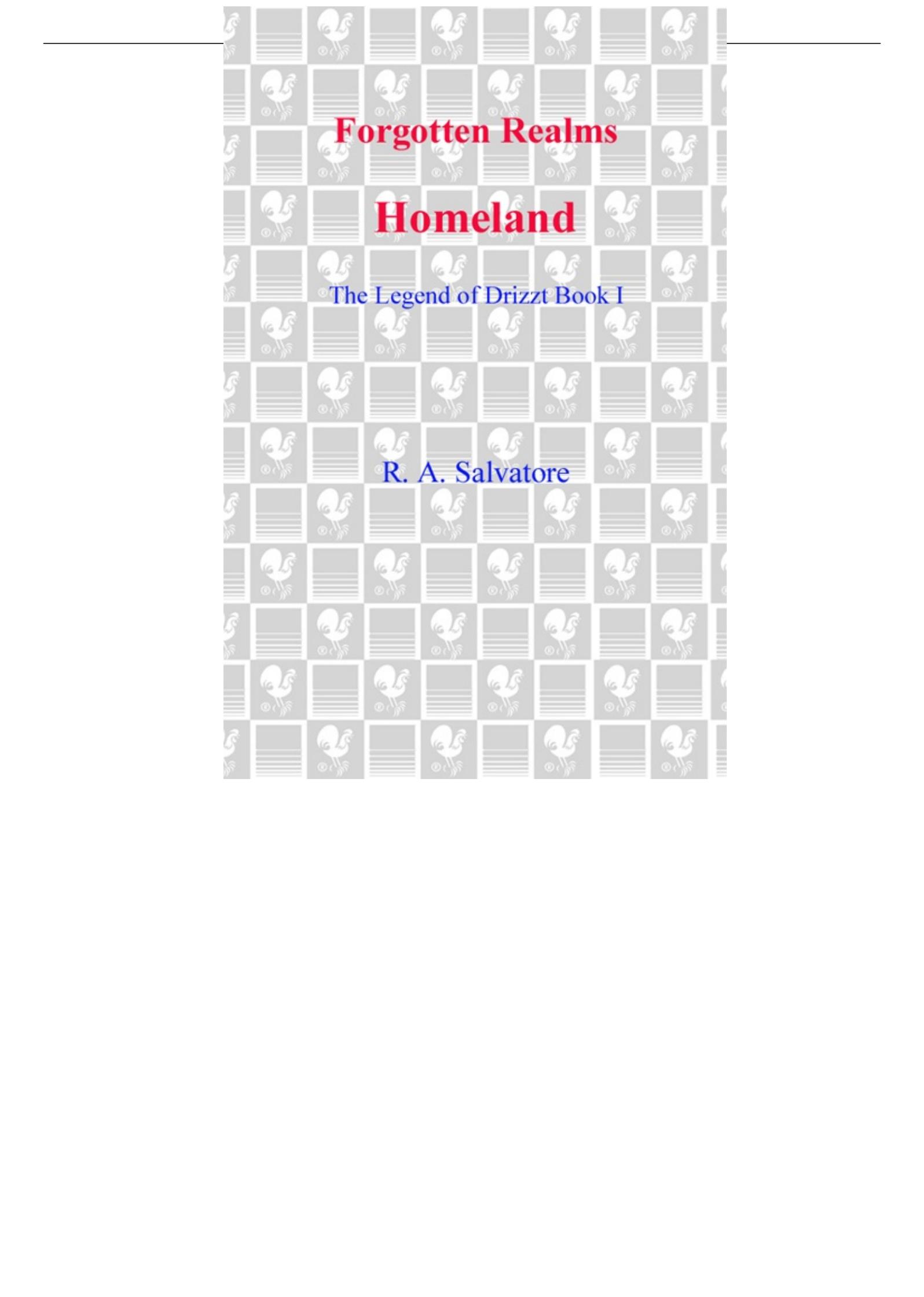
The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of a rooster and a chessboard square. The rooster is white and stands on a grey square, while the chessboard square is white with horizontal lines. The pattern is offset by half a square in each direction.

**Forgotten Realms**

**Homeland**

The Legend of Drizzt Book I

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# THE LEGEND BEGINS!

Briza placed the newborn on the back of the spider idol and lifted the ceremonial dagger, pausing to admire its cruel workmanship. Its hilt was a spider's body sporting eight legs, barbed so as to appear furred, but angled down to serve as blades. Briza lifted the instrument above the baby's chest.

"Name the child," she implored her mother. "The Spider Queen will not accept the sacrifice until the child is named!"

"Drizzt," breathed Matron Malice. "The child's name is Drizzt!"

THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT

*Homeland*

*Exile*

*Sojourn*

*The Crystal Shard*

*Streams of Silver*

*The Halfling's Gem*

*The Legacy*

*Starless Night*

*Siege of Darkness*

*Passage to Dawn*

*The Silent Blade*

*The Spine of the World*

*Sea of Swords*

THE HUNTER'S BLADES TRILOGY

*The Thousand Orcs*

*The Lone Drow*

*The Two Swords*

THE SELLSWORDS

*Servant of the Shard*

*Promise of the Witch-King*

*Road of the Patriarch*

October 2006

HOMELAND  
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK I  
RA  
SALVATORE



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TO MY BEST FRIEND,

MY BROTHER,

GARY.



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## PRELUDE

Never does a star grace this land with a poet's light of twinkling mysteries, nor does the sun send to here its rays of warmth and life. This is the Underdark, the secret world beneath the bustling surface of the Forgotten Realms, whose sky is a ceiling of heartless stone and whose walls show the gray blandness of death in the torchlight of the foolish surface-dwellers that stumble here. This is not their world, not the world of light. Most who come here uninvited do not return.

Those who do escape to the safety of their surface homes return changed. Their eyes have seen the shadows and the gloom, the inevitable doom of the Underdark.

Dark corridors meander throughout the dark realm in winding courses, connecting caverns great and small, with ceilings high and low. Mounds of stone as pointed as the teeth of a sleeping dragon leer down in silent threat or rise up to block the way of intruders.

