



B.A. Salvatore's
WAR OF THE SPIDER QUEEN BOOK II

Insurrection



THOMAS M. REID



R . A . S A L V A T O R E ' S

War of the Spider Queen Book II: Insurrection

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Distributed in the United States by Holtzbrinck Publishing.
Distributed in Canada by Fenn Ltd.

Distributed to the hobby, toy, and comic trade in the United States and Canada
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Distributed worldwide by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. and regional distributors.

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Made in the U.S.A.

Cover art by Brom
First Printing: December 2002
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2001097183

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

US ISBN: 0-7869-2786-0
UK ISBN: 0-7869-2787-9
620-88613-001-EN

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She felt as if a bit of herself was sliding from her womb, and for a moment she felt diminished, as if she were giving too much away.

The regret was fleeting.

For in chaos, the one would become many, and the many would travel along diverse roads and to goals that seemed equally diverse but were, in effect, one and the same. In the end there would be one again, and it would be as it had been. This was rebirth more than birth; this was growth more than diminishment or separation.

This was as it had been through the millennia and how it must be for her to persevere through the ages to come.

She was vulnerable now—she knew that—and so many enemies would strike at her, given the chance. So many of her own minions would deign to replace her, given the chance.

But they, all of them, held their weapons in defense, she knew, or in aspirations of conquests that seemed grand but were, in the vast scale of time and space, tiny and inconsequential.

More than anything else, it was the understanding and appreciation of time and space, the foresight to view events as they might be seen a hundred years hence, a thousand years hence, that truly separated the deities from the mortals, the gods from the chattel. A moment of weakness in exchange for a millennium of surging power. . . .

So, in spite of her vulnerability, in spite of her weakness (which she hated above all else), she was filled with joy as another egg slid from her arachnid torso.

For the growing essence in the egg was her.

U n a p t e r



U n e

“And why should my aunt trust anyone who sends a male to do her work for her?” Eliss’pra said, staring disdainfully down her nose at Zammzt.

The drow priestess reclined imperiously upon an overstuffed couch that had been further padded with an assortment of plush fabrics, as much for decoration as comfort. Quorlana thought the slender dark elf should have looked oddly out of place in the richly appointed private lounge, dressed as she was in her finely crafted chain shirt and with her mace close at hand. Yet Eliss’pra somehow managed to appear as though she was counted among House Unnamed’s most exclusive clientele. Quorlana wrinkled her nose in distaste; she knew well which House Eliss’pra represented, and she found that the haughty drow reclining opposite her exhibited a little bit too much of her aunt’s superior affectations.

Zammzt inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the other dark elf’s concern.

"My mistress has given me certain . . . gifts that she hopes express her complete and enthusiastic sincerity in this matter," he said. "She also wishes me to inform you that there will be many more of them once the agreement is sealed. Perhaps that will assuage your own fears, as well," he added with what he must have intended as a deferential smile, though Quorlana found it to be more feral than anything. Zammzt was not a handsome male at all.

"Your 'mistress,'" Eliss'pra replied, avoiding both appellations and names, as the five of them gathered there had agreed at the outset, "is asking for a great deal from my aunt, indeed from each of the Houses represented here. Gifts are not nearly a generous enough token of trust. You must do better than that."

"Yes," Nadal chimed in, sitting just to Quorlana's right. "My grandmother will not even consider this alliance without some serious proof that House—" The drow male, dressed in a rather plain *piwafwi*, snapped his mouth shut in mid-word. His insignia proclaimed him as wizard member of the Disciples of Phelthong. He caught his breath and continued, "I mean your mistress—that your mistress is actually committing these funds you speak of."

He seemed chagrined that he had nearly divulged a name, but the male maintained his firm expression.

"He's right," Dylsinae added from Quorlana's other side, her smooth, beautiful skin nearly glowing from the scented oils that she habitually slathered on herself. Her gauzy, hugging dress contrasted sharply with Eliss'pra's armor, reflecting her propensity for partaking in hedonistic pleasures. Her sister, the matron mother, was perhaps even more decadent. "None of those whom we represent will lift a finger until you give us some evidence that we aren't all putting our own heads on pikes. There are far more . . . interesting . . . pastimes to indulge in than rebellion," Dylsinae finished, stretching languidly.

