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THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK II





# ANNIVERSARY PRESENT

Matron Malice Do'Urden shifted uneasily on the stone throne in the small and darkened anteroom to the great chapel of House Do'Urden. To the dark elves, who measured time's passage in decades, this was a day to be marked in the annals of Malice's house, the tenth anniversary of the ongoing covert conflict between the Do'Urden family and House Hun'ett. Matron Malice, never one to miss a celebration, had a special present prepared for her enemies.

Briza Do'Urden, Malice's eldest daughter, a large and powerful drow female, paced about the anteroom anxiously, a not uncommon sight. "It should be finished by now," she grumbled as she kicked a small three-legged stool. It skidded and tumbled, chipping away a piece of mushroom-stem seat.

"Patience, my daughter," Malice replied somewhat recriminatory, though she shared Briza's sentiments. "Jarlaxle is a careful one." Briza turned away at the mention of the outrageous mercenary and moved to the room's ornately carved stone doors. Malice did not miss the significance of her daughter's actions.

"You do not approve of Jarlaxle and his band," the matron mother stated flatly.

“They are houseless rogues,” Briza spat in response, still not turning to face her mother. “There is no place in Menzoberranzan for houseless rogues. They disrupt the natural order of our society. And they are males!”

“They serve us well,” Malice reminded her. Briza wanted to argue about the extreme cost of hiring the mercenary band, but she wisely held her tongue. She and Malice had been at odds almost continually since the start of the Do’Urden-Hun’ett war.

“Without Bregan D’aerthe, we could not take action against our enemies,” Malice continued. “Using the mercenaries, the houseless rogues, as you have named them, allows us to wage war without implicating our house as the perpetrator.”

“Then why not be done with it?” Briza demanded, spinning back toward the throne. “We kill a few of Hun’ett’s soldiers, they kill a few of ours. And all the while, both houses continue to recruit replacements! It will not end! The only winners in the conflict are the mercenaries of Bregan D’aerthe—and whatever band Matron SiNafay Hun’ett has hired—feeding off the coffers of both houses!”

“Watch your tone, my daughter,” Malice growled as an angry reminder. “You are addressing a matron mother.”

Briza turned away again. “We should have attacked House Hun’ett immediately, on the night Zaknafein was sacrificed,” she dared to grumble.

“You forget the actions of your youngest brother on that night,” Malice replied evenly.

But the matron mother was wrong. If she lived a thousand more years, Briza would not forget Drizzt’s actions on the night he had forsaken his family. Trained by Zaknafein, Malice’s favorite lover and reputedly the finest weapon master in all of Menzoberranzan, Drizzt had achieved a level of fighting ability far beyond the drow norm. But Zak had also given Drizzt the troublesome and blasphemous attitudes that Lolth, the

Spider Queen deity of the dark elves, would not tolerate. Finally, Drizzt's sacrilegious ways had invoked Lolth's wrath, and the Spider Queen, in turn, had demanded his death.

Matron Malice, impressed by Drizzt's potential as a warrior, had acted boldly on Drizzt's behalf and had given Zaknafein's heart to Lolth to compensate for Drizzt's sins. She forgave Drizzt in the hope that without Zaknafein's influences he would amend his ways and replace the deposed weapon master.

In return, though, the ungrateful Drizzt had betrayed them all, had run off into the Underdark—an act that had not only robbed House Do'Urden of its only potential remaining weapon master, but also had placed Matron Malice and the rest of the Do'Urden family out of Lolth's favor. In the disastrous end of all their efforts, House Do'Urden had lost its premier weapon master, the favor of Lolth, and its would-be weapon master. It had not been a good day.

Luckily, House Hun'ett had suffered similar woes on that same day, losing both its wizards in a botched attempt to assassinate Drizzt. With both houses weakened and in Lolth's disfavor, the expected war had been turned into a calculated series of covert raids.

Briza would never forget.

A knock on the anteroom door startled Briza and her mother from their private memories of that fateful time. The door swung open, and Dinin, the elderboy of the house, walked in.

"Greetings, Matron Mother," he said in appropriate manner and dipping into a low bow. Dinin wanted his news to be a surprise, but the grin that found its way onto his face revealed everything.