There is a silence here, profound and foreboding, the crouched hush of a predator at work. Too often the only sound, the only reminder to travelers in the Underdark that they have not lost their sense of hearing altogether, is a distant and echoing drip of water, beating like the heart of a beast, slipping through the silent stones to the deep Underdark pools of chilled water. What lies beneath the still onyx surface of these pools one can only guess. What secrets await the brave, what horrors await the foolish, only the imagination can reveal—until the stillness is disturbed. This is the Underdark.



There are pockets of life here, cities as great as many of those on the surface. Around any of the countless bends and turns in the gray stone a traveler might stumble suddenly into the perimeter of such a city, a stark contrast to the emptiness of the corridors. These places are not havens, though; only the foolish traveler would assume so. They are the homes of the most evil races in all the Realms, most notably the duergar, the kuo-toa, and the drow.

In one such cavern, two miles wide and a thousand feet high, looms Menzoberranzan, a monument to the otherworldly and—ultimately—deadly grace that marks the race of drow elves. Menzoberranzan is not a large city by drow standards; only twenty thousand dark elves reside there. Where, in ages past, there had been an empty cavern of roughly shaped stalactites and stalagmites now stands artistry, row after row of carved castles thrumming in a quiet glow of magic. The city is perfection of form, where not a stone has been left to its natural shape. This sense of order and control, however, is but a cruel facade, a deception hiding the chaos and vileness that rule the dark elves' hearts. Like their cities, they are a beautiful, slender, and delicate people, with features sharp and haunting.

Yet the drow are the rulers of this unruled world, the deadliest of the deadly, and all other races take cautious note of their passing. Beauty itself pales at the end of a dark elf's sword. The drow are the survivors, and this is the Underdark, the valley of death—the land of nameless nightmares.

## S<sub>TATION</sub>

**S**tation: In all the world of the drow, there is no more important word. It is the calling of their—of our—<sup>X</sup>religion, the incessant pulling of hungering heartstrings. Ambition overrides good sense and compassion is thrown away in its face, all in the name of Lolth, the Spider Queen.

Ascension to power in drow society is a simple process of assassination. The Spider Queen is a deity of chaos, and she and her high priestesses, the true rulers of the drow world, do not look with ill favor upon ambitious individuals wielding poisoned daggers.

Of course, there are rules of behavior; every society must boast of these. To openly commit murder or wage war invites the pretense of justice, and penalties exacted in the name of drow justice are merciless. To stick a dagger in the back of a rival during the chaos of a larger battle or in the quiet shadows of an alley, however, is quite acceptable—even applauded. Investigation is not the forte of drow justice. No one cares enough to bother.

Station is the way of Lolth, the ambition she bestows to further the chaos, to keep her drow “children” along their appointed course of self-imprisonment. Children? Pawns, more likely, dancing dolls for the Spider Queen, puppets on the imperceptible but impervious strands of her web. All climb the Spider Queen’s ladders; all hunt for her pleasure; and all fall to the hunters of her pleasure.

Station is the paradox of the world of my people, the limitation of our power within the hunger for power. It is gained through treachery and invites treachery against those who gain it. Those most powerful in Menzoberranzan spend their days watching over their shoulders, defending against the daggers that would find their backs. Their deaths usually come from the front.

—Drizzt Do’Urden

To a surface dweller, he might have passed undetected only a foot away. The padded footfalls of his lizard mount were too light to be heard, and the pliable and perfectly crafted mesh armor that both rider and mount wore bent and creased with their movements as well as if the suits had grown over their skin.

Dinin's lizard trotted along in an easy but swift gait, floating over the broken floor, up the walls, and even across the long tunnel's ceiling. Subterranean lizards, with their sticky and soft three-toed feet, were preferred mounts for just this ability to scale stone as easily as a spider. Crossing hard ground left no damning tracks in the lighted surface world, but nearly all of the creatures of the Underdark possessed infravision, the ability to see in the infrared spectrum. Footfalls left heat residue that could easily be tracked if they followed a predictable course along a corridor's floor.

Dinin clamped tight to his saddle as the lizard plodded along a stretch of the ceiling, then sprang out in a twisting descent to a point farther along the wall. Dinin did not want to be tracked.

He had no light to guide him, but he needed none. He was a dark elf, a drow, an ebony-skinned cousin of those sylvan folk who danced under the stars on the world's surface. To Dinin's superior eyes, which translated subtle variations of heat into vivid and colorful images, the Underdark was far from a lightless place. Colors all across the spectrum swirled before him in the stone of the walls and the floor, heated by some distant fissure or hot stream. The heat of living things was the most distinctive, letting the dark elf view his enemies in details as intricate as any surface-dweller would find in brilliant daylight.

Normally Dinin would not have left the city alone; the world of the Underdark was too dangerous for solo treks, even for a drow elf. This day was different, though. Dinin had to be certain that no unfriendly drow eyes marked his passage.

A soft blue magical glow beyond a sculpted archway told the drow that he neared the city entrance, and he slowed the lizard's pace accordingly. Few used this narrow tunnel, which opened into Tier Breche, the northern section of Menzoberranzan devoted to the Academy, and none but the mistresses and masters, the instructors of the Academy, could pass through here without attracting suspicion.

Dinin was always nervous when he came to this point. Of the hundred tunnels that opened off the main cavern of Menzoberranzan, this one was the best guarded. Beyond the archway, twin statues of gigantic spiders sat in quiet defense. If an enemy crossed through, the spiders would animate and attack, and alarms would be sounded throughout the Academy.

Dinin dismounted, leaving his lizard clinging comfortably to a wall at his chest level. He reached under the collar of his *piwafwi*, his magical, shielding cloak, and took out his necklace purse. From this Dinin produced the insignia of House Do'Urden, a spider wielding various weapons in each of its eight legs and emblazoned with the letters "DN," for Daermoc N'a'shezbaernon, the ancient and formal name of House Do'Urden.

“You will await my return,” Dinin whispered to the lizard as he waved the insignia before it. As with all the drow houses, the insignia of House Do’Urden held several magical dweomers, one of which gave family members absolute control over the house pets. The lizard would obey unfailingly, holding its position as though it were rooted to the stone, even if a scurry rat, its favorite morsel, napped a few feet from its maw.

