

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

HOMELAND



THE
LEGEND
OF DRIZZT BOOK I

RA SALVATORE



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 ceil-
ing of heartless stone and whose walls show the gray
blandness of death in the torchlight of the foolish
surface-dwellers that stumble here.

PRELUDE

This is not their world, not the world
of light. Most who come here unin-
vited 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 hear-
ing 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 imagi-
nation 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 other worldly 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.



PART ONE

Station: In all the world of the drow, there is no more important word. It is the calling of their—of our—religion, the incessant pulling of hungry heart-strings. Ambition overrides good sense and compassion is thrown away in its face, all in the name of Lolth, the Spider Queen.

STATION

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



MENZOBERRANZAN

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 ebon-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's 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 neck-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 Daermon 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 un-faillingly, 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 to admire the sweeping view of Menzoberranzan. No one, drow or otherwise, 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; Sorcere, 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 off singularly in cutting lines against the backdrop of dim gray stone. More confined than these 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 or 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 spell 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 out 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. “Greetings, 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 this 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.”



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 in 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 fair-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 their 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 finest 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 a globe of darkness—impervious to both infravision and normal sight—in the fleeing creatures' 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 heat 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 Ginafae 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 fully expected that some family lower in the city hierarchy soon would strike out against the crippled House DeVir.

Matron Ginafae 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. 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 Ginafae, was in the Spider Queen's full favor.

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



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, a 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 Rikken, the present patron of the family, "to let us know if the time is right for the assault."

"We go before Narbondel finds its morning glow!" Briza snapped at him in her thick but 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, "third 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!"

Rikken 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 Rikken. "Let the females of the house see to the important matters of this battle."

Rikken shifted again and dropped his gaze.



Dinin came to the magically wrought fence that connected the keep within the city's west 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-and-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 Menzoberanzan, did not stand free within groves of stalactites and stalagmites. The bulk of the structure was within a cave, 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. All 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 clerical 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 huddles 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: 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: Rissen 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.”



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, Rissen’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 tenth 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 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.

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 Ginfae 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 flesh, 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, 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 Menzoberanzan rolled out 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.