

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

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

Annihilation



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She was the strongest. She had feasted on more than any still alive. She had killed more than any still alive. She had killed all those around her and hadn't even bothered to devour their carcasses before moving on to those outside the zone of the dead.

She was the strongest. She knew she was the strongest as yet another fell before her snapping mandibles. She was the one who would rise through the carnage and rule.

She was the strongest.

The others soon knew this as well.

So she was dead.

Within the chaos, there was intelligence and purpose. Within the hunger and the slaughter, there was common cause. She was the strongest and would kill them all or rule them all, so they bonded together and tore her eight legs from her, devouring her fully before turning again upon each other.

Another rose to prominence through deed and fearsome assault.

That one, too, fell to the common cause.

The mortal test continued. The strongest died, but the smartest remained. The manipulative remained—those who hid their strengths beyond what was necessary to kill the present opponent.

Those who stepped forward, who rose above the tumult, died.

Through all the millennia, she had recognized those who were stronger than she, and she had persuaded them to do her bidding or be killed. Strength came not from the size of her muscles but from the power of her cunning.

In the frenzy of the birthing, in the contest of the slaughter, these traits paved the road to victory.

To find the moment when individual strength was beyond the collective power to defeat it.

To intrigue amidst battle to destroy any who were stronger.

And for some, to admit defeat before oblivion's descent, to escape and survive, new demons of chaos to run wild about the planes and in the end to serve the winner.

*The numbers dwindled. Those left grew in power and size.
Each waited and watched, deciding who must die before she could
reign supreme, sorting through the tumult to facilitate that desired end.
Those driven by uncontrollable hunger were dead now.
Those driven by simple self-defense were dead now.
Those driven by foolish pride were dead now.
Those driven by instinctual survival were dead or were fleeing.
Those driven by cunning remained, knowing only one could emerge
in the end.*

*For all the others, it would be servitude or oblivion. There were no
other choices.*

*As she had manipulated the mortals who served her and the mortals
who feared her, as she had maneuvered even other gods through the centu-
ries, so she controlled her offspring. This was the test of her decree.*

There were no other choices.

U b a p t e r



U N E

Gromph found himself growing accustomed to seeing the world through his familiar's eyes. It was that feeling that prompted him to do something about it. Gromph Baenre, brother of the Matron Mother of the First House of the City of Spiders, Archmage of Menzoberranzan, would not look through the eyes of a rat any longer than he had to.

Kyorli's head bobbed from side to side and up and down as she sniffed the air. The rat was bound to look where Gromph willed her to, but she was easily distracted. She didn't see as well in the dark, either, which in the Underdark meant she didn't ever see well, and there were no colors. Gromph perceived the casting chamber, like the rest of the world, in dull hues of gray and black.

Gromph knew the chamber well enough, though, that he didn't need the rat's vision to reveal its limits. The fuzzy blurs at the edge of Kyorli's vision were the great columns that rose to a series of flying buttresses, eighty feet into the gloom overhead. The carvings on the

columns were sparse, and what they lacked in beauty they made up for in magical utility. The chamber, deep in the maze of Sorcere, was there for a purpose and not to impress. Spells were cast there in the course of training the students, testing the masters, in researching new spells, straining the limits of their powers, and for the odd summoning or scrying.

Gromph stepped into the center of the room, and from the corner of Kyorli's eyes he saw the two drow waiting for him. They bowed. The rat was sniffing the air, her nose angled up in the direction of the circle of giant mushroom stems that had been secured to the floor in the center of the cavernous chamber. There were ten of them, and to each was bound a single drow male.

"Archmage," one of the two wizards in attendance whispered reverently, his voice hissing off the distant walls in a thousand echoes that Gromph doubted he would have heard if he still had his eyesight.

The archmage willed Kyorli to turn her head to face the wizards, and he was satisfied to see that they were dressed and equipped as he had commanded.

During his time away from Menzoberranzan, thanks to the traitorous lichdrow Dyrr, certain elements within the Academy had revealed themselves. It had taken Gromph less time that he feared but more time than he'd wished to reassert himself at Sorcere. Triel had, to Gromph's surprise, actually done well in maintaining the House's hold over the school of wizards, but still there were traitors to kill and conspirators to bring back into the fold. All that had delayed his efforts to regain his eyesight. No more.

"All is prepared," the whispering mage—his own distant nephew, Prath Baenre—said.

Prath was young, still barely an apprentice, and though Gromph couldn't see the two dark elves' faces since Kyorli insisted on occasionally scratching her own hindquarters with her sharp front teeth, he was sure that the other—a Master of Sorcere named Jaemas Xorlarrin—was looking at the younger drow with impatience. Baenre or no, Sorcere had its hierarchies.