Dinin took a deep breath and gingerly stepped to the archway. He could see the spiders leering down at him from their fifteen-foot height. He was a drow of the city, not an enemy, and could pass through any other tunnel unconcerned, but the Academy was an unpredictable place; Dinin had heard that the spiders often refused entry—viciously—even to uninvited drow.

He could not be delayed by fears and possibilities, Dinin reminded himself. His business was of the utmost importance to his family’s battle plans. Looking straight ahead, away from the towering spiders he strode between them and onto the floor of Tier Breche.

He moved to the side and paused, first to be certain that no one lurked nearby, and then to admire the sweeping view of Menzoberranzan. No one, drow or other wise, had ever looked out from this spot without a sense of wonder at the drow city. Tier Breche was the highest point on the floor of the two-mile cavern, affording a panoramic view to the rest of Menzoberranzan. The cubby of the Academy was narrow, holding only the three structures that comprised the drow school: Arach-Tinilith, the spider-shaped school of Lolth; Sorcery, the gracefully curving, many-spired tower of wizardry; and Melee-Magthere, the somewhat plain pyramidal structure where male fighters learned their trade.

Beyond Tier Breche, through the ornate stalagmite columns that marked the entrance to the Academy, the cavern dropped away quickly and spread wide, going far beyond Dinin’s line of vision to either side and farther back than his keen eyes could possibly see. The colors of Menzoberranzan were threefold to the sensitive eyes of the drow. Heat patterns from various fissures and hot springs swirled about the entire cavern. Purple and red, bright yellow and subtle blue, crossed and merged, climbed the walls and stalagmite mounds, or ran out singularly in cutting lines against the backdrop of dim gray stone. More confined than the generalized and natural gradations of color in the infrared spectrum were the regions of intense magic, like the spiders Dinin had walked between, virtually glowing with energy. Finally there were the actual lights of the city, faerie fire and highlighted sculptures on the houses. The drow were proud of the beauty of their designs, and especially ornate columns and perfectly crafted gargoyles were almost always limned in permanent magical lights.

Even from this distance Dinin could make out House Baenre, First House of Menzoberranzan. It encompassed twenty stalagmite pillars and half again that number of gigantic stalactites. House Baenre had existed for five thousand years, since the founding of Menzoberranzan, and in that time the work to perfect the house’s art had never ceased. Practically every inch of the immense structure glowed in faerie fire, blue at the outlying towers and brilliant purple at the huge central dome.

The sharp light of candles, foreign to the Underdark, glared through some of the windows of the distant houses. Only clerics or wizards would light the fires, Dinin knew, as necessary pains in their world of scrolls and parchments.

This was Menzoberranzan, the city of drow. Twenty thousand dark elves lived there.

twenty thousand soldiers in the army of evil.

A wicked smile spread across Dinin's thin lips when he thought of some of those soldiers who would fall this night.

Dinin studied Narbondel, the huge central pillar that served as the timeclock of Menzoberranzan. Narbondel was the only way the drow had to mark the passage of time in a world that otherwise knew no days and no seasons. At the end of each day, the city's appointed Archmage cast his magical fires into the base of the stone pillar. There the spells lingered throughout the cycle—a full day on the surface—and gradually spread its warmth up the structure of Narbondel until the whole of it glowed red in the infrared spectrum. The pillar was fully dark now, cooled since the dweomer's fires had expired. The wizard was even now at the base, Dinin reasoned, ready to begin the cycle anew.

It was midnight, the appointed hour.

Dinin moved away from the spiders and the tunnel exit and crept along the side of Tier Breche, seeking the "shadows" of heat patterns in the wall, which would effectively hide the distinct outline of his own body temperature. He came at last to Sorcere, the school of wizardry and slipped into the narrow alley between the tower's curving base and Tier Breche's outer wall.

"Student or master?" came the expected whisper.

"Only a master may walk out-of-house in Tier Breche in the black death of Narbondel," Dinin responded.

A heavily robed figure moved around the arc of the structure to stand before Dinin. The stranger remained in the customary posture of a master of the drow Academy, his arms outstretched before him and bent at the elbows, his hands tight together, one on top of the other in front of his chest.

That pose was the only thing about this one that seemed normal to Dinin. "Greeting the Faceless One," he signaled in the silent hand code of the drow, a language as detailed as the spoken word. The quiver of Dinin's hands belied his calm face, though, for the sight of the wizard put him as far on the edge of his nerves as he had ever been.

"Secondboy Do'Urden," the wizard replied in the gestured code. "Have you my payment?"

"You will be compensated," Dinin signaled pointedly, regaining his composure in the first swelling bubbles of his temper. "Do you dare to doubt the promise of Malice Do'Urden, Matron Mother of Daermon N'a'shezbaernon, Tenth House of Menzoberranzan?"

The Faceless One slumped back, knowing he had erred. "My apologies, Secondboy of House Do'Urden," he answered, dropping to one knee in a gesture of surrender. Since he had entered this conspiracy, the wizard had feared that his impatience might cost him his life. He had been caught in the violent throes of one of his own magical experiments, the tragedy melting away all of his facial features and leaving behind a blank hot spot of white and green goo. Matron Malice Do'Urden, reputedly as skilled as anyone in all the vast city in mixing potions and salves, had offered him a sliver of hope that he could not pass by.

No pity found its way into Dinin's callous heart, but House Do'Urden needed the wizard. "You will get your salve," Dinin promised calmly, "when Alton DeVir is dead."

"Of course," the wizard agreed. "This night?"

Dinin crossed his arms and considered the question. Matron Malice had instructed him that Alton DeVir should die even as their families' battle commenced. That scenario now seemed too clean, too easy, to Dinin. The Faceless One did not miss the sparkle that suddenly brightened the scarlet glow in the young Do'Urden's heat-sensing eyes.

"Wait for Narbondel's light to approach its zenith," Dinin replied, his hands working through the signals excitedly and his grimace seeming more of a twisted grin.

"Should the doomed boy know of his house's fate before he dies?" the wizard asked, guessing the wicked intentions behind Dinin's instructions.

"As the killing blow falls," answered Dinin. "Let Alton DeVir die without hope."

