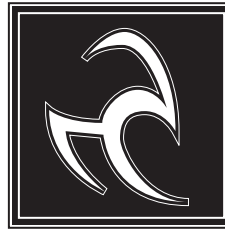


c h a p t e r



o n e

Gromph Baenre, Archmage of Menzoberranzan, flicked a long, obsidian-skinned finger. His office door, a black marble rectangle incised all over with lines of tiny runes, swung noiselessly shut and locked itself.

At least certain that no one could see him, the drow wizard rose from the white bone desk, faced the back wall, and swirled his hands in a complex pattern. A second doorway opened in the stippled calcite surface.

His dark elf vision unimpaired by the lack of light, Gromph stepped into the blackness beyond the new exit. There was no floor there to receive his tread, and for a moment he fell, then he invoked the power of levitation granted by the House Baenre insignia brooch that he was never without. He began to rise, floating up a featureless shaft. The cool air tingled and prickled against his skin as it always did, and it also carried a rank, unpleasant smell. Evidently one of the creatures native to this peculiar pseudoplane of existence had been nosing around the conduit.

Sure enough, something rattled above his head. The rank smell was

suddenly stronger, pungent enough to make his scarlet eyes water and sting his nose.

Gromph looked up. At first he saw nothing, but then he discerned a vague ovoid shape in the darkness.

The archmage wondered how the beast had gotten inside the shaft. Nothing ever had before. Had it torn a hole in the wall, oozed through like a ghost, or done something stranger still? Perhaps—

It plummeted at him, putting an end to his speculations.

Gromph could have effortlessly blasted the creature with one of his wands, but he preferred to conserve their power for genuine threats. Instead, he coolly dismissed the force of levitation lifting his body and allowed himself to drop back down the shaft. The fall would keep him away from the beast for long enough to cast a spell, and he didn't have to worry about hitting the ground. In this reality, there was no ground.

The bejeweled and sigil-adorned Robes of the Archmage flapping around him, he snatched a vial of venom from his pocket, set it alight with a spurt of flame from his fingertip, and recited an incantation. On the final syllable, he thrust his arm at the creature, and a glob of black, burning liquid erupted from his fingertips.

Propelled by magic, the blazing fluid hurtled straight up the shaft to splash against the descending predator. The creature emitted a piercing buzz that was likely a cry of pain. It floundered in the air, bouncing back and forth against the walls as it fell. Its body sizzled and bubbled as the spattered acid ate into it, but it resumed diving in a controlled manner.

Gromph was mildly impressed. A venom bolt would kill most creatures, certainly most of the petty vermin one encountered in the empty places between the worlds.

Manipulating an empty cocoon, he cast another spell. The beast's body crumpled and folded into itself, and for a heartbeat, it was a helplessly tumbling mouse—then it swelled and rippled back into its natural form.

All right, thought Gromph, then I'll cut you up.

He prepared to conjure a hail of blades, but at that moment, the creature accelerated.

Gromph had no idea the creature could descend any faster than it had hitherto, and he wasn't prepared for the sudden burst of speed. The

creature closed the distance between them in an instant, until it was hovering right in his face.

It had the melted or unfinished look common to many such beings. Rows of blank little eyes and a writhing proboscis sat off center in its bump of a head, only vaguely differentiated from its rubbery blob of a body. The monster possessed no wings, but it was flying—the goddess only knew how. Its legs were the most articulate part of it. Ten thin, segmented members terminated in barbed hooks, which lashed at Gromph again and again and again.

As he expected, the frenzied scratching failed to harm him. The enchantments woven into Gromph's *piwafwi*—not to mention a ring and an amulet—armored him at least as well as a suit of plate. Still, it irked him that he had allowed the beast to get so close, and he felt more irritated still when he noticed that the creature's exertions were flinging tiny smoking droplets of his own conjured acid onto his person.

He growled a final spell and snatched hold of the malodorous predator, seizing handfuls of the blubber on its torso. Instantly the magic began its work. Strength and vitality flowed into him, and he cried out at the shocking pleasure of it.