"Master Xorlarrin," Gromph said, making his own feelings on the

necessity of that hierarchy clear, “as is obvious, I have some trouble seeing. I will require simple answers to some simple questions. You will stand at my left. The boy will step aside until called.”

“As you wish,” the Xorlarrin mage replied.

The rat left off her scratching when Gromph snapped his fingers. He watched through the rat’s eyes as Kyorli scampered up his leg, to his hand, up his arm, and sat, twitching and sniffing, on the archmage’s shoulder. Seeing himself through the rat’s eyes unsettled Gromph, and feeling the rat’s feet on him—both senses detached from each other—was something the archmage was determined not to experience again.

Gromph stepped toward the bound dark elves, sharply aware of the Xorlarrin mage following close behind him. As they came closer, a shadowy form revealed itself—another drow standing inside the circle of captives. It was Zillak, one of the archmage’s most trusted assassins.

“Is the boy prepared with the sigils?” Gromph asked.

He was answered by a faint clang of metal and the sound of scurrying steps that finally slid to a halt.

“Yes, Archmage,” Jaemas Xorlarrin replied.

Gromph stepped close to one of the bound dark elves. All ten of them were cousins—the wicked sons of House Agrach Dyrre and traitors to Menzoberranzan every last one. Gromph had asked for the youngest, the strongest, the ablest of them to be spared.

“Dyrre,” the archmage said, doing his best to fix his sightless eyes on the captive’s face.

The prisoner squirmed a little at the sound of his family’s name. Gromph wondered if the boy felt the shame his traitorous House had inflicted on every last one of his kin.

“I . . .” the prisoner muttered. “I know why I’m here, Baenre. You can do your worst to me, and I will not betray my House.”

Gromph laughed. It felt good. He hadn’t had a good laugh in a long time, and with the siege of Menzoberranzan only digging in, with no word of Lolth or break in her Silence, he didn’t think he’d be laughing much in the days, tendays, months, or even years ahead.

“Thank you,” the archmage said to the boy. He caught the edge of the captive’s confused, surprised expression as Kyorli began again to worry at her itchy hip. “I don’t care what you might have to say about your doomed House. You will answer only one question . . . what is that sigil?”

There was a silence Gromph took as confusion.

“The sign,” the archmage said, letting impatience sound in his voice. “The sigil my young nephew is holding up in front of you.”

As ordered, Prath had taken up a position some yards away, against the wall of the giant chamber, and was holding up a small placard maybe six inches on each side. Painted onto its surface was a simple, easily recognizable rune—one any drow would recognize as marking a way to shelter, a place of safety in the wilds of the Underdark.

“I could compel you to read it, fool,” the archmage drawled into the prisoner’s hesitation. “Tell me what it is, and let us move on.”

“It’s . . .” the captive said, squinting. “Is it the symbol of Lolth?”

Gromph sighed and said, “Almost.”

The archmage mentally nudged the rat on his shoulder and turned her head to see Zillak wrap a thin wire garrote around the prisoner’s neck. When blood began to ooze from under the wire and spittle sprinkled from his mouth, Kyorli paid closer attention. Gromph waited for the prisoner to stop struggling, then die, before he stepped to the next traitor.

“I won’t read it!” that one barked, the fear coming off him in waves. “What is this?”

Gromph, aggravated at the waste of time a spell of compulsion would take, tipped his head to the Xorlarrin mage who still stood right behind him and asked, “What color?”

“A garish magenta, Archmage,” Jaemas answered.

“Well,” Gromph replied, “that won’t do at all, will it?”

That was enough for Zillak, who slipped the garrote, still dripping with the first Dyrri cousin’s blood, around the second’s neck. Gromph didn’t bother waiting for the prisoner to die before stepping to the third in the circle.

There was a sharp stench of urine that almost made Gromph step

back, and a spattering of droplets echoed on the hard stone floor. The archmage blew air out his nostrils to clear the smell.

“Read it,” he said to the terrified captive.

“It’s a way shelter rune,” the terrified Dyrr cousin almost barked. “A way shelter.”

Gromph could tell by the feminine timbre in his voice that he was a younger cousin. That was positive in itself. Kyorli, perhaps sensing the boy’s fear or drawn to the stench of piss, looked the prisoner in the face and Gromph did his best to keep the rat’s gaze fixed on the boy’s eyes.

Jaemas Xorlarrin leaned in from behind and said quietly, “A pleasing blood red, Archmage.”

Gromph smiled, and the bound prisoner did his best to look away.