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Dinin retrieved his mount and sped off down the empty corridors, finding an intersecting route that would take him in through a different entrance to the city proper. He came along the eastern end of the great cavern, Menzoberranzan's produce section, where no drow families would see that he had been outside the city limits and where only a few unremarkable stalagmite pillars rose up from the flat stone. Dinin spurred his mount along the banks of Donigarten, the city's small pond with its moss-covered island that housed a fairly sized herd of cattle-like creatures called rothe. A hundred goblins and orcs looked up from their herding and fishing duties to mark the drow soldier's swift passage. Knowing the restrictions as slaves, they took care not to look Dinin in the eye.

Dinin would have paid them no heed anyway. He was too consumed by the urgency of the moment. He kicked his lizard to even greater speeds when he again was on the flat and curving avenues between the glowing drow castles. He moved toward the south-central region of the city, toward the grove of giant mushrooms that marked the section of the fine houses in Menzoberranzan.

As he came around one blind turn, he nearly ran over a group of four wandering bugbears. The giant hairy goblin things paused a moment to consider the drow, then moved slowly but purposefully out of his way.

The bugbears recognized him as a member of House Do'Urden, Dinin knew. He was a noble, a son of a high priestess, and his surname, Do'Urden, was the name of his house. Of the twenty thousand dark elves in Menzoberranzan, only a thousand or so were nobles, actually the children of the sixty-seven recognized families of the city. The rest were common soldiers.

Bugbears were not stupid creatures. They knew a noble from a commoner, and though drow elves did not carry their family insignia in plain view, the pointed and tailed cut of Dinin's stark white hair and the distinctive pattern of purple and red lines in his black *piwafwi* told them well enough who he was.

The mission's urgency pressed upon Dinin, but he could not ignore the bugbears' slight. How fast would they have scampered away if he had been a member of House Baenre or one of the other seven ruling houses? he wondered.

"You will learn respect of House Do'Urden soon enough!" the dark elf whispered under his breath, as he turned and charged his lizard at the group. The bugbears broke into a run, turning down an alley strewn with stones and debris.

Dinin found his satisfaction by calling on the innate powers of his race. He summoned

globe of darkness—impervious to both infravision and normal sight—in the fleeing creature's path. He supposed that it was unwise to call such attention to himself, but a moment later when he heard crashing and sputtered curses as the bugbears stumbled blindly over the stones, he felt it was worth the risk.

His anger sated, he moved off again, picking a more careful route through the heavy shadows. As a member of the tenth house of the city, Dinin could go as he pleased within the giant cavern without question, but Matron Malice had made it clear that no one connected to House Do'Urden was to be caught anywhere near the mushroom grove.

Matron Malice, Dinin's mother, was not to be crossed, but it was only a rule, after all. In Menzoberranzan, one rule took precedence over all of the petty others: Don't get caught.

At the mushroom grove's southern end, the impetuous drow found what he was looking for: a cluster of five huge floor-to-ceiling pillars that were hollowed into a network of chambers and connected with metal and stone parapets and bridges. Red-glowing gargoyles, the standard of the house, glared down from a hundred perches like silent sentries. This was House DeVir, Fourth House of Menzoberranzan.

A stockade of tall mushrooms ringed the place, every fifth one a shrieker, a sentient fungus named (and favored as guardians) for the shrill cries of alarm it emitted whenever a living being passed it by. Dinin kept a cautious distance, not wanting to set off one of the shriekers, and knowing also that other, more deadly wards protected the fortress. Matron Malice would see to those.

An expectant hush permeated the air of this city section. It was general knowledge throughout Menzoberranzan that Matron Ginfae of House DeVir had fallen out of favor with Lolth, the Spider Queen deity to all drow and the true source of every house's strength. Such circumstances were never openly discussed among the drow, but everyone who knew full well expected that some family lower in the city hierarchy soon would strike out against the crippled House DeVir.

Matron Ginfae and her family had been the last to learn of the Spider Queen's displeasure—ever was that Lolth's devious way—and Dinin could tell just by scanning the outside of House DeVir that the doomed family had not found sufficient time to erect proper defenses. House DeVir sported nearly four hundred soldiers, many female, but those that Dinin could now see at their posts along the parapets seemed nervous and unsure.

Dinin's smile spread even wider when he thought of his own house, which grew in power daily under the cunning guidance of Matron Malice. With all three of his sisters rapidly approaching the status of high priestess, his brother an accomplished wizard, and his uncle Zaknafein, the finest weapons master in all of Menzoberranzan, busily training the three hundred soldiers, House Do'Urden was a complete force. And, Matron Malice, unlike Ginfae, was in the Spider Queen's full favor.

"Daermon N'a'shezbaernon," Dinin muttered under his breath, using the formal ancestral reference to House Do'Urden. "Ninth House of Menzoberranzan!" He liked the sound of it.

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Halfway across the city, beyond the silver-glowing balcony and the arched doorway twenty feet up the cavern's west wall, sat the principals of House Do'Urden, gathered to outline the

final plans of the night's work. On the raised dais at the back of the small audience chamber sat venerable Matron Malice, her belly swollen in the final hours of pregnancy. Flanking her in their places of honor were her three daughters, Maya, Vierna, and the eldest, Briza, newly ordained high priestess of Lolth. Maya and Vierna appeared as younger versions of their mother, slender and deceptively small, though possessing great strength. Briza, though hardly carried the family resemblance. She was big—huge by drow standards—and rounded in the shoulders and hips. Those who knew Briza well figured that her size was merely a circumstance of her temperament; a smaller body could not have contained the anger and brutal streak of House Do'Urden's newest high priestess.

"Dinin should return soon," remarked Rizen, the present patron of the family, "to let you know if the time is right for the assault."

"We go before Narbondel finds its morning glow!" Briza snapped at him in her thick, razor-sharp voice. She turned a crooked smile to her mother, seeking approval for putting the male in his place.

"The child comes this night," Matron Malice explained to her anxious husband. "We go no matter what news Dinin bears."

"It will be a boy child," groaned Briza, making no effort to hide her disappointment, "this living son of House Do'Urden."

"To be sacrificed to Lolth," put in Zaknafein, a former patron of the house who now held the important position of weapons master. The skilled drow fighter seemed quite pleased at the thought of sacrifice, as did Nalfein, the family's eldest son, who stood at Zak's side. Nalfein was the elderboy, and he needed no more competition beyond Dinin within the ranks of House Do'Urden.