"Jarlaxle has returned!" Malice snarled in glee. Dinin turned toward the open door, and the mercenary, waiting patiently in the corridor, strode in. Briza, ever amazed at the rogue's unusual mannerisms, shook her head as Jarlaxle walked past her. Nearly every dark elf in Menzoberranzan dressed in a quiet and practical manner, in robes adorned with the symbols of the

Spider Queen or in supple chain-link armor under the folds of a magical and camouflaging *piwafwi* cloak.

Jarlaxle, arrogant and brash, followed few of the customs of Menzoberanzan's inhabitants. He was most certainly not the norm of drow society and he flaunted the differences openly, brazenly. He wore not a cloak nor a robe, but a shimmering cape that showed every color of the spectrum both in the glow of light and in the infrared spectrum of heat-sensing eyes. The cape's magic could only be guessed, but those closest to the mercenary leader indicated that it was very valuable indeed.

Jarlaxle's vest was sleeveless and cut so high that his slender and tightly muscled stomach was open for all to view. He kept a patch over one eye, though careful observers would understand it as ornamental, for Jarlaxle often shifted it from one eye to the other.

"My dear Briza," Jarlaxle said over his shoulder, noting the high priestess's disdainful interest in his appearance. He spun about and bowed low, sweeping off the wide-brimmed hat—another oddity, and even more so since the hat was overly plumed in the monstrous feathers of a diatryma, a gigantic Underdark bird—as he stooped.

Briza huffed and turned away at the sight of the mercenary's dipping head. Drow elves wore their thick white hair as a mantle of their station, each cut designed to reveal rank and house affiliation. Jarlaxle the rogue wore no hair at all, and from Briza's angle, his clean-shaven head appeared as a ball of pressed onyx.

Jarlaxle laughed quietly at the continuing disapproval of the eldest Do'Urden daughter and turned back toward Matron Malice, his ample jewelry tinkling and his hard and shiny boots clumping with every step. Briza took note of this as well, for she knew that those boots, and that jewelry, only seemed to make noise when Jarlaxle wished them to do so.

"It is done?" Matron Malice asked before the mercenary could even begin to offer a proper greeting.

“My dear Matron Malice,” Jarlaxle replied with a pained sigh, knowing that he could get away with the informalities in light of his grand news. “Did you doubt me? Surely I am wounded to my heart.”

Malice leaped from her throne, her fist clenched in victory. “Dipree Hun’ett is dead!” she proclaimed. “The first noble victim of the war!”

“You forget Masoj Hun’ett,” remarked Briza, “slain by Drizzt ten years ago. And Zaknafein Do’Urden,” Briza had to add, against her better judgment, “killed by your own hand.”

“Zaknafein was not noble by birth,” Malice sneered at her impertinent daughter. Briza’s words stung Malice nonetheless. Malice had decided to sacrifice Zaknafein in Drizzt’s stead against Briza’s recommendations.

Jarlaxle cleared his throat to deflect the growing tension. The mercenary knew that he had to finish his business and be out of House Do’Urden as quickly as possible. Already he knew—though the Do’Urdens did not—that the appointed hour drew near. “There is the matter of my payment,” he reminded Malice.

“Dinin will see to it,” Malice replied with a wave of her hand, not turning her eyes from her daughter’s pernicious stare.

“I will take my leave,” Jarlaxle said, nodding to the elderboy.

Before the mercenary had taken his first step toward the door, Vierna, Malice’s second daughter, burst into the room, her face glowing brightly in the infrared spectrum, heated with obvious excitement.

“Damn,” Jarlaxle whispered under his breath.

“What is it?” Matron Malice demanded.

“House Hun’ett,” Vierna cried. “Soldiers in the compound! We are under attack!”



Out in the courtyard, beyond the cavern complex, nearly five hundred soldiers of House Hun’ett—fully a hundred more than the house reportedly

possessed—followed the blast of a lightning bolt through House Do’Urden’s adamantite gates. The three hundred fifty soldiers of the Do’Urden household swarmed out of the shaped stalagmite mounds that served as their quarters to meet the attack.

Outnumbered but trained by Zaknafein, the Do’Urden troops formed into proper defensive positions, shielding their wizards and clerics so that they might cast their spells.

An entire contingent of Hun’ett soldiers, empowered with enchantments of flying, swooped down the cavern wall that housed the royal chambers of House Do’Urden. Tiny hand-held crossbows clicked and thinned the ranks of the aerial force with deadly, poison-tipped darts. The aerial invaders’ surprise had been achieved, though, and the Do’Urden troops were quickly put into a precarious position.