“The smaller,” Gromph said then listened to the sounds of Prath’s robes rustling behind him. “Read it,” he said to the prisoner.

The boy looked up, tears streaming down his cheeks, and blinked at the young Baenre, who Gromph knew was holding up the other side of the placard upon which was drawn, half again smaller than the way shelter rune, the number . . .

“Five,” the prisoner said, his voice squeaking in a most unseemly way.

Gromph smiled and stepped back, Jaemas moving smoothly to get out of his way.

“Yes,” the archmage said, “this one.”

Jaemas snapped his fingers and Prath came quickly back to attend his superiors. The sound of a dark elf being strangled again echoed through the chamber, then again, and seven more times as Zillak executed the rest of the captives, save the one with the sensitive, blood-crimson eyes.

As Zillak went methodically about his bloody work, Gromph, Jaemas, and Prath stripped off their robes to stand barefoot, naked from the waist up, covered only by simple breeches. Gromph concentrated on the sounds of the executions, keeping his mind as clear as he could.

In his rise through a demanding House, then through the ranks of Sorcere, Gromph had seen and done much. He was no stranger to pain and sacrifice and was able to withstand much that would break even other noble drow. He told himself that he would bear the proceedings that day as well, for his own good and for the sake of Menzoberranzan.

He kept mental note of the number of strangulations he heard, and when Zillak was squeezing the last of the life out of the last of the Dyrr captives, he said, “Bring in the table when you’re through there, Zillak. Then leave us.”

“Yes . . .” the assassin grunted as he strained through the last execution, “Archmage.”

When that last life was spent, Gromph caught a glimpse through Kyorli’s eyes of Zillak walking quickly out of the circle of dead, wiping his hands dry on a rag. The surviving Dyrr was crying, and by the sound of it Gromph thought the boy was more ashamed than afraid. He had broken, after all. He had behaved like some . . . goblin—certainly not a drow. Dark elves didn’t wet themselves at the prospect of death or torture. Dark elves didn’t cry in the face of their enemies—didn’t cry at all. If the boy hadn’t proved his keen darkvision, Gromph might have thought him half human.

An example, he thought, for us all.

Zillak wheeled in a table upon which were secured four sturdy rothé leather straps. At one end was a drain that emptied into a big glass bottle hanging from the bottom of the table. Zillak left the table where Jaemas Xorlarrin indicated and quickly left the room.

Gromph took hold of Kyorli and cradled the rat in his arms as he sat on the table. Holding the rat, he found he could turn the beast physically to keep her eyes focused where he wished. Gromph chuckled at the odd timing of that revelation and turned the rat’s face to Jaemas. The Xorlarrin mage was making a point of not acknowledging Gromph’s sign of humor. Young Prath just looked nervous.

“This is something,” Gromph said to his nephew, “that few masters have seen in a centuries-long lifetime, young nephew. You will be able to tell your grandchildren that you were here to witness it.”

The apprentice mage nodded, obviously unsure how to respond, and Gromph laughed at him even as he lay down on the table. The steel was cold against his back, and Gromph broke out in gooseflesh. He let out a long sigh to keep from shivering and held Kyorli to his bare chest. The rat's claws pricked him, but Gromph didn't mind. There would be greater pain soon, and not only for the archmage.

Reeling at first from the dizzying perspective, Gromph held the rat aloft and turned it to face the Master of Sorcere. From the bowl that Prath was holding Jaemas had taken a polished silver spoon. No ordinary eating utensil, the edges of the spoon were sharpened to a razor's keenness. Jaemas gestured for Prath to step closer to the prisoner, and Jaemas began to chant a spell.

The words of power were like music, and the sound of them sent a shiver through Gromph's already freezing spine. It was a good spell, a hard spell, a rare spell, and one that only a handful of drow knew. Jaemas had been chosen carefully, after all.

As the cadence rose and fell, the words repeating then turning upon themselves, the Xorlarrin mage stepped closer still to the shaking, terrified captive. He held the spoon in a delicate grip, like an artist holds his brush. With his other hand, Jaemas held the prisoner's left eye open wide. It wasn't until the shining silver spoon was an inch from the boy's eye that the captive seemed to understand what was about to happen.

He screamed.

When the sharp edge of the spoon slipped up under his eyelid, he screamed louder.

When Jaemas, in one deft, fluid motion, scooped the eye from its socket, he screamed louder still.

When the eye fell with a soft, wet sound into the bowl that Prath held under the prisoner's chin, he shrieked.

Seen through the rat's eyes, the blood that poured from the empty socket looked black. Jaemas held open the prisoner's right eye and the young drow started to beg. All the while, the Master of Sorcere continued his incantation, not missing a beat, not missing a syllable. When he slid the spoon under the right eyelid, the boy began to pray.