"In accord with custom," Briza glowered and the red of her eyes brightened. "To aid in our victory!"

Rizen shifted uncomfortably. "Matron Malice," he dared to speak, "you know well the difficulties of birthing. Might the pain distract you—"

"You dare to question the matron mother?" Briza started sharply, reaching for the snake-headed whip so comfortably strapped—and writhing—on her belt. Matron Malice stopped her with an outstretched hand.

"Attend to the fighting," the matron said to Rizen. "Let the females of the house see to the important matters of this battle."

Rizen shifted again and dropped his gaze.

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Dinin came to the magically wrought fence that connected the keep within the city's wall with the two small stalagmite towers of House Do'Urden, and which formed the courtyard to the compound. The fence was adamantine, the hardest metal in all the world, and adorning it were a hundred weapon-wielding spider carvings, each ensorcelled with deadly glyphs and wards. The mighty gate of House Do'Urden was the envy of many a drow house, but so soon after viewing the spectacular houses in the mushroom grove, Dinin could only find disappointment when looking upon his own abode. The compound was plain and somewhat bare, as was the section of wall, with the notable exception of the mithral-an-

adamantine balcony running along the second level, by the arched doorway reserved for the nobility of the family. Each baluster of that balcony sported a thousand carvings, all of which blended into a single piece of art.

House Do'Urden, unlike the great majority of the houses in Menzoberranzan, did not stand free within groves of stalactites and stalagmites. The bulk of the structure was within a cavern and while this setup was indisputably defensible, Dinin found himself wishing that his family could show a bit more grandeur.

An excited soldier rushed to open the gate for the returning secondboy. Dinin swept past him without so much as a word of greeting and moved across the courtyard, conscious of the hundred and more curious glances that fell upon him. The soldiers and slaves knew that Dinin's mission this night had something to do with the anticipated battle.

No stairway led to the silvery balcony of House Do'Urden's second level. This, too, was a precautionary measure designed to segregate the leaders of the house from the rabble and the slaves. Drow nobles needed no stairs; another manifestation of their innate magical abilities allowed them the power of levitation. With hardly a conscious thought to the act, Dinin drifted easily through the air and dropped onto the balcony.

He rushed through the archway and down the house's main central corridor, which was dimly lit in the soft hues of faerie fire, allowing for sight in the normal light spectrum but not bright enough to defeat the use of infravision. The ornate brass door at the corridor's end marked the secondboy's destination, and he paused before it to allow his eyes to shift back to the infrared spectrum. Unlike the corridor, the room beyond the door had no light source. It was the audience hall of the high priestesses, the anteroom to House Do'Urden's grand chapel. The drow clerical rooms, in accord with the dark rites of the Spider Queen, were not places of light.

When he felt he was prepared, Dinin pushed straight through the door, shoving past the two shocked female guards without hesitation and moving boldly to stand before his mother. As three of the family daughters narrowed their eyes at their brash and pretentious brother. To enter without permission! he knew they were thinking. Would that it was he who was to be sacrificed this night!

As much as he enjoyed testing the limitations of his inferior station as a male, Dinin could not ignore the threatening dances of Vierna, Maya, and Briza. Being female, they were bigger and stronger than Dinin and had trained all their lives in the use of wicked drow cleric powers and weapons. Dinin watched as enchanted extensions of the clerics, the dreaded snake-headed whips on his sisters' belts, began writhing in anticipation of the punishment they would exact. The handles were adamantine and ordinary enough, but the whips' lengths and multiple heads were living serpents. Briza's whip, in particular, a wicked six-headed device, danced and squirmed, tying itself into knots around the belt that held it. Briza was always the quickest to punish.

Matron Malice, however, seemed pleased by Dinin's swagger. The secondboy knew his place well enough by her measure and he followed her commands fearlessly and without question.

Dinin took comfort in the calmness of his mother's face, quite the opposite of the shining white-hot faces of his three sisters. "All is ready," he said to her. "House DeVir huddled

within its fence—except for Alton, of course, foolishly attending his studies in Sorcere.”

“You have met with the Faceless One?” Matron Malice asked.

“The Academy was quiet this night,” Dinin replied. “Our meeting went off perfectly.”

“He has agreed to our contract?”

“Alton DeVir will be dealt with accordingly,” Dinin chuckled. He then remembered the slight alteration he had made in Matron Malice’s plans, delaying Alton’s execution for the sake of his own lust for added cruelty. Dinin’s thought evoked another recollection as well. The high priestesses of Lolth had an unnerving talent for reading thoughts.

“Alton will die this night,” Dinin quickly completed the answer, assuring the others before they could probe him for more definite details.

“Excellent,” Briza growled. Dinin breathed a little easier.

“To the meld,” Matron Malice ordered.

The four drow males moved to kneel before the matron and her daughters: Rikken to Malice, Zaknafein to Briza, Nalfein to Maya, and Dinin to Vierna. The clerics chanted in unison, placing one hand delicately upon the forehead of their respective soldier, tuning in to his passions.

“You know your places,” Matron Malice said when the ceremony was completed. She grimaced through the pain of another contraction. “Let our work begin.”

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Less than an hour later, Zaknafein and Briza stood together on the balcony outside the upper entrance to House Do’Urden. Below them, on the cavern floor, the second and third brigades of the family army, Rikken’s and Nalfein’s, bustled about, fitting on heated leather straps and metal patches—camouflage against a distinctive elven form to heat-seeing drow eyes. Dinin’s group, the initial strike force that included a hundred goblin slaves, had long since departed.

“We will be known after this night,” Briza said. “None would have suspected that a ten-story house would dare to move against one as powerful as DeVir. When the whispers ripple out after this night’s bloody work, even Baenre will take note of Daermon N’a’shezbaernon!” She leaned out over the balcony to watch as the two brigades formed into lines and started out silently, along separate paths that would bring them through the winding city to the mushroom grove and the five-pillared structure of House DeVir.

Zaknafein eyed the back of Matron Malice’s eldest daughter, wanting nothing more than to put a dagger into her spine. As always, though, good judgment kept Zak’s practiced hand in its place.