“Hun’ett has not the favor of Lolth!” Malice screamed. “It would not dare to openly attack!” She flinched at the refuting, thunderous sounds of another, and then still another, bolt of lightning.

“Oh?” Briza snapped.

Malice cast her daughter a threatening glare but didn’t have time to continue the argument. The normal method of attack by a drow house would involve the rush of soldiers combined with a mental barrage by the house’s highest-ranking clerics. Malice, though, felt no mental attack, which told her beyond any doubt that it was indeed House Hun’ett that had come to her gates. The clerics of Hun’ett, out of the Spider Queen’s favor, apparently could not use their Lolth-given powers to launch the mental assault. If they had, Malice and her daughters, also out of the Spider Queen’s favor, could not have hoped to counter.

“Why would they dare to attack?” Malice wondered aloud.

Briza understood her mother’s reasoning. “They are bold indeed,” she

said, “to hope that their soldiers alone can eliminate every member of our house.” Everyone in the room, every drow in Menzoberranzan, understood the brutal, absolute punishments exacted upon any house that failed to eradicate another house. Such attacks were not frowned upon, but getting caught at the deed most certainly was.

Rizzen, the present patron of House Do’Urden, came into the anteroom then, his face grim. “We are outnumbered and outpositioned,” he said. “Our defeat will be swift, I fear.”

Malice would not accept the news. She struck Rizzen with a blow that knocked the patron halfway across the floor, then she spun on Jarlaxle. “You must summon your band!” Malice cried at the mercenary. “Quickly!”

“Matron,” Jarlaxle stuttered, obviously at a loss. “Bregan D’aerthe is a secretive group. We do not engage in open warfare. To do so could invoke the wrath of the ruling council!”

“I will pay you whatever you desire,” the desperate matron mother promised.

“But the cost—”

“Whatever you desire!” Malice snarled again.

“Such action—” Jarlaxle began.

Again, Malice did not let him finish his argument. “Save my house, mercenary,” she growled. “Your profits will be great, but I warn you, the cost of your failure will be far greater!”

Jarlaxle did not appreciate being threatened, especially by a lame matron mother whose entire world was fast crumbling around her. But in the mercenary’s ears the sweet ring of the word “profits” outweighed the threat a thousand times over. After ten straight years of exorbitant rewards in the Do’Urden-Hun’ett conflict, Jarlaxle did not doubt Malice’s willingness or ability to pay as promised, nor did he doubt that this deal would prove even more lucrative than the agreement he had struck with Matron SiNafay Hun’ett earlier that same tenday.

“As you wish,” he said to Matron Malice with a bow and a sweep of his garish hat. “I will see what I can do.” A wink at Dinin set the elderboy on his heels as he exited the room.

When the two got out on the balcony overlooking the Do’Urden compound, they saw that the situation was even more desperate than Rikken had described. The soldiers of House Do’Urden—those still alive—were trapped in and around one of the huge stalagmite mounds anchoring the front gate.

One of Hun’ett’s flying soldiers dropped onto the balcony at the sight of a Do’Urden noble, but Dinin dispatched the intruder with a single, blurring attack routine.

“Well done,” Jarlaxle commented, giving Dinin an approving nod. He moved to pat the elderboy Do’Urden on the shoulder, but Dinin slipped out of reach.

“We have other business,” he pointedly reminded Jarlaxle. “Call your troops, and quickly, else I fear that House Hun’ett will win the day.”

“Be at ease, my friend Dinin,” Jarlaxle laughed. He pulled a small whistle from around his neck and blew into it. Dinin heard not a sound, for the instrument was magically tuned exclusively for the ears of members of Bregan D’aerthe.

The elderboy Do’Urden watched in amazement as Jarlaxle calmly puffed out a specific cadence, then he watched in even greater amazement as more than a hundred of House Hun’ett’s soldiers turned against their comrades.

Bregan D’aerthe owed allegiance only to Bregan D’aerthe.



“They could not attack us,” Malice said stubbornly, pacing about the chamber. “The Spider Queen would not aid them in their venture.”

“They are winning without the Spider Queen’s aid,” Rikken reminded

her, prudently ducking into the room's farthest corner even as he spoke the unwanted words.

"You said that they would never attack!" Briza growled at her mother. "Even as you explained why we could not dare to attack them!" Briza remembered that conversation vividly, for it was she who had suggested the open attack on House Hun'ett. Malice had scolded her harshly and publicly, and now Briza meant to return the humiliation. Her voice dripped of angry sarcasm as she aimed each word at her mother. "Could it be that Matron Malice Do'Urden has erred?"

