CALL OF A MOTHER

by Anthony Beal

Creature: *Penanggalan* | **Level:** *10 - 12*
CWs: *Themes of arson, infanticide, and body horror*

SYNOPSIS

The distant hospice of Mother's Hope has been destroyed. For centuries it was a safe haven for expectant mothers and their newborns. The destruction of the hospice above has awakened something below, for Mother's Hope held a secret. An ancient evil stirs, her name lost to time, but soon to be whispered anew.

ADVENTURE HOOK

Call of a Mother is for 3-4 characters at 10th-12th level. The adventurers must unravel the secret hidden below the remains of Mother's Hope before it claims their lives.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The creature in this adventure is an undead called a **penanggalan**. She appears as a humanoid woman during the day but at night, her head and her entrails separate from her body. She flies out in search of blood, preferring new mothers and infants. She returns to her body before daybreak, soaking her swollen organs in vinegar before reattaching her head to her body.

The penanggalan in this adventure is Nyari. Once a powerful celestial, she believed that morals would soon overrun the Material Plane, and began a sacrificial cult. At the moment of her execution, Orcus saved her body and soul, and she became the first penanggalan. Only Nyari can create new penanggalan.

She was imprisoned by the Order of Sacred Light, who built Mother's Hope above her tomb to keep her sealed. Each time a child was born in the hospice, the divine energy released renewed the magic binding her. The Order hunted her penanggalan daughters to extinction.

Nyari lay dormant until Kar'heeta, a former priestess of Lolth, arrived. Despising Lolth, Nyari pushed against her bonds, causing the uneasiness Eleana felt near Mother's Hope. As less children were born at the hospice, her influence grew, until Eleana's attack inadvertently freed her.

This adventure works best when you slowly build the tension and dread. The room descriptions are functional, but feel free to embellish them to your own tastes. This includes adding additional rooms, but be careful not to tax player resources too heavily.

As a final note, this adventure can be deadly. The danger should be emphasized to players. The information in the Priest's Journal is essential. If your players find a way to circumnavigate the ghoul tunnels, be sure to give them an opportunity to find the journal, or have Kar'heeta or Eleana find it for them.

FEATURED CHARACTERS

- **Kar'heeta:** A female drow nearly 400 years old, she was a midwife at Mother's Hope. Kar'heeta was once a priestess of Lolth, but gave up her faith and left the Underdark when her son was taken away from her.
- **Eleana:** A human woman in her mid-forties. Tough and grizzled, Eleana is still grieving the death of her only daughter. She is unknowingly descended from the priests that sealed Nyari.
- **Nyari (spirit):** The first penanggalan. She is vicious, intelligent, and devoted to Orcus.
- **Seeta, Brianne & Ventra:** Midwives who fled Mother's Hope during Eleana's attack.

CHAPTER 1 – SCOURGE OF NEW LIFE

Each of you was awakened in the night by the same lucid nightmare. A tide of blood. Screams of women and infants. A cold, monstrous presence pressing against your minds.

In the morning, black smoke rises over the treeline, portending something dreadful. Mother's Hope, a hospice for the care of pregnant women and newborns, is burning. You move as swiftly as you can, uncertain of what horrors you will find when you arrive.

Arriving at Mother's Hope, the party find the husk of the building, ravaged by fire and collapsed in on itself. A female drow in a smock is near the building. Her body is covered in small cuts and abrasions, and her smock is smeared with dirt and plant matter. She pulls a large chest from the rubble and opens it with a key.

When the party approaches, she panics and draws a rapier from the chest. Realizing that the party is not who she thought, she lowers the rapier. She introduces herself as Kar'heeta, one of the midwives.

Mother's Hope was destroyed by a woman named Eleana, the leader of a mercenary company. Eleana had claimed for years to feel an evil presence on the hospice grounds, warning away everyone she could from seeking their aid.

Three days ago, Eleana's daughter went into labor, and Eleana hesitated to call the midwives. When she finally did, it was too late, and both mother and child died. Drunk and lost in her grief, Eleana and her soldiers burned down the building and the midwives scattered into the woods. There were ten midwives in total, including Kar'heeta.

As upset as she is, Kar'heeta understands Eleana's pain and so far no one has come to harm. She asks the party to help her find the other midwives and make sure Eleana doesn't hurt anyone. She has a pretty good idea of where to look for the others. There's a small cave nearby that they might have taken shelter in.

CAVE OF THE MOTHER

It takes an hour to reach the Cave of the Mother on foot. The entrance is in the side of a hill that resembles the belly of a pregnant woman. With a successful DC 14 Wisdom (Survival) check, a character discovers several smaller sets of tracks leading into the cave as well as heavy boot prints. No tracks exit the cave.