Quorlana wished she were not sitting quite so close to the harlot. The perfume of her oils was sickly sweet.

Despite her general distaste for the other four drow, Quorlana agreed with them on this matter, and she admitted as much to the group.

“If my mother were to ally our own House with you other four lesser Houses against our common enemies, she would need certain assurances that we would not be left by the rest of you to dangle as scapegoats the moment events turned difficult. I’m not at all certain such a thing exists.”

“Believe me,” Zammzt responded, circling to make eye contact with each of them in turn, “I understand your concerns and your reluctance. As I said, these gifts I have been ordered to bestow upon your Houses are but a small token of my mistress’s commitment to this alliance.”

He reached inside his *piwafwi* and produced a scroll tube, and a rather ornate one, at that. After slipping a fat roll of parchment from the tube, he unfurled the scroll. Quorlana sat forward in her own chair, suddenly curious as to what the dark elf male might have.

Scanning the contents of his stack of curled parchment, Zammzt sorted them and began to circle the gathering, removing a set of pages and handing them to each co-conspirator in turn. When he handed Quorlana her sheaf, she took it from him gingerly, uncertain what kind of magical trap might be inlaid in the pages. She eyed them carefully, but her suspicions were dispelled; they were spells, not curses. He was offering them scrolls as gifts!

Quorlana felt elation rise up into her. Such a treasure was priceless in days of such uncertainty and unease. The Dark Mother’s absence had put a strain on every priestess who worshiped her. Quorlana herself had not been able to weave her own divine magic in four ten-days, and she broke out into a sweat every time she thought on it. But with scrolls, the fear, the anxiety, the sense of hopelessness might be staved off, at least for a time.

It was only with the utmost effort that the drow priestess resisted the urge to read through the scrolls there and then. Forcing herself to remember whom she served, at least for the moment, she instead pocketed the parchment sheets inside her *piwafwi* and turned her attention back to the clandestine gathering in front of her.

“The only other proof strong enough to convince you of our sincerity would be moving forward with hiring the mercenaries,” Zammzt said, though none of the other dark elves seemed to be paying the least bit of attention to him.

Eliss'pra and Dylsinae were both wide-eyed with the same excitement Quorlana felt. Nadal, though not as personally thrilled—the spells were worthless to him as a wizard—could still recognize the value of the gifts.

“It should be obvious to each of you,” Zammzt continued, “that once our House approaches outsiders, there is no turning back. We would be completely committed, with or without your pledge of alliance. That, my charming companions, is putting the cart before the lizard.”

“Nonetheless,” Eliss'pra answered, still smiling as she gazed on the scrolls in her hands, “that is precisely what you must do if you wish to count my aunt among your allies.”

“Yes,” Dylsinae agreed.

Nadal nodded his concurrence.

“I think my mother would be willing to accept those terms. Especially after she sees these,” Quorlana voiced her assent, then gestured at the scrolls tucked away in her *piwafwi*. “Most definitely if there are more where these came from.”

How in the Underdark do they have precious scrolls to spare? she wondered.

Zammzt frowned and said, “I am not promising anything. I very much doubt that I can convince her to agree to this, but if she is willing, I will procure the services of the mercenaries and bring you the proof.”

No one spoke. They were all one step away from the point of no return, and despite the fact that none of them were actually in a position to make the decision, they felt the weight of that decision just as heavily.

“Then we will meet again after you have hired the army,” Eliss'pra said, rising from her couch. “Until then, I don't wish to see any of you near me, not even on the same web street.”

Gripping her mace tightly, the drow priestess stalked out of the private lounge.

One by one, the others also departed, even Zammzt, until Quorlana was alone in the room.

Our time has come, the drow insisted silently. Lolth has issued a

challenge. The great Houses of Ched Nasad will fall, and ours will rise up to take their place. Our time has come at last.



Aliisza was so used to the tanarukks' constant grunting, snarling, and slaving that she rarely heard it anymore, so the quiet that surrounded her as she strode alone along the dwarven thoroughfare was noticeable. Being out and about in ancient Ammarindar without an escort of the half-fiend, half-orc hordes was a refreshing change. Kaanyr rarely asked her to—she refused to say “let”—do anything without an armed escort anymore, so she had almost forgotten how pleasant solitude really was. Still, as much as she was enjoying her privacy, however brief it might be, she had a purpose, and it quickened her steps.