He was drinking his adversary's very life, much as a vampire might have done. The flying creature buzzed, thrashed, and became still. It withered, cracked, and rotted in his grasp. Finally, when he was certain he'd sucked out every vestige of life, he shoved it away.

Focusing his will, he arrested his fall and drifted upward again. After a few minutes, he spied the opening at the top of the shaft. He floated through, grabbed a convenient handrail, pulled himself over onto the floor of the workroom, then allowed his weight to return. His vestments rustled as they settled around him.

The large circular chamber was in most respects a part of the tower of Sorcere—the school of wizardry over which the Archmage presided—but Gromph was reasonably certain that none of the masters of Sorcere suspected its existence, accustomed to secret and magical architecture though they were. The place, lit by everlasting candles like the office below, was well nigh undetectable, even unguessable, because its tenant had set it a little apart from normal space and conventional time. In some subtle respects it existed in the distant past, in the days of Menzoberra the Kinless,

founder of the city, and in another way, in the remote and unknowable future. Yet on the level of gross mortal existence, it sat firmly in the present, and Gromph could work his most clandestine magic there secure in the knowledge that it would affect the Menzoberranzan of today. It was a neat trick, and sometimes he almost regretted killing the seven prisoners, master mages all, who had helped him build the place in exchange, they imagined, for their freedom. They had been genuine artists, but there was no point in creating a hidden refuge unless one ensured it would remain hidden.

Dusting a few specks and smears of the flying vermin from his nimble hands, Gromph moved to the section of the room containing an extensive collection of wizard's tools. Humming, he selected a spiral-carved ebony staff from a wyvern's-foot stand, an onyx-studded iron amulet from its velvet-lined box, and a wickedly curved athame from a rack of similar ritual knives. He sniffed several ceramic pots of incense before finally selecting, as he often did, the essence of black lotus.

As he murmured a invocation to the Abyssal powers and lit a brazen censor with the tame little flame he could conjure at will, he hesitated. To his surprise, he found himself wondering if he truly wanted to proceed.

Menzoberranzan was in desperate straits, even though most of her citizens hadn't yet realized it. In Gromph's place, many another wizard would embrace the situation as an unparalleled opportunity to enhance his own power, but the archmage saw deeper. The city had experienced too many shocks and setbacks in recent years. Another upheaval could cripple or even destroy it, and he didn't fancy life in a Menzoberranzan that was merely a broken mockery of its former glory. Nor did he see himself as a homeless wanderer begging sanctuary and employment from the indifferent rulers of some foreign realm. He had resolved to correct the current problem, not exploit it.

Except I am about to exploit it in at least a limited way, aren't I? he thought. Give in to temptation and seize the advantage, even if so doing further destabilizes the already precarious status quo.

Gromph snorted his momentary and uncharacteristic misgivings away. The drow were children of chaos—of paradox, contradiction, and perhaps even perversity. It was the source of their strength. So yes, curse it, why not walk in two opposite directions at the same time? When would he get another chance to so alter his circumstances?

He moved to one of the complex pentacles inlaid in gold on the marble floor and traced the tip of the black staff along its curves and angles, sealing it. That done, he swept the athame in ritual passes and chanted a rhyme that returned to its own beginning like a serpent swallowing its tail. The cloying sweetness of black lotus hung in the air, and he could feel the narcotic vapors lifting his consciousness into a state of almost painful concentration and lucidity.

He lost all track of time, had no idea whether he'd been reciting for ten minutes or an hour, but the moment finally came when he'd recited long enough. The netherspirit Beradax appeared in the center of the pentacle, seeming to jerk up out of the floor like a fish at the end of an angler's line.

His centuries of wizardry had rendered Gromph about as indifferent to ugliness and grotesquerie as a member of his callous race could get, yet even he found Beradax an unpleasant spectacle. The creature wore the approximate shape of a dark elf female or perhaps a human woman, but her body was made of soft, wet, glistening eyeballs adhering together. About half of them had the crimson irises characteristic of the drow, while the rest were blue, brown, green, gray—a miscellany of the colors commonly found in lesser races.

