open mouth.

“No,” coughed out Purdun.

Biting down on Menrick’s neck with her massive fangs, Shyressa shook her face back and forth, tearing away the fresh flesh like a wild animal devouring its prey. The old wizard’s body went stiff as he let out an anguished wail. Blood flooded down Shyressa’s cheeks, spattering her hunched shoulders and the ragged remains of her dress.

Menrick shook for a moment longer, his body twitching in agony. Then his head slumped to one side, and he stopped struggling.

Menrick was gone.

Purdun felt his whole body tingle then go numb. Only by sheer force of will did he manage to pick himself up off the ground and grasp hold of the torch. Leaving his sword where it lay, the young lord turned away from the still-smoldering Shyressa and the body of his dead manservant and bolted for the stairs.

Lord Purdun ran with all of his might, skipping steps on the way up. The musty air burned his lungs as he drove his legs on, trying desperately to escape the damned tomb.

Finally, with a last burst of speed, Purdun forced himself out of the stairway, down the hall, and out the door into the sunlight. As soon as his foot touched the ground outside, the archway slammed closed. The smooth, polished stone that had been destroyed by the demon returned, leaving in its place a perfect replacement.

With only a single glance back, the young lord continued to run. Menrick, his mentor and confidant, was dead. Purdun had enough of that tomb for a lifetime. He wanted to put the whole episode as far behind him as humanly possible.



Deep inside the crypt, Shyressa pulled her teeth from the weeping neck of the wizard. Stepping down off the dais, she lowered his limp body to the ground beside one of the stone sarcophagi. Then she picked up the discarded blade lying on the floor. Examining the hilt, she read the inscription on it.

“Well, well,” said Shyressa. “Lord Purdun.” A smile crossed her weathered, now magically burned lips. “I think we shall meet again one day.” Turning to survey the room, she lifted her hands into the air. “Rise, my children.”

A loud grinding sound filled the chamber as the stone lids on all the sarcophagi began to slide away.