The interior of the cave is shallow. Along the back of the cave there is a doorway that Kar'heeta says was not there before. The entrance is framed by three pieces of stone, each carved with arcane runes which are now cracked. A successful DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check identifies the runes as a potent illusion spell. Something happened that shattered the magic.

The entrance leads to a dark corridor of smooth worked stone. A successful DC 16 Intelligence (History) check identifies the tool marks and techniques used for this construction to be from more than a millennium ago.

DEVELOPMENT

The party enters the corridor to continue searching for the lost midwives.

CHAPTER 2 – MOTHER OF THE HEADLESS MAIDENS

The corridor continues for 100 feet before opening into a small chamber. Two arches lead out of the chamber on the left and the right. To the right, another corridor leads deeper beneath the hill while on the left is a round room with murals on the walls.

A massive 8 foot tall statue sits against the far wall, the figure a bloated, winged demon holding an imposing weapon in its right hand. A successful DC 12 Intelligence (Religion) check identifies the figure as Orcus, Demon Prince of the Undead.

MURAL ROOM

The murals are as beautiful as they are grotesque, stretching from floor to ceiling, moving clockwise in four panels. In the first, an impossibly tall woman stands at the center of a group of women. Her features are demonic and her expression evil, yet the women kneel in reverence. On the second, the tall woman's head separates from her body along with her internal organs. The heads of the kneeling women do the same. The third shows these severed heads brutally attacking a village, mostly women and infants. The final panel mirrors the first.

Dead End

The corridor continues for 50 feet before turning sharply to the left for another 20 feet. This shorter corridor has several collapsed side corridors and small tunnels positioned near the floor, about 4 feet wide and 2 feet tall. It then opens into another chamber. The sounds of battle echo from within.

In the chamber, Eleana stands at the center of a bloody mess. Three of her men and one ghoul lay dead on the ground as she holds off two more **ghouls**.

Once the ghouls are dealt with, Eleana spots Kar'heeta. Kar'heeta demands to know what Eleana has done with the other midwives. Eleana says that she has done nothing to them, but that obviously her instincts were right. Eleana long suspected the midwives were hiding something.

While this is happening, have the party make a DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check. A success means that they see the ghoul that scurries out of the tunnel in the corridor behind them, dart up the wall and remove a stone from the ceiling. Regardless, the entire corridor collapses behind them, burying the ghoul and their only exit. A long, low laugh echoes throughout the chamber.

Realizing that they face some new danger, Kar'heeta and Eleana form a shaky truce. It would take days to dig out the corridor. The only way out is through the small tunnels.

Ghoul Tunnel

The tunnels eventually connect together. This new tunnel continues for more than 100 feet, and progress is slow and tense. The skeletal remains of a priest await, 50 feet down the corridor. His hand rests atop a journal and a small medallion hangs around his neck.

The medallion is made of steel, and a successful DC 14 Intelligence (History or Religion) check identifies the symbol as the Order of Sacred Light. The Order has not existed for several hundred years. Curiously, the symbol of Eleana's mercenary company shares many similarities, though she is unaware of any connection.

The journal takes some time to go through, but provides a lot of useful information.

Priest's Journal

The priest was part of the Order of Sacred Light and came to this place as part of a large hunting party with the intent to destroy a powerful undead creature and her minions. He refers to her only as the Mother.

To defeat the Mother, they constructed four golden lances imbued with divine power. They knew that the Mother, as a servant of Orcus, was too powerful for them to destroy. Instead, they intended to prevent her from returning to the Abyss by using the lances to trap her in her physical body. To ensure that she was forgotten, the priest gathered all known records of her and destroyed them.

The undead they hunted were called penanggalan, daughters of the Mother. The journal contains basic information about the penanggalan as well as the following.

- They are resistant to turning and grant that resistance to other undead in their proximity.
- Their entrails can infect a person with a deadly disease if touched.
- Destroying their bodies while their heads are detached limits the penanggalan's regeneration and ensures that at sunrise the creature will die.

Kar'heeta remembers a legend told among the drow about an entity from long ago that set itself against Lolth. The legends are unclear as to what started the conflict, but the entity in the stories was called the Mother.

Development

After finding the priest's journal, the party moves through the corridor to the final chambers.

Chapter 3 – Exalted Priestess of Orcus

The corridor is short, with a smaller doorway on the left and a set of descending stairs at the end. In the center of the corridor is the body of a small gnome woman being consumed by a ghoul. As it hears the party, the ghoul darts into one of the small tunnels, dragging the body with it. Only a bloody smear remains. Kar'heeta recognizes the body as that of Seeta, one of the lost midwives.