Her body flowing, her shape warping, Beradax flung herself at her summoner. Fortunately, she couldn't pass beyond the edge of the pentacle. She slammed into an unseen barrier with a wet, slapping sound, then rebounded.

Undeterred, she lunged a second time with the same lack of success. Her resentment and malice infinite, she would spring a million times if left to her own devices. Gromph had caught her, trapped her, but something more was needed if they were to converse. He shoved the ritual dagger into his belly.

Beradax reeled. The eyeballs comprising her own stomach churned and shuddered. A few fell away from the central mass to fade and vanish in the air.

"*Kill you!*" she screamed, her shrill voice unnaturally loud, her gaping mouth affording a shadowy glimpse of the eyeball bumps lining the interior. "I'll kill you, wizard!"

"No, slave, you will not," Gromph said. He realized the chanting and incense had parched his throat, and he swallowed the dryness away. "You'll

serve me. You'll calm yourself and submit, unless you want another taste of the blade."

"Kill you!"

Beradax sprang at him again and kept springing while he pulled the athame back and forth through his abdomen. Finally she collapsed to her knees.

"I submit," she growled

"Good." Gromph extracted the athame. It didn't leave a tear in his robes or in his flesh, which was to say, the knife's enchantments had worked precisely as expected, hurting the demon rather than him.

Beradax's belly stopped heaving and shaking.

"What do you want, drow?" the creature asked. "Information? Tell me, so I can discharge my errand and depart."

"Not information," the dark elf said. He'd summoned scores of nether-spirits over the past month, and none had been able to tell him what he wished to know. He was certain Beradax was no wiser than the rest. "I want you to kill my sister Quenthel."

Gromph had hated Quenthel for a long time. She always treated him like some retainer, even though he too was a Baenre, a noble of the First House of Menzoberranzan, and the city's greatest wizard besides. In her eyes, he thought, only high priestesses deserved respect.

His antipathy only intensified as the two of them attempted to advise their mother, Matron Mother Baenre, the uncrowned queen of Menzoberranzan. Predictably, they'd disagreed on every matter of policy from trade to war to mining and had vexed one another no end.

Gromph's animus intensified still further when Quenthel became Mistress of Arach-Tinilith, the school for priestesses. The mistress governed the entire Academy, Sorcere included, and thus Gromph had found himself obliged to contend with her—indeed, to suffer her oversight—in this one-time haven as well.

Still, he might have endured Quenthel's arrogance and meddling indefinitely, if not for their mother's sudden and unexpected death.

Counseling the former matron mother had been more an honor than a treat. She generally ignored advice, and her deputies were lucky if she let it go at that. Often enough, she responded to their suggestions with a torrent of abuse.

But Triel, Gromph's other sister and the new head of House Baenre, had, over time, proved to be a different sort of sovereign. Indecisive, overwhelmed by the responsibilities of her new office, she relied heavily on the opinions of her siblings.

That meant the archmage, though a "mere male," could theoretically rule Menzoberranzan from behind the throne, and at long last order all things to please himself. But only if he disposed of the matron's other counselor, the damnably persuasive Quenthel, who continued to oppose him on virtually every matter. He'd been contemplating her assassination for a long time, until the present situation afforded him an irresistible opportunity.

"You send me to my death!" Beradax protested.

"Your life or death are of no importance," Gromph replied, "only my will matters. Still, you may survive. Arach-Tinilith has changed, as you know very well."

"Even now, the Academy is warded by all the old enchantments."

"I'll dissolve the barriers for you."

"I won't go!"

"Nonsense. You've submitted and must obey. Stop blathering before I lose my patience."

He hefted the athame, and Beradax seemed to slump.

"Very well, wizard, send me and be damned. I'll kill her as I will one day butcher you."