“Have you the articles?” Briza inquired, showing Zak considerably more respect than she had when Matron Malice sat protectively at her side. Zak was only a male, a commoner, not allowed to don the family name as his own because he sometimes served Matron Malice in a husbandly manner and had once been the patron of the house. Still, Briza feared to anger him. Zak was the weapons master of House Do’Urden, a tall and muscular male, stronger than most females, and those who had witnessed his fighting wrath considered him among the finest warriors of either sex in all of Menzoberranzan. Besides Briza and her mother, both high priestesses of the Spider Queen, Zaknafein, with his unrivaled swordsmanship, was

House Do'Urden's trump.

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Zak held up the black hood and opened the small pouch on his belt, revealing several tiny ceramic spheres.

Briza smiled evilly and rubbed her slender hands together. "Matron Ginafae will not be pleased," she whispered.

Zak returned the smile and turned to view the departing soldiers. Nothing gave the weapons master more pleasure than killing drow elves, particularly clerics of Lolth.

"Prepare yourself," Briza said after a few minutes.

Zak shook his thick hair back from his face and stood rigid, eyes tightly closed. Briza drew her wand slowly, beginning the chant that would activate the device. She tapped Zak on one shoulder, then the other, then held the wand motionless over his head.

Zak felt the frosty sprinkles falling down on him, permeating his clothes and armor, even his hair, until he and all of his possessions had cooled to a uniform temperature and hue. Zak hated the magical chill—it felt as he imagined death would feel—but he knew that under the influence of the wand's sprinkles he was, to the heat-sensing eyes of the creatures of the Underdark, as gray as common stone, unremarkable and undetectable.

Zak opened his eyes and shuddered, flexing his fingers to be sure they could still perform the fine edge of his craft. He looked back to Briza, already in the midst of the second spell of the summoning. This one would take a while, so Zak leaned back against the wall and considered again the pleasant, though dangerous, task before him. How thoughtful of Matron Malice to leave all of House DeVir's clerics to him!

"It is done," Briza announced after a few minutes. She led Zak's gaze upward, to the darkness beneath the unseen ceiling of the immense cavern.

Zak spotted Briza's handiwork first, an approaching current of air, yellow-tinted and warmer than the normal air of the cavern. A living current of air.

The creature, a conjuration from an elemental plane, swirled to hover just beyond the lip of the balcony, obediently awaiting its summoner's commands.

Zak didn't hesitate. He leaped out into the thing's midst, letting it hold him suspended above the floor.

Briza offered him a final salute and motioned her servant away. "Good fighting," she called to Zak, though he was already invisible in the air above her.

Zak chuckled at the irony of her words as the twisting city of Menzoberranzan rolled on below him. She wanted the clerics of House DeVir dead as surely as Zak did, but for very different reasons. All complications aside, Zak would have been just as happy killing clerics of House Do'Urden.

The weapons master took up one of his adamantine swords, a drow weapon magically crafted and unbelievably sharp with the edge of killing dweomers. "Good fighting indeed," he whispered. If only Briza knew how good.



## THE FALL OF HOUSE DEVIR

Dinin noted with satisfaction that any of the meandering bugbears, or any other of the multitude of races that composed Menzoberranzan, drow included, now made great haste to scurry out of his way. This time the secondboy of House Do'Urden was not alone. Nearly sixty soldiers of the house walked in tight lines behind him. Behind these, in similar order though with far less enthusiasm for the adventure, came a hundred armed slaves of lesser races—goblins, orcs, and bugbears.

There could be no doubt for onlookers—a drow house was on a march to war. This was not an everyday event in Menzoberranzan but neither was it unexpected. At least once every decade a house decided that its position within the city hierarchy could be improved by another house's elimination. It was a risky proposition, for all of the nobles of the "victim" house had to be disposed of quickly and quietly. If even one survived to lay an accusation upon the perpetrator, the attacking house would be eradicated by Menzoberranzan's merciless system of "justice."

If the raid was executed to devious perfection, though, no recourse would be forthcoming. All of the city, even the ruling council of the top eight matron mothers, would secretly applaud the attackers for their courage and intelligence and no more would ever be said of the incident.

Dinin took a roundabout route, not wanting to lay a direct trail between House Do'Urden and House DeVir. A half-hour later, for the second time that night, he crept to the mushroom grove's southern end, to the cluster of stalagmites that held House DeVir. His soldiers streamed out behind him eagerly, readying weapons and taking full measure of the structure before them.

The slaves were slower in their movements. Many of them looked about for some escape for they knew in their hearts that they were doomed in this battle. They feared the wrath of the dark elves more than death itself, though, and would not attempt to flee. With every exit out of Menzoberranzan protected by devious drow magic, where could they possibly go? Every one of them had witnessed the brutal punishments the drow elves exacted on recaptured slaves. At Dinin's command, they jumped into their positions around the mushroom fence.

Dinin reached into his large pouch and pulled out a heated sheet of metal. He flashed the object, brightened in the infrared spectrum, three times behind him to signal the approaching brigades of Nalfein and Rikken. Then, with his usual cockiness, Dinin spun it quickly into the air, caught it, and replaced it in the secrecy of his heat-shielding pouch. On cue with the twirling signal, Dinin's drow brigade fitted enchanted darts to their tiny hand-held crossbows and took aim on the appointed targets.

Every fifth mushroom was a shrieker, and every dart held a magical dweomer that could

silence the roar of a dragon.

“... two ... three,” Dinin counted, his hand signaling the tempo since no words could be heard within the sphere of magical silence cast about his troops. He imagined the “click” as the drawn string on his little weapon released, loosing the dart into the nearest shrieker. So went all around the cluster of House DeVir, the first line of alarm systematically silenced by three-dozen enchanted darts.

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Halfway across Menzoberranzan, Matron Malice, her daughters, and four of the house's common clerics were gathered in Lolth's unholy circle of eight. They ringed an idol of the wicked deity, a gemstone carving of a drow-faced spider, and called to Lolth for aid in their struggles.

Malice sat at the head, propped in a chair angled for birthing. Briza and Vierna flanked her, Briza clutching her hand.

The select group chanted in unison, combining their energies into a single offensive spell. A moment later, when Vierna, mentally linked to Dinin, understood that the first attack group was in position, the Do'Urden circle of eight sent the first insinuating waves of mental energy into the rival house.