She moved to the end of a long and broad boulevard, which had been hewn by long-dead dwarves from the unmarred bedrock of the Underdark itself eons ago. Though she barely noticed it, the craftsmanship of the wide passageway was exquisite. Every angle was perfect, every column and cornice was thick and finely decorated with runes and stylized images of the stout folk. At the terminus of the boulevard, Aliisza entered a large chamber, which itself was large enough to have engulfed a small surface town. She turned into a side tunnel that would allow her to cut across several main passages and reach the avenue that would take her directly to Kaanyr's palace, deep in the center of the old city. It still surprised her how empty the city could be, even with all of the Sceptered One's Scourged Legions roaming around. She crossed the avenues and found the path she wanted, then hurried toward the palace.

A pair of tanarukk guards flanked the doorway into the throne room. The stocky, gray-green humanoids were hunched over as usual, their prominent tusks jutting forward defiantly from overly large lower jaws as they peered at her with their squinty red eyes. To Aliisza, it almost appeared that the two beasts were preparing to charge forward and ram her with their low, sloping foreheads. Aliisza knew

that with her magic the scalelike ridges protruding from atop those foreheads were no threat to her, but still the creatures seemed uncertain of who she was, for they kept their battle-axes crossed before the opening as she approached. Finally, just before it seemed that she was actually going to have to slow her pace and say something—which would have made her very cross—the two coarse-haired, nearly naked beasts stepped aside and allowed her to enter without breaking her stride. She smiled to herself, wondering how much fun it would have been to flay them alive.

Passing through several outer chambers, Aliisza crossed the threshold into the throne room itself and spied the marquis cambion lounging on his throne, a great, hideous chair constructed of the bones of his enemies. Every time she saw the thing, she was reminded of how crass it was. She knew too many fiends who considered sitting atop a pile of bones to be some sort of symbol of power and glory, but in her opinion, it exhibited no class, no subtlety. It was Kaanyr Vhok's single biggest lack of vision.

Kaanyr had thrown one leg over the armrest of the throne and sat with his chin resting in his cupped hand, elbow against his knee. He was staring off into the upper reaches of the chamber, obviously thinking and oblivious to her.

Aliisza almost unconsciously began to saunter provocatively as she closed the distance between them, and yet she found that she was admiring his form as much as she hoped he was appreciating hers. His graying hair was roguishly disheveled and, combined with his swept-back ears, gave him the appearance of a maturing, if somewhat devil-may-care, half-elf. Aliisza crooked her mouth in a sly smile, thinking of him engaging in the many subterfuges he was so fond of, passing himself off on the surface world as a member of that fair race.

Kaanyr finally heard his consort's footsteps and looked up at her, his features brightening, though whether it was simply for the sight of her or the news she bore, she was not sure. She reached the first steps of the dais and climbed to where he sat, allowing just a hint of a pout to creep into her visage.

"Ah, my delectable one, you've come, and with news, I hope?" Kaanyr asked, straightening himself and patting his thigh.

Aliisza stuck out her tongue at him and sashayed the remaining distance to plop herself down atop his lap.

“You never just ravish me anymore, Kaanyr,” she pretended to complain, wriggling her backside as she settled. “You only love me for the work I do for you.”

“Oh, that’s not fair, little one,” Vhok replied, running his hand lovingly down one of her black, shiny leather wings. “Nor is it particularly true.”

With that, he reached up with his other hand, and placing it behind her lustrous black curls, crushed her to him, engaging her mouth with his own in a deep, spine-tingling kiss. For the briefest of moments she considered resisting him, playing one of the infinite variations of the games the two of them seemed to love so much, but the thought was short-lived. His hand strayed down her throat to the hollow of her neck, and it continued lower still. She practically buzzed at his touch, and she knew that with the news she brought him, such flirtations would only break the spell.

As it was, Kaanyr still pulled away after a moment’s heated embrace and said, “Enough. Tell me what you found out.”