"You can't go quite yet. For all your bluster, you're the lowliest kind of netherspirit, a grub crawling on the floor of Hell, but tonight you'll wear the form of a genuine demon, to make the proper impression on the residents of the temple."

"No!"

Gromph lifted his staff in both hands and shouted words of power. Beradax howled in agony as her mass of eyeballs flowed and humped into something quite different.

Afterward, Gromph descended to his office. He had an appointment with a different kind of agent.



As Pharaun Mizzrym and Ryld Argith strolled through the cool air, fresher than that pent up in Melee-Magthere, the latter looked about Tier Breche, realized he hadn't bothered to set foot outside in days, and rather wondered why, for the view was as spectacular as ever.

Tier Breche, home to the Academy since that institution's founding, was a large cavern where the labor of countless spellcasters, artisans, and slaves had turned enormous stalagmites and other masses of rocks into three extraordinary citadels. To the east rose pyramidal Melee-Magthere, where Ryld and others like him turned callow young drow into warriors. By the western wall stood the many-spired tower of Sorcere, where Pharaun and his colleagues taught wizardry, while to the north crouched the largest and most imposing school of all, Arach-Tinilith, a temple built in the eight-limbed shape of a spider. Inside, the priestesses of Lolth, goddess of arachnids, chaos, assassins, and the drow race, trained dark elf maidens to serve the deity in their turn.

And yet, magnificent as was Tier Breche, considered in the proper context, it was only a detail in a scene of far greater splendor. The Academy sat in a side cavern, a mere nook opening partway up the wall of a truly prodigious vault. The primary chamber was two miles wide and a thousand feet high, and filling all that space was Menzoberranzan.

On the cavern floor, castles, hewn like the Academy from natural protrusions of calcite, shone blue, green, and violet amid the darkness. The phosphorescent mansions served to delineate the plateau of Qu'ellarz'orl, where the Baenre and those Houses nearly as powerful made their homes; the West Wall district, where lesser but still well-established noble families schemed how to supplant the dwellers on Qu'ellarz'orl; and Narbondellyn, where parvenus plotted to replace the inhabitants of West Wall. Still other palaces, cut from stalactites, hung from the lofty ceiling.

The nobles of Menzoberranzan had set their homes glowing to display their immensity, their graceful lines, and the ornamentation sculpted about their walls. Most of the carvings featured spiders and webs, scarcely surprising, Ryld supposed, in a realm where Lolth was the only deity anyone worshiped, and her clergy ruled in the temporal sense as well as the spiritual one.

For some reason, Ryld found the persistence of the motif vaguely oppressive, so he shifted his attention to other details. If a drow had good

eyes, he could make out the frigid depths of the lake called Donigarten at the narrow eastern end of the vault. Cattle-like beasts called rothé and the goblin slaves who herded them lived on an island in the center of the lake.

And there was Narbondel itself, of course. It was the only piece of unworked stone remaining on the cavern floor, a thick, irregular column extending all the way to the ceiling. At the start of every day, the Archmage of Menzoberranzan cast a spell into the base of it, heating it until the rock glowed. Since the radiance rose through the stone at a constant rate, its progress enabled the residents of the city to tell the time.

In their way, the Master of Melee-Magthere supposed, he and Pharaun were, if nowhere near as grand a sight as the vista before them, at least a peculiar one by virtue of the contrasts between them. With his slender build, graceful manner, foppish, elegant attire, and intricate coiffure, the Mizzrym mage epitomized what a sophisticated noble and wizard should be. Ryld, on the other hand was an oddity. He was huge for a member of his sex, bigger than many females, with a burly, broad-shouldered frame better suited to a brutish human than a dark elf. He compounded his strangeness by wearing a dwarven breastplate and vambraces in preference to light, supple mail. The armor sometimes caused others to eye him askance, but he'd found that it maximized his effectiveness as a warrior, and that, he'd always believed, was what really mattered.