Malice's reply came in the form of a glare that wavered somewhere between rage and terror. Briza returned the threatening look without ambiguity and suddenly the matron mother of House Do'Urden did not feel so very invincible and sure of her actions. She started forward nervously a moment later when Maya, the youngest of the Do'Urden daughters, entered the room.

"They have breached the house!" Briza cried, assuming the worst. She grabbed at her snake-headed whip. "And we have not even begun our preparations for defense!"

"No!" Maya quickly corrected. "No enemies have crossed the balcony. The battle has turned against House Hun'ett!"

"As I knew it would," Malice observed, pulling herself straight and speaking pointedly at Briza. "Foolish is the house that moves without the favor of Lolth!" Despite her proclamation, though, Malice guessed that more than the judgment of the Spider Queen had come into play out in the courtyard. Her reasoning led her inescapably to Jarlaxle and his untrustworthy band of rogues.



Jarlaxle stepped off the balcony and used his innate drow abilities to levitate down to the cavern floor. Seeing no need to involve himself in a

battle that was obviously under control, Dinin rested back and watched the mercenary go, considering all that had just transpired. Jarlaxle had played both sides off against the other, and once again the mercenary and his band had been the only true winners. Bregan D'aerthe was undeniably unscrupulous, but Dinin had to admit, undeniably effective.

Dinin found that he liked the renegade.



“The accusation has been properly delivered to Matron Baenre?” Malice asked Briza when the light of Narbondel, the magically heated stalagmite mound that served as the time clock of Menzoberranzan, began its steady climb, marking the dawn of the next day.

“The ruling house expected the visit,” Briza replied with a smirk. “All of the city whispers of the attack, and of how House Do’Urden repelled the invaders of House Hun’ett.”

Malice futilely tried to hide her vain smile. She enjoyed the attention and the glory that she knew would be lavished upon her house.

“The ruling council will be convened this very day,” Briza went on. “No doubt to the dismay of Matron SiNafay Hun’ett and her doomed children.”

Malice nodded her agreement. To eradicate a rival house in Menzoberranzan was a perfectly acceptable practice among the drow. But to fail in the attempt, to leave even one witness of noble blood alive to make an accusation, invited the judgment of the ruling council, a wrath that wrought absolute destruction in its wake.

A knock turned them both toward the room’s ornate door.

“You are summoned, Matron,” Rizzo said as he entered. “Matron Baenre has sent a chariot for you.”

Malice and Briza exchanged hopeful but nervous glances. When punishment fell upon House Hun’ett, House Do’Urden would move into

the eighth rank of the city hierarchy, a most desirable position. Only the matron mothers of the top eight houses were accorded a seat on the city's ruling council.

"Already?" Briza asked her mother.

Malice only shrugged in reply and followed Rizen out of the room and down to the house's balcony. Rizen offered her a hand of assistance, which she promptly and stubbornly slapped away. Her pride apparent with every move, Malice stepped over the railing and floated down to the courtyard, where the bulk of her remaining soldiery was gathered. The floating, blue-glowing disk bearing the insignia of House Baenre hovered just outside the blasted adamantite gate of the Do'Urden compound.

Malice proudly strode through the gathered crowd; dark elves fell over each other trying to get out of her way. This was her day, she decided, the day she achieved the seat on the ruling council, the position she so greatly deserved.

"Matron Mother, I will accompany you through the city," offered Dinin, standing at the gate.

"You will remain here with the rest of the family," Malice corrected. "The summons is for me alone."

"How can you know?" Dinin questioned, but he realized he had overstepped his rank as soon as the words had left his mouth.

By the time Malice turned her reprimanding glare toward him, he had already disappeared into the mob of soldiers.

"Proper respect," Malice muttered under her breath, and she instructed the nearest soldiers to remove a section of the propped and tied gate. With a final, victorious glance at her subjects, Malice stepped out and took a seat on the floating disk.

This was not the first time that Malice had accepted such an invitation from Matron Baenre, so she was not the least bit surprised when several Baenre clerics moved out from the shadows to encircle the floating disk in a protective guard. The last time Malice had made this trip, she had been

tentative, not really understanding Baenre's intent in summoning her. This time, though, Malice folded her arms defiantly across her chest and let the curious onlookers view her in all the splendor of her victory.