FEEDING ROOM

This room is nearly 70 feet long, the floor stained brown with blood. Lining each side of the room are a series of wooden beds equipped with stirrups. These stirrups have an iron cage intended to lock the legs in place, as well as iron bands to immobilize the head and arms. Several of them contain skeletal remains. There are more of the small tunnels in this room as well.

Kar'heeta stares as if lost in some distant memory. She wonders out loud "if he is in such a place." While she still lived in the Underdark, she had a son who was taken from her the day he was born. She searched for him for years but never found a trace of him. Disgusted with the depravity of drow society, she left the Underdark for the surface.

"I hold no illusions as to his fate. Most likely he is dead, or transformed into some abomination beyond recognition. Still, a mother always hopes."

A moment passes between Eleana and Kar'heeta, both recognizing that they are more alike than they thought.

THRONE ROOM

The stairs descend to a set of double doors that are neither locked or trapped. They lead into a square chamber, 80 feet on each side with ceilings 50 feet high. In the far corners, two massive stones are set, attached to rusted chains, suspended in the air.

The left and right sides each hold four small alcoves. In the farthest of these alcoves, one on each side, Brianne and Ventra kneel in silence. They do not respond to either verbal or physical interactions. More of the small tunnels are positioned between the alcoves.

Centered on the back wall is a large stone throne atop a platform. Seated on the throne are the mummified remains of a woman. At her full height she would have been nearly 10 feet tall. Her head rests in her lap. Four golden lances pierce her body and the throne. To the right of the platform is a door.

Once they enter, the party is welcomed by a raspy, feminine voice that booms around the room. She introduces herself as Nyari, Scourge of New Life, Mother of the Headless Maidens, Exalted Priestess of Orcus. Her voice is coming from the mummified head but it is not moving. If the party tries attacking the head or body, Nyari laughs, explaining that she is using her former body as a conduit to speak, but her spirit has returned to the Abyss.

Nyari thanks Kar'heeta and Eleana for freeing her from confinement and allowing her to return to the Abyss. When Kar'heeta and Eleana deny helping her, Nyari is bemused. She tells them that once the lances pierced her body, the priests knew the magic was already weakening. Cleverly, the Order of Sacred Light built Mother's Hope directly above this chamber. They linked the building to the same magic as the lances. Every time a child was born, the release of divine energy renewed the magic of the lances.

Over the centuries, Nyari became dormant. When Kar'heeta arrived at Mother's Hope, Nyari's hatred of the drow and Lolth woke her from dormancy. Eleana is a descendent of one of the priests who bound Nyari, and it was her evil that Eleana sensed at Mother's Hope. When Eleana burnt the building, she shattered the bonds holding Nyari.

Tactics: Nyari engages the characters in conversation for as long as she can.

If pressed as to why she is sharing this, or when she finishes her tale, Nyari says she was stalling for sundown. At that point two things happen. First, both doors in the chamber lock with an audible click. Second, the two giant stones in the corners descend, their chains throwing clouds of rust, and raising thick metal doors over each alcove. The doors each have a 1-inch wide slit in their center.

"I'd prefer you all die here. Anonymity has its advantages. If you live, well, then my name will be whispered in hushed tones once again."

The sound of claws on stone mixed with terrible screams rises from the tunnels, but is overpowered by the wet, tearing sound coming from the alcoves. The disembodied heads of Brianne and Ventra, now penanggalan, squeeze through the tiny gaps in the door just as the first ghouls emerge from their tunnels.

COMBAT

Brianne and Ventra's penanggalan forms attempt to destroy the strongest characters first. If someone destroys their body, the penanggalan fly into a rage, and target the party member or members responsible.

The ghouls attack anything that they can get to and flee when both penanggalan are slain. An optional wave of four ghouls can be added. They enter on initiative count 20 (losing ties) during the third round of combat.

Kar'heeta is an **assassin** but uses a rapier (1d8+3 piercing damage). She moves to intercept the ghouls, knowing she is immune to their paralysing touch. Eleana is a **knight** with an additional 40 hit points. She positions herself to make use of her Leadership ability. If reduced to 0 hit points, both Kar'heeta and Eleana make death saving throws.

The chains attached to the large stones are old and brittle, with an AC of 10 and 10 hit points, and resistance to piercing damage. They can be targeted by melee or ranged attacks. Breaking a chain causes the alcove doors on that side of the room to retract.

DEVELOPMENT

When both penanggalan are dead, any remaining ghouls flee the area.

CONCLUSION

After the battle, a quick search of the room reveals a lever in the far right alcove that releases the locks on the doors. The lances can be pulled from Nyari's body. Characters who make a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana) check realize the magic in them is broken, but they still look valuable.

Each of the alcoves has a series of arcane runes inscribed inside. A successful DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check deciphers their meaning. These runes channel Abyssal energy for some purpose, most likely to create penanggalan.