Ryld and Pharaun walked to the edge of Tier Breche and sat down with their legs dangling over the sheer drop-off. They were only a few yards from the head of the staircase that connected the Academy with the city below, and at the top of those steps, beside the twin pillars, a pair of sentries—last-year students of Melee-Magthere—stood watch. Ryld thought that he and Pharaun were distant enough for privacy if they kept their voices low.

Low, but not silent, curse it. Ever the sensualist, the mage sat savoring the panorama below him, obviously prolonging his contemplation well past the point where Ryld's mouth had begun to tighten with impatience, and never mind that on the walk up, he'd admired the view himself.

"We drow don't love one another, except in the carnal sense," Pharaun remarked at last, "but I think one could almost love Menzoberranzan itself, don't you? Or at least take a profound pride in it."

Ryld shrugged. "If you say so."

"You sound less than rhapsodic. Feeling morose again today?"

"I'm all right. Better, at least, now that I see you still alive."

"You assumed Gromph had executed me? Does my offense seem so grievous, then? Have you never annihilated a single specimen of our tender young cadets?"

"That depends on how you look at it," Ryld replied. "Combat training is inherently dangerous. Accidents happen, but no one has ever questioned that they *were* accidents occurring during the course of Melee-Magthere's legitimate business. The goddess knows, I never lost seven in a single hour, two of them from Houses with seats on the Council. How does such a thing happen?"

"I needed seven assistants with a degree of magical expertise to help me perform the summoning ritual. Had I called upon full-fledged wizards, they would have joined the experiment as equal partners. They would have emerged from the ritual possessed of the same newly discovered secrets as myself, equally able to conjure and control the Sarthos demon. Naturally I wished to avoid such a sharing, so I opted to use apprentices instead."

Pharaun grinned and continued, "In retrospect, I must admit that it may not have been a good idea. The fiend didn't even require seven heartbeats to smash them all."

An updraft wafted past Ryld's face, carrying the constant murmur of the metropolis below. He caught its scent as well, a complex odor made of cooking smoke, incense, perfume, the stink of unwashed thralls, and a thousand other things.

"Why perform such a dangerous ritual in the first place?" he asked.

Pharaun smiled as if it was a silly question. Perhaps it was.

"To become more powerful, of course," the wizard answered. "At present, I'm one of the thirty most puissant mages in the city. If I controlled the Sarthos demon, I'd be one of the five. Perhaps even the first, mightier than dreary old Gromph himself."

"I see."

Ambition was an essential part of the drow character, and Ryld sometimes envied Pharaun his still-passionate investment in the struggle for status. The warrior supposed that he himself had achieved the pinnacle of his ambitions when he became one of the lesser masters of Melee-Magthere, for certainly he, born a commoner, could never climb any

higher. From that day forward, he'd stopped peering hungrily upward and concentrated on looking down, to guard against all those who wished to kill him in hopes of ascending to his position.

Pharaun was a Master of Sorcere as Ryld was a Master of Melee-Magthere, but perhaps, being of noble blood, Pharaun really did aspire to assassinate the formidable Gromph Baenre and seize his office. Even if he didn't, wizards, by the nature of their intricate and clandestine art, maintained a rivalry that encompassed more than who was a master, who was chief wizard in a great House, and who was neither. They also cared about such things as who could know the most esoteric secrets, could conjure the deadliest specter, or see most clearly into the future. In fact, they cared so deeply that they occasionally sought to murder each other and plunder one another's spellbooks even when such hostilities ran counter to the interests of their Houses, severing an alliance or disrupting a negotiation.

"Now," Pharaun said, reaching inside the elegant folds of his *piwafwi* and producing a silver flask, "I'll have to turn my back on the Sarthos demon for a while. I hope the poor behemoth won't be lonely without me."

He unscrewed the bottle, took a sip, and passed the container to Ryld.

Ryld hoped the flask didn't contain wine or an exotic liqueur. Pharaun was forever pressing such libations on him and insisting that he try to recognize all the elements that allegedly blended together to create the taste, even though Ryld had demonstrated time and again that his palate was incapable of such a dissection.