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Matron Ginafae, her two daughters, and the five principal clerics of the common troops of House DeVir huddled together in the darkened anteroom of the five-stalagmite house's main chapel. They had gathered there in solemn prayer every night since Matron Ginafae had learned that she had fallen into Lolth's disfavor. Ginafae understood how vulnerable her house remained until she could find a way to appease the Spider Queen. There were sixty-six other houses in Menzoberranzan, fully twenty of which might dare to attack House DeVir at such an obvious disadvantage. The eight clerics were anxious now, somehow suspecting that this night would be eventful.

Ginafae felt it first, a chilling blast of confusing perceptions that caused her to stutter over her prayer of forgiveness. The other clerics of House DeVir glanced nervously at the matron's uncharacteristic slip of words, looking for confirmation.

“We are under attack,” Ginafae breathed to them, her head already pounding with a dull ache under the growing assault of the formidable clerics of House Do'Urden.

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A second signal from Dinin put the slave troops into motion. Still using stealth as their ally, they quietly rushed to the mushroom fence and cut through with wide-bladed swords. The secondboy of House Do'Urden watched and enjoyed as the courtyard of House DeVir was easily penetrated. “Not such a prepared guard,” he whispered in silent sarcasm to the red-glowing gargoyles on the high walls. The statues had seemed such an ominous guard earlier that night. Now they just watched helplessly.

Dinin recognized the measured but growing anticipation in the soldiers around him; the drow battle-lust was barely contained. Every now and then came a killing flash as one of the slaves stumbled over a warding glyph, but the secondboy and the other drow only laughed at the spectacle. The lesser races were the expendable “fodder” of House Do'Urden's army. The

only purpose in bringing the goblinoids to House DeVir was to trigger the deadly traps and defenses along the perimeter, to lead the way for the drow elves, the true soldiers.

The fence was now opened and secrecy was thrown away. House DeVir's soldiers met the invading slaves head-on within the compound. Dinin barely had his hand up to begin the attack command when his sixty anxious drow warriors jumped up and charged, their faces twisted in wicked glee and their weapons waving menacingly.

They halted their approach on cue, though, remembering one final task set out to them. Every drow, noble or commoner, possessed certain magical abilities. Bringing forth a globe of darkness, as Dinin had done to the bugbears in the street earlier that night, came easily to even the lowliest of the dark elves. So it went now, with sixty Do'Urden soldiers blotting out the perimeter of House DeVir above the mushroom fence in ball after ball of blackness.

For all of their stealth and precautions, House Do'Urden knew that many eyes were watching the raid. Witnesses were not too much of a problem; they could not, or would not care enough to identify the attacking house. But custom and rules demanded that certain attempts at secrecy be enacted, the etiquette of drow warfare. In the blink of a red-glowing drow eye, House DeVir became, to the rest of the city, a dark blot on Menzoberranzan landscape.

Rizzen came up behind his youngest son. "Well done," he signaled in the intricate finger language of the drow. "Nalfein is in through the back."

"An easy victory," the cocky Dinin signaled back, "if Matron Ginafae and her clerics are held at bay."

"Trust in Matron Malice," was Rizzen's response. He clapped his son's shoulder and followed his troops in through the breached mushroom fence.

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High above the cluster of House DeVir, Zaknafein rested comfortably in the current-arms of Briza's aerial servant, watching the drama unfold. From this vantage, Zak could see within the ring of darkness and could hear within the ring of magical silence. Dinin's troops, the first drow soldiers in, had met resistance at every door and were being beaten badly.

Nalfein and his brigade, the troops of House Do'Urden most practiced in the ways of wizardry, came through the fence at the rear of the complex. Lightning strikes and magic balls of acid thundered into the courtyard at the base of the DeVir structures, cutting down Do'Urden fodder and DeVir defenses alike.

In the front courtyard, Rizzen and Dinin commanded the finest fighters of House Do'Urden. The blessings of Lolth were with his house, Zak could see when the battle was fully joined for the strikes of the soldiers of House Do'Urden came faster than those of their enemies, and their aim proved more deadly. In minutes, the battle had been taken fully inside the five pillars.

Zak stretched the incessant chill out of his arms and willed the aerial servant to action. Down he plummeted on his windy bed, and he fell free the last few feet to the terrace along the top chambers of the central pillar. At once, two guards, one a female, rushed out to greet him.

They hesitated in confusion, though, trying to sort out the true form of this unremarkable

gray blur—too long.

They had never heard of Zaknafein Do'Urden. They didn't know that death was upon them.

Zak's whip flashed out, catching and gashing the female's throat, while his other hand walked his sword through a series of masterful thrusts and parries that put the male off balance. Zak finished both in a single, blurring movement, snapping the whip-entwined female from the terrace with a twist of his wrist and spinning a kick into the male's face that likewise dropped him to the cavern floor.

Zak was then inside, where another guard rose up to meet him ... but fell at his feet.

Zak slipped along the curving wall of the stalactite tower, his cooled body blending perfectly with the stone. Soldiers of House DeVir rushed all about him, trying to formulate some defense against the host of intruders who had already won out the lowest level of every structure and had taken two of the pillars completely.

Zak was not concerned with them. He blocked out the clanging ring of adamantium weapons, the cries of command, and the screams of death, concentrating instead on a singular sound that would lead him to his destination: a unified, frantic chant.

He found an empty corridor covered with spider carvings and running into the center of the pillar. As in House Do'Urden, this corridor ended in a large set of ornate double doors, the decorations dominated by arachnid forms. "This must be the place." Zak muttered under his breath, fitting his hood to the top of his head.

A giant spider rushed out of its concealment to his side.

Zak dived to his belly and kicked out under the thing, spinning into a roll that plunged his sword deep into the monster's bulbous body. Sticky fluids gushed out over the weapon master, and the spider shuddered to a quick death.

"Yes," Zak whispered, wiping the spider juices from his face, "this must be the place." He pulled the dead monster back into its hidden cubby and slipped in beside the thing, hoping that no one had noticed the brief struggle.

By the sounds of ringing weapons, Zak could tell that the fighting had almost reached the floor. House DeVir now seemed to have its defenses in place, though, and was finally holding its ground.