This time, Aliisza really did pout. His caresses on her wings and elsewhere left her panting slightly, and important news or not, she was not ready to be cast aside so quickly. She considered withholding the information for a time, sending a subtle message that she was not to be trifled with. He might rule this place, but she was not his servant. She was consort, she was advisor, and she was free to find another lover, should he cease to satisfy her. Satisfying an alu—the daughter of a succubus and a human mate—was a challenge few were up to. Kaanyr was one of those few. She decided to tell him her news.

“They haven’t veered from their course, though it’s apparent they know we’re closing in. Their scouts have spotted our skirmishers and have continued to avoid contact. We will have them pinned against the Araumycos, soon.”

“You’re certain they’re not here to spy or to wage war? No quick strikes before vanishing into the wilds?”

Kaanyr was absently stroking one of her wings as he asked this, and the alu-fiend shivered in delight. He seemed not to notice her reaction.

“Fairly certain. They are apparently headed southeast, toward Ched Nasad. Each time we cut off their route, they seek out another. They seem intent on keeping to that path.”

“Yet, they are not a caravan,” he said. “They don’t have goods or pack animals. In fact, they travel unreasonably lightly armed for drow. They are definitely up to something. The question is, what?”

Aliisza shivered again, though this time it was as much from the anticipation of the next bit of news as from Kaanyr’s absentminded petting.

“Oh, definitely not a caravan,” she told him. “It’s the strangest drow entourage I think I’ve seen wandering around the wilds. They have a draegloth with them.”

Kaanyr straightened, staring straight into Aliisza’s eyes, and asked, “A draegloth? Are you sure?”

When the alu nodded, he pursed his lips.

“Interesting. This just gets more and more intriguing. First, we haven’t seen a drow caravan of any sort in the last few tendays. Finally, when a party of drow *do* venture out, they come straight through here, something they would normally avoid like the stink on a dretch, and lastly, they have a draegloth accompanying them, which means drow noble Houses are somehow personally involved. What in the Nine Hells are they up to?”

Vhok resumed staring off into the dark distance, again absently caressing his consort, this time letting his fingers trail gently down her ribs, which were exposed through the lacing of her shiny black leather corset. She sighed in delight but forced herself to stay focused.

“There’s more. I listened in on a conversation when they stopped to rest. One of them, definitely a mage of some sort, was taunting another, who looked like a priestess.”

“One of the males giving lip to a female? That can’t last long.”

“Not just any female. He referred to her as ‘the Mistress of the Academy.’ ”

Kaanyr sat upright, his stare deeply penetrating her own.

“Oh, really,” he said in a tone so intrigued, he never noticed that his move nearly made Aliisza fall to the floor at his feet.

She managed to maintain her balance, but she was forced to stand to avoid looking silly. She glared at the cambion.

He went on, oblivious, “Oh, this is just too good. One of the highest drow priestesses in all of Menzoberranzan is trying to sneak incognito through my tiny little domain. And she’s letting a wizard run his mouth at her. No caravans for more than a month, and now this. This is too much fun!”

Kaanyr turned to face Aliisza once more, and upon seeing her glare, he cocked his head in confusion.

“What? What’s wrong?”

The alu fumed, “You have no idea, do you?”

Kaanyr spread his hands helplessly and shook his head.

“Well, then I’m not going to tell you!” she snapped, and turned away from him.

“Aliisza.” Vhok’s voice was deep and commanding, and it sent shivers down her spine. He was angry, just as she’d hoped. “Aliisza, look at me.”

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, letting one arched eyebrow rise questioningly. He had risen from the throne and was standing with his hands on his hips.

“Aliisza, I don’t have time for this. Look at me!”

She shivered in spite of herself and turned fully around to face her lover. His eyes smoldered and made her melt. She pouted just a little, to let him know that she didn’t like being chastised, but she was finished playing the game.

Vhok nodded slightly in satisfaction.

His visage softened a bit, and he said, “Whatever I did, I’ll make it up to you later. Right now, though, you have to get back over there and find out what’s going on. See if you can get face to face with them and ‘invite’ them to pay us a visit. But be careful. I don’t want this to explode in my face. If a high priestess and a draegloth are part of this group, then the rest of them are dangerous, too. Keep the Scourged close, to hem them in, but don’t waste too many bodies on an all-out attack. But also don’t make it too obvious that you’re holding them back. Also, don’t—”

Aliisza rolled her eyes, feeling a little insulted.