He drank and was pleased to find that for a change, the flask contained simple brandy, probably imported at some expense from the inhospitable world that lay like a rind atop the Underdark, baking in the excruciating sunlight. The liquor burned his mouth and kindled a warm glow in his stomach.

He handed the brandy back to Pharaun and said, "I assume Gromph told you to leave the entity alone."

"In effect. He assigned me another task to occupy my time. Should I succeed, the archmage will forgive me my transgressions. Should I fail . . . well, I'll hope for a nice beheading or garroting, but I'm not so unrealistic as to expect anything that quick."

"What task?"



"A number of males have eloped from their families, and not to a merchant clan or Bregan D'aerthe either but to an unknown destination. I'm supposed to find them."

Pharaun took another sip, then offered the flask again.

"What did they steal?" asked Ryld, waving off the drink.

Pharaun smiled and said, "That's a good guess, but you're wrong. As far as I know, no one walked off with anything important. You see, it isn't just a few fellows from one particular House. It's a bunch of them from any number of homes, noble and common alike."

"All right, but so what? Why does the Archmage of Menzoberranzan care?"

"I don't know. He offered some vague excuse of an explanation, but there's something—several somethings, belike—that he's not telling me."

"That's not going to make your job any easier."

"How true. The old tyrant did condescend to say that he isn't the only one interested in the fugitives' whereabouts. The priestesses are equally concerned, but that emphatically did not make them want to join forces with Gromph. Matron Mother Baenre herself ordered him to drop the matter."

"Matron Baenre," said Ryld. "I like this less with every word you speak."

"Oh, I don't know. Just because Triel Baenre rules all Menzoberranzan, and I'm about to flout her express wishes . . . Anyway, the archmage says he can no longer investigate the disappearances himself. Seems the ladies have their eyes on him, but, lucky me, I am not so burdened."

"That doesn't mean you're going to find the missing males. If they fled the city, they could be anywhere in the Underdark by now."

"Please," said Pharaun with a grin, "you don't have to try to cheer me up. Actually, I'm going to start looking in Eastmyr and the Braeryn. Apparently some of the runaways were last sighted in those déclassé vicinities, and perhaps they linger there still. Even if they do intend to depart Menzoberranzan, they may still be making preparations for the journey."

"If they've already decamped," Ryld said, "you might at least find a witness who can at tell you what tunnel they took. It's a sensible plan, but I can think of another. It's reckless to gamble your life when you don't even understand the game. You could flee Menzoberranzan yourself. With your wizardry, you're one of the few people capable of undertaking such a dangerous trek alone."

"I could try," Pharaun said, "but I suspect Gromph would track me down. Even if he didn't, I would have lost my home and forfeited the rank I worked my whole life to earn. Would you give up being a master just to avoid a spot of danger?"

"No."

"Then you understand my predicament. I imagine you've also figured out why I called on you today."

"I think so."

"Of course you have. Whatever it is that's truly transpiring, my chances of survival improve if I have a comrade to watch my back."

Ryld scowled. "You mean, a comrade willing to defy the express will of Matron Mother Baenre and risk running afoul of the Archmage of Menzoberranzan as well."

"Quite, and by a happy coincidence you have the look of a drow in need of a break from his daily routine. You know you're bored to death. It's painful to watch you grouch your way through the day."

Ryld pondered for a moment, then said, "All right. Maybe we'll find out something we can turn to our advantage."

"Thank you, my friend. I owe you." Pharaun took a drink and held out the flask again. "Have the rest. There's only a swallow left. We seem to have guzzled the whole pint in just a few minutes, though that scarcely seems possible, refined, genteel fellows that we—"

Something crackled and sizzled above their heads. Waves of pressure beat down on them. Ryld looked up, cursed, scrambled to his feet, and drew a dagger, meanwhile wishing he'd strapped on his weapons before stepping outside Melee-Magthere.

Pharaun rose in a more leisurely fashion.

"Well," he said, "this is interesting."