"Now, Malice," Zak whispered, hoping that Briza, attuned to him in the meld, would sense his anxiety. "Let us not be late!"

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Back in the clerical anteroom of House Do'Urden, Malice and her subordinates continued their brutal mental assault on the clerics of House DeVir. Lolth heard their prayers louder than those of their counterparts, giving the clerics of House Do'Urden the stronger spells in their mental combat. Already they had easily put their enemies into a defensive posture. One of the lesser priestesses in DeVir's circle of eight had been crushed by Briza's mental insinuations and now lay dead on the floor barely inches from Matron Ginafae's feet.

But the momentum had slowed suddenly and the battle seemed to be swinging back to an even level. Matron Malice, struggling with the impending birth, could not hold her concentration, and without her voice, the spells of her unholy circle weakened.

At her mother's side, powerful Briza clutched her mother's hand so tightly that all the blood

was squeezed from it, leaving it cool—the only cool spot on the laboring female—to the eyes of the others. Briza studied the contractions and the crowning cap of the coming child's white hair, and calculated the time to the moment of birth. This technique of translating the pain of birth into an offensive spell attack had never been tried before, except in legend, and Briza knew that timing would be the critical factor.

She whispered into her mother's ear, coaxing out the words of a deadly incantation.

Matron Malice echoed back the beginnings of the spell, sublimating her gasps, and transforming her rage of agony into offensive power.

*"Dinnen douward ma brechen tol,"* Briza implored.

*"Dinnen douward... maaa ... brechen tol!"* Malice growled, so determined to focus through the pain that she bit through one of her thin lips.

The baby's head appeared, more fully this time, and this time to stay.

Briza trembled and could barely remember the incantation herself. She whispered the final rune into the matron's ear, almost fearing the consequences.

Malice gathered her breath and her courage. She could feel the tingling of the spell as clearly as the pain of the birth. To her daughters standing around the idol, staring at her in disbelief, she appeared as a red blur of heated fury, streaking sweat lines that shone as brightly as the heat of boiling water.

*"Abec,"* the matron began, feeling the pressure building to a crescendo. *"Abec."* She felt the hot tear of her skin, the sudden slippery release as the baby's head pushed through, the sudden ecstasy of birthing. *"Abec di'n'a'BREG DOUWARD!"* Malice screamed, pushing away all of the agony in a final explosion of magical power that knocked even the clerics of her own house from their feet.

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Carried on the thrust of Matron Malice's exultation, the dweomer thundered into the chapel of House DeVir, shattered the gemstone idol of Lolth, sundered the double doors into heaps of twisted metal, and threw Matron Ginafae and her overmatched subordinates to the floor.

Zak shook his head in disbelief as the chapel doors flew past him. "Quite a kick, Malice!" He chuckled and spun around the entryway, into the chapel. Using his infravision, he took a quick survey and head count of the lightless room's seven living occupants, all struggling back to their feet, their robes tattered. Again shaking his head at the bared power of Matron Malice, Zak pulled his hood down over his face.

A snap of his whip was the only explanation he offered as he smashed a tiny ceramic globe at his feet. The sphere shattered, dropping out a pellet that Briza had enchanted for just such occasions, a pellet glowing with the brightness of daylight.

For eyes accustomed to blackness, tuned in to heat emanations, the intrusion of such radiance came in a blinding flash of agony. The clerics' cries of pain only aided Zak in his systematic trek around the room, and he smiled widely under his hood every time he felt his sword bite into drow flesh.

He heard the beginnings of a spell across the way and knew that one of the DeVirs had recovered enough from the assault to be dangerous. The weapons master did not need his eyes to aim, however, and the crack of his whip took Matron Ginafae's tongue right out of

her mouth.

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Briza placed the newborn on the back of the spider idol and lifted the ceremonial dagger, pausing to admire its cruel workmanship. Its hilt was a spider's body sporting eight legs, barbed so as to appear furred, but angled down to serve as blades. Briza lifted the instrument above the baby's chest. "Name the child," she implored her mother. "The Spider Queen will not accept the sacrifice until the child is named!"

Matron Malice lolled her head, trying to fathom her daughter's meaning. The matron's mother had thrown everything into the moment of the spell and the birth, and she was now barely coherent.

"Name the child!" Briza commanded, anxious to feed her hungry goddess.

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"It nears its end," Dinin said to his brother when they met in a lower hall of one of the lesser pillars of House DeVir. "Rizzen is winning through to the top, and it is believed that Zaknafein's dark work has been completed."

"Two score of House DeVir's soldiers have already turned allegiance to us," Nalfein replied.

"They see the end," laughed Dinin. "One house serves them as well as another, and in the eyes of commoners no house is worth dying for. Our task will be finished soon."

"Too quickly for anyone to take note," Nalfein said. "Now Do'Urden, Daermoc, and N'a'shezbaernon, is the Ninth House of Menzoberranzan and DeVir be damned!"

"Alert!" Dinin cried suddenly, eyes widening in feigned horror as he looked over his brother's shoulder.

Nalfein reacted immediately, spinning to face the danger at his back, only to put the true danger at his back. For even as Nalfein realized the deception, Dinin's sword slipped into his spine. Dinin put his head to his brother's shoulder and pressed his cheek to Nalfein's, watching the red sparkle of heat leave his brother's eyes.

"Too quickly for anyone to take note," Dinin teased, echoing his brother's earlier words.

He dropped the lifeless form to his feet. "Now Dinin is elderboy of House Do'Urden, and Nalfein be damned."

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"Drizzt," breathed Matron Malice. "The child's name is Drizzt!"

Briza tightened her grip on the knife and began the ritual. "Queen of Spiders, take this babe," she began. She raised the dagger to strike. "Drizzt Do'Urden we give to you in payment for our glorious vic—"

"Wait!" called Maya from the side of the room. Her melding with her brother Nalfein had abruptly ceased. It could only mean one thing. "Nalfein is dead," she announced. "The baby is no longer the third living son."

Vierna glanced curiously at her sister. At the same instant that Maya had sensed Nalfein's death, Vierna, melded with Dinin, had felt a strong emotive surge. Elation? Vierna brought her slender finger up to her pursed lips, wondering if Dinin had successfully pulled off the assassination.

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