Malice accepted the stares proudly, feeling positively superior. Even when the disk reached the fabulous weblike fence of House Baenre, with its thousand marching guards and towering stalagmite and stalactite structures, Malice's pride had not diminished.

She was of the ruling council now, or soon would be; no longer did she have to feel intimidated anywhere in the city.

Or so she thought.

"Your presence is requested in the chapel," one of Baenre's clerics said to her when the disk came to a stop at the base of the great domed building's sweeping stairs.

Malice stepped down and ascended the polished stones. As soon as she entered, she noticed a figure sitting on one of the chairs atop the raised central altar. The seated drow, the only other person visible in the chapel, apparently did not notice that Malice had entered. She sat back comfortably, watching the huge illusionary image at the top of the dome shift through its forms, first appearing as a gigantic spider, then a beautiful drow female.

As she moved closer, Malice recognized the robes of a matron mother, and she assumed, as she had all along, that it was Matron Baenre herself, the most powerful figure in all of Menzoberranzan, awaiting her. Malice made her way up the altar's stairs, coming up behind the seated drow. Not waiting for an invitation, she boldly walked around to greet the other matron mother.

It was not, however, the ancient and emaciated form of Matron Baenre that Malice Do'Urden encountered on the dais of the Baenre chapel. The seated matron mother was not old beyond the years of a drow and as withered and dried as some bloodless corpse. Indeed, this drow was no older than Malice and quite diminutive. Malice recognized her all too well.

“SiNafay!” she cried, nearly toppling.

“Malice,” the other replied calmly.

A thousand troublesome possibilities rolled through Malice’s mind. SiNafay Hun’ett should have been huddling in fear in her doomed house, awaiting the annihilation of her family. Yet here SiNafay sat, comfortably, in the hallowed quarters of Menzoberranzan’s most important family!

“You do not belong in this place!” Malice protested, her slender fists clenched at her side. She considered the possibilities of attacking her rival there and then, of throttling SiNafay with her own hands.

“Be at ease, Malice,” SiNafay remarked casually. “I am here by the invitation of Matron Baenre, as are you.”

The mention of Matron Baenre and the reminder of where they were calmed Malice considerably. One did not act out of sorts in the chapel of House Baenre! Malice moved to the opposite end of the circular dais and took a seat, her gaze never leaving the smugly smiling face of SiNafay Hun’ett.

After a few interminable moments of silence, Malice had to speak her mind. “It was House Hun’ett that attacked my family in the last dark of Narbondel,” she said. “I have many witnesses to the fact. There can be no doubt!”

“None,” SiNafay replied, her agreement catching Malice off her guard.

“You admit the deed?” she balked.

“Indeed,” said SiNafay. “Never have I denied it.”

“Yet you live,” Malice sneered. “The laws of Menzoberranzan demand justice upon you and your house.”

“Justice?” SiNafay laughed at the absurd notion. Justice had never been more than a facade and a means of keeping the pretense of order in chaotic Menzoberranzan. “I acted as the Spider Queen demanded of me.”

“If the Spider Queen approved of your methods, you would have been victorious,” Malice reasoned.

“Not so,” interrupted another voice. Malice and SiNafay turned about

just as Matron Baenre magically appeared, sitting comfortably in the chair farthest back on the dais.

Malice wanted to scream out at the withered matron mother, both for spying on her conversation and for apparently refuting her claims against SiNafay. Malice had managed to survive the dangers of Menzoberranzan for five hundred years, though, primarily because she understood the implications of angering one such as Matron Baenre.

“I claim the rights of accusation against House Hun’ett,” she said calmly.

“Granted,” replied Matron Baenre. “As you have said, and as SiNafay agreed, there can be no doubt.”

Malice turned triumphantly on SiNafay, but the matron mother of House Hun’ett still sat relaxed and unconcerned.

“Then why is she here?” Malice cried, her tone edged in explosive violence. “SiNafay is an outlaw. She—”

“We have not argued against your words,” Matron Baenre interrupted. “House Hun’ett attacked and failed. The penalties for such a deed are well known and agreed upon, and the ruling council will convene this very day to see that justice is carried through.”

“Then why is SiNafay here?” Malice demanded.

“Do you doubt the wisdom of my attack?” SiNafay asked Malice, trying to keep a chuckle under her breath.

“You were defeated,” Malice reminded her matter-of-factly. “That alone should provide your answer.”

“Lolth demanded the attack,” said Matron Baenre.