“I’ve done this a time or two before, you know,” she interrupted, her voice thick with sarcasm. “I think I know what to do. But . . .”

She stepped closer to Kaanyr—into him, really—rising up on her tiptoes and wrapping her arms around his waist and curling one smooth, bare leg around the back of his calf. She drew herself close, let her body press against his, and continued.

“When I’m done with this little task,” she said, her voice smoky with desire, “you’re going to tend to *my* needs for a while.” She leaned up and nibbled on his ear, then whispered, “Your teasing is working too well, love.”



Triel didn’t like brooding, but she caught herself doing it frequently of late. This time, when she realized she was at it again, she was suddenly aware of the faces of the other seven matrons, looking at her expectantly. She blinked and stared back at them for a moment, trying to recall the words of the conversation that had droned in the background of her thoughts. She could remember voices but nothing more.

“I asked,” Matron Miz’ri Mizzrym said, “what thoughts have you given to other courses of action, should your sister fail to return?”

When Triel still did not respond, the hard-faced matron mother added, “There *are* thoughts floating around somewhere in there today, aren’t there, Mother?”

Triel blinked again, jolted fully back to the conversation at hand by the Mizzrym’s biting words, focusing her attention where it ought to be instead of on the empty sensation she felt where the goddess’s presence should have been. Other courses of action . . .

“Of course,” she replied at last. “I’ve been giving that considerable thought, but before we delve too deeply into alternatives, I think we must exercise some patience.”

Matron Mez’Barris Armgo snorted. “Have you been listening to a word we’ve said in the last five minutes, Mother? Patience is a luxury we no longer have. We exhausted so much of our reserves of magic quelling the uprising we might—*might*, I say—be able to withstand another major insurrection, should one occur. As much as I love a

good battle, putting down another slave rebellion would be wasteful, when it's only a matter of time before Gracklstugh or the survivors of Blingdenstone determine that we are powerless, without . . .”

The hulking, brutish matron mother faltered, unwilling, even as forward and tactless as she usually was, to put words to the crisis they all faced.

“If they aren’t already aware,” Zeerith Q’Xorlarrin interjected, glossing over Mez’Barris’s unfinished thought. “Even now, one or more of the other nations could be amassing an army to drive to our gates. New voices could be whispering poison into the ears of the lesser creatures down in the Braeryn or the Bazaar, voices belonging to those clever enough to mask their true identities, their true intent. It’s something we must consider and discuss.”

“Oh, yes,” Yasraena Dyrr said contemptuously. “Yes, let’s sit here and discuss; not act, never act. We are afraid to venture forth into our own city!”

“Bite your tongue!” Triel snapped, growing more and more incensed.

She was angry not only at the direction of the conversation—suggestions of cowardice from the High Council!—but also at the ridicule, the unusually open vitriolic nature, of the other matrons’ words. Ridicule directed at her.

“If there is one among us afraid to walk our own streets, she need no longer sit on this Council. Are you one such, Yasraena?”

The matron mother from House Agrach Dyrr grimaced at the chastisement she was receiving, and Triel realized it was not merely because Yasraena knew she had overstepped herself. It was the matron of House Baenre, supposedly an ally to Yasraena’s house, that was administering this stern lecture. Triel intended it as such. It was time to send a message, to remind the other matron mothers that she still sat at the top of the power structure and she would not tolerate such insubordination from any of those sitting around her, ally or not.

“Perhaps Matron Q’Xorlarrin is right,” Miz’ri Mizzrym said quietly, in an obvious attempt to steer the conversation in a new direction. “Perhaps we should consider not just who knows, not just who moves against us—covertly or otherwise—but who might be allying

together against us. If even two or three of the other nations come together as our enemies . . .”

She let the thought trail off, and the other drow in the chamber looked uncomfortable, considering its obvious conclusion.

“We need to know what’s going on,” she continued, “at the very least. Our spy network among the duergar, the illithids, and other deep races has not been best used of late or perhaps isn’t as strong as we would like. But what’s in place should be funneling more information back to us about the intentions of potential threats.”

“Oh, it should be doing more than that,” Byrtyn Fey said. Triel raised her eyebrow in slight surprise, for the voluptuous matron mother of House Fey-Branche did not often find interest in discussions so far removed from her own hedonistic pleasures.