Exiting the chamber through the far door, the party moves through a short corridor that splits left and right. The left leads further into the dark. A breeze comes from the right where a circular shaft leads up to the surface. Some of Eleana's men are near the top and lower a rope.

If Kar'heeta and/or Eleana survived they tell the party that they will continue to explore beneath Mother's Hope, hoping to find the other midwives, who they believe (correctly) have been transformed into penanggalan. They ask the party to scour the surface for any information that might still exist about Nyari. One of them gives the party one half of a pair of *sending stones* to relay any information they find.

The party watches as the woman or women disappear into the dark.

REWARDS

Enemies Defeated	XP (per defeated)
Ghoul	200
Penanggalan	10,000

Challenges Completed	XP
Kar'heeta lives	2,000
Eleana lives	2,000

Items	Value
Throne Room	Golden Lances x4 (2,500 gp each)
Kar'heeta or Eleana	*Sending stone*

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The penanggalan is a horrifying creature, both in appearance and in the fears that she represents. Giving birth, during any time period, can be a dangerous, harrowing time for both mother and child. Infection, toxic shock, birthing complications, and even S.I.D.S. are frightening realities. Those fears are given a face in the penanggalan.

In Malaysian folklore, penanggalan are women who are cursed into becoming a monster, by making a demonic pact for eternal life or beauty, and failing to uphold the bargain. With Nyari, I rejected that notion, creating instead an undead matriarch powerful enough to tangle with entities like Lolth without fear. Nyari represents the same fears as all penanggalan, now organized and focused. She is completely devoted to the ideals that Orcus embodies.

Women have been measured throughout history by their willingness and ability to have children. Societies have often seen those women who can't or won't have children as somehow abnormal or broken. Motherhood, like all things to do with a woman's body, is a choice. It belongs to her, despite history and society's attempts to say otherwise.

Nyari represents an alternative, albeit a dark and twisted one. Her emergence in a larger campaign setting can have a direct impact on the world. How

do societies that place women in a subservient role react when some flee to join Nyari, hoping to become one of her penanggalan daughters? Does it cause massive societal changes or do they react by trying to re-enforce those traditional roles more harshly?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Beal lives in Northern Ohio. A relative newcomer to the world of *D&D*, he has enjoyed the creative freedom the game offers and the diversity of people involved in play. This is his first published adventure. He can be reached @ajbeal85 on Twitter.

Penanggalan

Medium undead, chaotic evil

Armor Class 16
Hit Points 144 (17d8 + 68)
Speed 0 ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	18 (+4)	18 (+4)	17 (+3)	15 (+2)	8 (-1)

Saving Throws Dex +9, Wis +7
Skills Perception +7, Stealth +9
Damage Immunities Poison
Damage Resistances necrotic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons
Condition Immunities charmed, diseased, poisoned
Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 17
Languages Common, Abyssal
Challenge 13 (10,000 XP)

Slip Through. The penanggalan can use an action to squeeze herself through a space as small as 1 inch wide.

Legendary Resistance (3/day). If the penanggalan fails a saving throw, she can choose to succeed instead.

Regeneration. The penanggalan regenerates 20 hit points at the start of each of her turns.

Turning Resistance. The penanggalan and any undead within 30 feet of her have advantage on saving throws against effects that turn undead.

Body Vulnerability. The penanggalan's body is vulnerable to attack while the head is detached. Her body has an AC of 12 and 35 hit points, and is considered paralyzed. If the penanggalan's body is reduced to 0 hit points it is destroyed and she loses her Regeneration and Legendary Resistance. The penanggalan dies at sunrise if her body has been destroyed.

Actions

Multiattack. The penanggalan makes one tongue attack and one gut attack.

Tongue. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 10 (1d8 +4) piercing damage. Make a Constitution saving throw, DC 17. The target creature takes 2d8 necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much on a successful save. The penanggalan regains hit points equal to the amount of necrotic damage dealt.

Gut Attack. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5ft., one creature. *Hit:* 9 (1d8 +4) acid damage. Make a Constitution saving throw DC 17. On a failed save, the target creature is considered diseased. While diseased, the creature loses hit points at the start of its turn equal to 5 minus its Constitution modifier (minimum 1) and has disadvantage on attack rolls and saving throws. The creature can repeat the save at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on a success. If the creature fails the saving throw three times, the disease take hold and must be cured by some other means.

Legendary Actions

The penanggalan can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time, and only at the end of another creature's turn. The penanggalan regains spent legendary actions at the start of her turn.

Move. The penanggalan moves up to her speed without provoking opportunity attacks.

Gut Attack. The penanggalan makes one Gut Attack.

Tongue Attack (Costs 2 actions). The penanggalan makes one Tongue Attack.