“Why, then, was House Hun’ett defeated?” Malice asked stubbornly. “If the Spider Queen—”

“I did not say that the Spider Queen had imbued her blessings upon House Hun’ett,” Matron Baenre interrupted, somewhat crossly. Malice shifted back in her seat, remembering her place and her predicament.

“I said only that Lolth demanded the attack,” Matron Baenre continued.

“For ten years all of Menzoberranzan has suffered the spectacle of your private war. The intrigue and excitement wore away long ago, let me assure you both. It had to be decided.”

“And it was,” declared Malice, rising from her seat. “House Do’Urden has proven victorious, and I claim the rights of accusation against SiNafay Hun’ett and her family!”

“Sit down, Malice,” SiNafay said. “There is more to this than your simple rights of accusation.”

Malice looked to Matron Baenre for confirmation, though, considering the present situation, she could not doubt SiNafay’s words.

“It is done,” Matron Baenre said to her. “House Do’Urden has won, and House Hun’ett will be no more.”

Malice fell back into her seat, smiling smugly at SiNafay. Still, though, the matron mother of House Hun’ett did not seem the least bit concerned.

“I will watch the destruction of your house with great pleasure,” Malice assured her rival. She turned to Baenre. “When will punishment be exacted?”

“It is already done,” Matron Baenre replied mysteriously.

“SiNafay lives!” Malice cried.

“No,” the withered matron mother corrected. “She who was SiNafay Hun’ett lives.”

Now Malice was beginning to understand. House Baenre had always been opportunistic. Could it be that Matron Baenre was stealing the high priestesses of House Hun’ett to add to her own collection?

“You will shelter her?” Malice dared to ask.

“No,” Matron Baenre replied evenly. “That task will fall to you.”

Malice’s eyes went wide. Of all the many duties she had ever been appointed in her days as a high priestess of Lolth, she could think of none more distasteful. “She is my enemy! You ask that I give her shelter?”

“She is your daughter,” Matron Baenre shot back. Her tone softened and

a wry smile cracked her thin lips. “Your oldest daughter, returned from travels to Ched Nasad, or some other city of our kin.”

“Why are you doing this?” Malice demanded. “It is unprecedented!”

“Not completely correct,” replied Matron Baenre. Her fingers tapped together out in front of her while she sank back within her thoughts, remembering some of the strange consequences of the endless line of battles within the drow city.

“Outwardly, your observations are correct,” she continued to explain to Malice. “But surely you are wise enough to know that many things occur behind the appearances in Menzoberranzan. House Hun’ett must be destroyed—that cannot be changed—and all of the nobles of House Hun’ett must be slaughtered. It is, after all, the civilized thing to do.” She paused a moment to ensure that Malice was fully comprehending the meaning of her next statement. “They must appear, at least, to be slaughtered.”

“And you will arrange this?” Malice asked.

“I already have,” Matron Baenre assured her.

“But what is the purpose?”

“When House Hun’ett initiated its attack against you, did you call upon the Spider Queen in your struggles?” Matron Baenre asked bluntly.

The question startled Malice, and the expected answer upset her more than a little.

“And when House Hun’ett was repelled,” Matron Baenre went on coldly, “did you give praise to the Spider Queen? Did you call upon a handmaiden of Lolth in your moment of victory, Malice Do’Urden?”

“Am I on trial here?” Malice cried. “You know the answer, Matron Baenre.” She looked at SiNafay uncomfortably as she replied, fearing that she might be giving some valued information away. “You are aware of my situation concerning the Spider Queen. I dare not summon a yochlol until I have seen some sign that I have regained Lolth’s favor.”

“And you have seen no sign,” SiNafay remarked.

“None other than the defeat of my rival,” Malice growled back at her.

“That was not a sign from the Spider Queen,” Matron Baenre assured them both. “Lolth did not involve herself in your struggles. She only demanded that they be finished!”

“Is she pleased at the outcome?” Malice asked bluntly.

“That is yet to be determined,” replied Matron Baenre. “Many years ago, Lolth made clear her desires that Malice Do’Urden sit upon the ruling council. Beginning with the next light of Narbondel, it shall be so.”

Malice’s chin rose with pride.

“But understand your dilemma,” Matron Baenre scolded her, rising up out of her chair. Malice slumped back immediately.