When the eye came out, all the traitor could do was shake, mouth open wide, cords showing in his neck, blood flooding over his face.

Gromph had a fleeting thought of telling the prisoner, paralyzed with agony and horror, that at least the last thing he saw was a drow face and the simple line of a silver spoon. The next thing Gromph would see might drive even the archmage mad.

Gromph, of course, said nothing.

Through Kyorli's eyes, Gromph saw Jaemas slip the silver spoon into the bowl, careful not to cut either of the fragile orbs. The Xorlarrin mage, still incanting, took the rat from his master's hands, and Gromph's vision reeled. He heard Prath set the bowl gently on the floor, and Jaemas turned the rat so that Gromph could see himself lying on his back on the cold steel table. He could see Prath's hands shaking as he gently, almost reluctantly, folded the leather straps around Gromph's right wrist. He fastened the strap, but not nearly tight enough.

"Tighter, boy," the archmage growled. "Don't be squeamish, and don't be afraid you're going to hurt me."

Gromph allowed himself a laugh as his nephew tightened the strap then moved on to his right ankle. Jaemas continued to chant the words of the spell as Prath finished strapping his uncle to the table at both wrists and both ankles. When Gromph was satisfied that he was properly secured, he nodded to the Xorlarrin mage.

Odd, the Archmage of Menzoberranzan thought as Jaemas set Kyorli down on his bare chest. If Lolth wished it, none of this would have been necessary, but whether she answers her priestesses' prayers or not, all of it would still be possible.

That thought brought a tentative peace to Gromph. The knowledge—no, the certainty—of his power had always reassured him, and it did still. It was that certainty that helped him breathe normally and remain still as he watched, from the rat's own eyes, Kyorli's meandering, reluctant march up his chest and onto his chin. The rat paused and Gromph saw black fingertips—Jaemas's—descend over his left eye with a twisted bit of wire. The Xorlarrin's touch was cool and dry on Gromph's eyelids. The archmage held still while the

Xorlarrin mage set the wires gently, carefully, to hold his eyelid open. That was repeated on his right eye while Jaemas continued to chant, and Kyorli looked on with uncharacteristic patience. The rat was slowly coming under the influence of the spell, and it was that magic that was focusing the rodent's attention on Gromph's eyes.

Though he could feel the wires holding his eyes open, Gromph, when he let his concentration fall away from his familiar, could see nothing. There was not a hint of light or shadow, not a sliver of reflection.

Gromph took a deep, steady breath and said, "Proceed."

His concentration off the rat and onto himself, Gromph couldn't see Kyorli crawl over his face, but he could feel every needle prick of her claws, could smell her musk, and could hear her sniffing. A whisker slipped across one of Gromph's open eyes, and he flinched. It stung. His eyes might have been useless, but they could still register pain.

Well, thought Gromph, too bad for me.

The first bite sent a wave of burning agony blasting through the archmage's head. Gromph's entire body tensed, and his teeth ground together. He could feel the rat back off and could feel the blood slowly drip down the side of his face. Jaemas continued to chant. The pain didn't stop either.

"Kyorli," the archmage grunted.

The rat was hesitating. Even under the influence of the spell, even offered the tasty morsel of a living—if sightless—eye, the rat knew that she was mutilating her own master, a master who had proven in the past to be anything but forgiving.

Gromph slipped his consciousness into his familiar's, and despite the one already ruined eye sending blood dripping down the side of his head, Gromph could see. It was the same colorless, dull rat's vision, though. He could see the bite the rat had already taken out of his right eye, could see the blood, could see himself shaking, could see the grim set of his jaw, and the open, helpless orb of his other blind eye awaiting the rodent's reluctant ministrations.

Gromph compelled the rat to finish her work.

Kyorli might have hesitated at the orders of Jaemas, but she responded to her master's invitation to feed without a second's pause. For

at least three bites, Gromph watched his own eye being chewed out of his head, then Kyorli's vision blurred as she plunged her head into the ruined orb to tear at the tender, blood-soaked bits inside.

The pain was unlike anything Gromph had ever imagined, and in his long, uneasy life, the Archmage of Menzoberranzan had imagined a lot.

"Scream if you have to, Archmage," his nephew whispered into his ear, barely audible over the sound of the feeding rat. "There is no shame in it."

Gromph grunted, trying to speak, but kept his jaw clamped shut. The young apprentice had no idea what shame was, but even in his maddening agony, Gromph promised himself that his nephew would learn and that would be the last time Prath Baenre offered his uncle advice.

Gromph didn't scream, even when the rat moved on to the other eye.