“It should be looking for possible weaknesses among our enemies. It should be exploiting those weaknesses, setting potential allies against one another, and perhaps, it should be on the lookout for dissatisfied elements of those traditional enemies, elements that might even consider a new alliance.”

“What, are you mad?” Mez’Barris snapped. “Allying with outsiders? Who is there to trust? No matter how we approach such an alliance, the moment we reveal that we cannot receive blessings from our own goddess, potential allies will either laugh uproariously or trip over themselves running to spread the news.”

“Don’t be dense,” Byrtyn snapped right back. “I know how fond you are of the straightforward, brutal-truth method for everything, but there are better, more subtle ways of luring an ally into your bed. Potential suitors need not know about your shortcomings until after you have partaken of their charms.”

“Not being able to defend our own city from attack would be too obvious a shortcoming to try to hide,” Zeerith said, frowning. “Our own charms will have to be most convincing to blind such potential suitors from the truth. Still, the idea has merit.”

“It is impossible,” Matron Mez’Barris said, folding her thick arms and leaning back as though dismissing the discussion. “The risk of discovery by our enemies would only be magnified, and the rewards are certainly not worth it.”

“Spoken like a hag with few to share her bed,” Byrtyrn said smugly, stretching languidly to make certain her own well-rounded figure was plainly visible through the sheer fabric of her shimmering dress. “And one who’s always trying to convince herself that she’s better off without them, anyway.”

Several of the other high priestesses gasped at the insult, but Mez’Barris only narrowed her piercing red eyes, staring daggers at Byrtyrn.

“Enough!” Triel said finally, interrupting the glaring contest between the two matron mothers. “This bickering is pointless, and it’s beneath us all.”

She looked pointedly at both Mez’Barris and Byrtyrn until both of them ceased their glowering and turned their attention back to her.

If only Jeggred were here, the matron mother of House Baenre thought.

Triel wondered briefly if she should be disturbed that she was once again wishing for the draegloth’s soothing presence in the face of such adversity. It was something else she had caught herself doing often of late, and she feared what it symbolized. Perhaps she had grown to rely too much on external protection rather than her own abilities. She feared that it was a weakness, and weakness was definitely something she could ill afford in the current climate.

No, she corrected herself, not just now, not ever.

But the need for allies, however brief and volatile such alliances tended to be, were a necessary part of her life.

Maybe Byrtyrn is right, she thought. Maybe that’s what Menzoberranzan needs: an ally. Another nation, a race from the Underdark, to aid the noble Houses until this crisis has passed.

Triel tightened her jaw and shook her head softly, determined to banish such silly notions from her mind.

Nonsense, she told herself firmly. Menzoberranzan is the strongest city in the Underdark. We need no one. We will prevail as we always have, through cunning, and guile, and the favor of the goddess. Wherever she is. . . .

“I know very well the state of things in Menzoberranzan,” Triel said, looking eye to eye with each matron mother present. “The crisis

we face tests us—tests us more severely than any ever confronted by the ruling Houses in all the city’s history—but we cannot let it get in the way of resolute administration of the city. The moment we begin to squabble, the moment we do not show a united front to the other Houses, to Tier Breche or Bregan D’aerthe, is the moment we show it to the rest of the world, and by then all is already lost.

“For the time being, we continue to show patience. Discussion of ways to deal with the crisis is welcome—calm, respectful discussion—” and Triel once again inclined her head toward the two matron mothers—“or suggestions for new ways to explore what has happened to Lolth, but there is to be no more of this talk of fear or cowardice, and no more of these insults. That is the behavior of foolish males or the lesser races. We conduct the business of our Houses and our council as we have always done.”

Triel made certain to catch each and every matron mother with her own gaze this time, staring intently into each pair of red eyes in turn, wanting to ensure that everyone present got her message—that and to ensure that she was showing a strong face.

Slowly, one by one, the other matron mothers nodded, willing, at least for the time being, to acquiesce to the Baenre’s demands.

Wielding power always requires such a delicate touch Triel reminded herself as the group broke apart and the other high priestesses went their separate ways, returning to their homes. Like a supple switch, if you swing it about too vigorously, you just end up breaking it on the slave you are trying to goad.