“You have lost more than half of your soldiers,” Baenre explained. “And you do not have a large family surrounding and supporting you. You rule the eighth house of the city, yet it is known by all that you are not in the Spider Queen’s favor. How long do you believe House Do’Urden will hold its position? Your seat on the ruling council is in jeopardy even before you have assumed it!”

Malice could not refute the ancient matron’s logic. They both knew the ways of Menzoberranzan. With House Do’Urden so obviously crippled, some lesser house would soon take advantage of the opportunity to better its station. The attack by House Hun’ett would not be the last battle fought in the Do’Urden compound.

“So I give to you SiNafay Hun’ett . . . Shi’nayne Do’Urden . . . a new daughter, a new high priestess,” said Matron Baenre. She turned then to SiNafay to continue her explanation, but Malice found herself suddenly distracted as a voice called out to her in her thoughts, a telepathic message.

*Keep her only as long as you need her, Malice Do’Urden,* it said. Malice looked around, guessing the source of the communication. On a previous visit to House Baenre, she had met Matron Baenre’s mind flayer, a telepathic beast. The creature was nowhere in sight, but neither had Matron Baenre been when Malice had first entered the chapel. Malice looked

around alternately at the remaining empty seats atop the dais, but the stone furniture showed no signs of any occupants.

A second telepathic message left her no doubts.

*You will know when the time is right.*

“. . . and the remaining fifty of House Hun’ett’s soldiers,” Matron Baenre was saying. “Do you agree, Matron Malice?”

Malice looked at SiNafay, an expression that might have been acceptance or wicked irony. “I do,” she replied.

“Go, then, Shi’nayne Do’Urden,” Matron Baenre instructed SiNafay. “Join your remaining soldiers in the courtyard. My wizards will get you to House Do’Urden in secrecy.”

SiNafay cast a suspicious glance Malice’s way, then moved out of the great chapel.

“I understand,” Malice said to her hostess when SiNafay had gone.

“You understand nothing!” Matron Baenre yelled back at her, suddenly enraged. “I have done all that I may for you, Malice Do’Urden! It was Lolth’s wish that you sit upon the ruling council, and I have arranged, at great personal cost, for that to be so.”

Malice knew then, beyond any doubt, that House Baenre had prompted House Hun’ett to action. How deep did Matron Baenre’s influence go, Malice wondered? Perhaps the withered matron mother also had anticipated, and possibly arranged, the actions of Jarlaxle and the soldiers of Bregan D’aerthe, ultimately the deciding factor in the battle.

She would have to find out about that possibility, Malice promised herself. Jarlaxle had dipped his greedy fingers quite deeply into her purse.

“No more,” Matron Baenre continued. “Now you are left to your own wiles. You have not found the favor of Lolth, and that is the only way you, and House Do’Urden, will survive!”

Malice’s fist clenched the arm of her chair so tightly that she almost expected to hear the stone cracking beneath it. She had hoped, with the

defeat of House Hun'ett, that she had put the blasphemous deeds of her youngest son behind her.

"You know what must be done," said Matron Baenre. "Correct the wrong, Malice. I have put myself forward on your behalf. I will not tolerate continued failure!"



"The arrangements have been explained to us, Matron Mother," Dinin said to Malice when she returned to the adamantite gate of House Do'Urden. He followed Malice across the compound and then levitated up beside her to the balcony outside the noble quarters of the house.

"All of the family is gathered in the anteroom," Dinin went on. "Even the newest member," he added with a wink.

Malice did not respond to her son's feeble attempt at humor. She pushed Dinin aside roughly and stormed down the central corridor, commanding the anteroom door to open with a single powerful word. The family scrambled out of her way as she crossed to her throne, on the far side of the spider-shaped table.

They had anticipated a long meeting, to learn the new situation confronting them and the challenges they must overcome. What they got instead was a brief glimpse at the rage burning within Matron Malice. She glared at them alternately, letting each of them know beyond any doubt that she would not accept anything less than she demanded. Her voice grating as though her mouth were filled with pebbles, she growled, "Find Drizzt and bring him to me!"

Briza started to protest, but Malice shot her a glare so utterly cold and threatening that it stole the words away. The eldest daughter, as stubborn as her mother and always ready for an argument, averted her eyes. And no one else in the anteroom, though they shared Briza's unspoken concerns, made any motion to argue.

Malice then left them to sort out the specifics of how they would accomplish the task. Details were not at all important to Malice.

The only part she meant to play in all of this was the thrust of the ceremonial dagger into her youngest son's chest.