

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

STARLESS NIGHT
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK VIII
RA
SALVATORE



Drizzt ran his fingers over the intricate carvings of the panther statuette, its black onyx perfectly smooth and unmarred even in the ridged areas of the muscled neck. So much like Guenhwyvar, it looked, a perfect representation. How could Drizzt bear to part with it now, fully convinced that he would never see the great panther again?

PROLOGUE

“Farewell, Guenhwyvar,” the drow ranger whispered, his expression sorrowful, almost pitiful, as he stared at the figurine. “I cannot in good conscience take you with me on this journey, for I would fear your fate more than my own.” His sigh was one of sincere resignation. He and his friends had fought long and hard, and at great sacrifice, to get to this point of peace, yet Drizzt had come to know that it was a false victory. He wanted to deny it, to put Guenhwyvar back in his pouch and go blindly on, hoping for the best.

Drizzt sighed away the momentary weakness and handed the figurine over to Regis, the halfling.

Regis stared up at Drizzt in disbelief for a long, silent while, shocked by what the drow had told him and had demanded of him.

“Five tendays,” Drizzt reminded him.

The halfling’s cherubic, boyish features crinkled. If Drizzt did not return in five tendays, Regis was to give Guenhwyvar to Catti-brie and tell both her and King Bruenor the truth of Drizzt’s departure. From the

drow's dark and somber tones, Regis understood that Drizzt did not expect to return.

On sudden inspiration, the halfling dropped the figurine to his bed and fumbled with a chain about his neck, its clasp caught in the long, curly locks of his brown hair. He finally got the thing undone and produced a pendant, dangling a large and magical ruby.

Now Drizzt was shocked. He knew the value of Regis's gemstone and the halfling's craven love of the thing. To say that Regis was acting out of character would be an incredible understatement.

"I cannot," Drizzt argued, pushing the stone away. "I may not return, and it would be lost. . . ."

"Take it!" Regis demanded sharply. "For all that you have done for me, for all of us, you surely deserve it. It's one thing to leave Guenhwyvar behind—it would be a tragedy indeed if the panther fell into the hands of your evil kin—but this is merely a magical token, no living being, and it may aid you on your journey. Take it as you take your scimitars." The halfling paused, his soft gaze locking with Drizzt's violet orbs. "My friend."

Regis snapped his fingers suddenly, stealing the quiet moment. He rambled across the floor, his bare feet slapping on the cold stone and his nightshirt swishing about him. From a drawer he produced yet another item, a rather unremarkable mask.

"I recovered it," he said, not wanting to reveal the whole story of how he had acquired the familiar item.

In truth, Regis had gone from Mithral Hall and found Artemis Entreri hanging helplessly from a jutting stone far up the side of a ravine. Regis promptly had looted the assassin, then cut the seam of Entreri's cloak. The halfling had listened with some measure of satisfaction as the cloak, the only thing holding the battered, barely conscious man aloft, began to rip.

Drizzt eyed the magical mask for a long time. He had taken it from the lair of a banshee more than a year before. With it, its user could change his entire appearance, could hide his identity.

"This should help you get in and out," Regis said hopefully. Still Drizzt made no move.

"I want you to have it," Regis insisted, misunderstanding the drow's hesitation and jerking it out toward Drizzt. Regis did not realize the significance the mask held for Drizzt Do'Urden. Drizzt had once worn it to hide his identity, because a dark elf walking the surface world was at a great disadvantage. Drizzt had come to see the mask as a lie, however useful it might be, and he simply could not bring himself to don it again, whatever the potential gain.

Or could he? Drizzt wondered then if he could refuse the gift. If the mask could aid his cause—a cause that would likely affect those he was leaving behind—then could he in good conscience refuse to wear it?

No, he decided at length, the mask was not that valuable to his cause. Three decades out of the city

was a long time, and he was not so remarkable in appearance, not so notorious, certainly, that he would be recognized. He held out his upraised hand, denying the gift, and Regis, after one more unsuccessful try, shrugged his little shoulders, and put the mask away.

Drizzt left without another word. Many hours remained before dawn; torches burned low in the upper levels of Mithral Hall, and few dwarves stirred. It seemed perfectly quiet, perfectly peaceful.

The dark elf's slender fingers, lightly touching, making not a sound, traced the grain of a wooden door. He had no desire to disturb the person within, though he doubted that her sleep was very restful. Every night, Drizzt wanted to go to her and comfort her, and yet he had not, for he knew that his words would do little to soothe Catti-brie's grief. Like so many other nights when he had stood by this door, a watchful, helpless guardian, the ranger ended up padding down the stone corridor, filtering through the shadows of low-dancing torches, his toe-heel step making not a whisper of sound.

With only a short pause at another door, the door of his dearest dwarven friend, Drizzt soon crossed out of the living areas. He came into the formal gathering places, where the king of Mithral Hall entertained visiting emissaries. A couple of dwarves—Dagna's troops probably—were about in here, but they heard and saw nothing of the drow's silent passing.

Drizzt paused again as he came to the entrance of the Hall of Dumathoin, wherein the dwarves of Clan Battlehammer kept their most precious items. He knew that he should continue, get out of the place before the clan began to stir, but he could not ignore the emotions pulling at his heartstrings. He hadn't come to this hallowed hall in the two tendays since his drow kin had been driven away, but he knew that he would never forgive himself if he didn't take at least one look.

The mighty warhammer, Aegis-fang, rested on a pillar at the center of the adorned hall, the place of highest honor. It seemed fitting, for to Drizzt's violet eyes, Aegis-fang far outshone all the other artifacts: the shining suits of mail, the great axes and helms of heroes long dead, the anvil of a legendary smith. Drizzt smiled at the notion that this warhammer hadn't even been wielded by a dwarf. It had been the weapon of Wulfgar, Drizzt's friend, who had willingly given his life so that the others of the tight band might survive.

Drizzt stared long and hard at the mighty weapon, at the gleaming mithral head, unscratched despite the many vicious battles the hammer had seen and showing the perfectly etched sigils of the dwarven god Dumathoin. The drow's gaze drifted down the item, settling on the dried blood on its dark adamantite handle. Bruenor, so stubborn, hadn't allowed that blood to be cleaned away.

Memories of Wulfgar, of fighting beside the tall and strong, golden-haired and golden-skinned man flooded through the drow, weakening his knees and his resolve. In his mind, Drizzt looked again into Wulfgar's clear eyes, the icy blue of the northern sky and always filled with an excited sparkle. Wulfgar had been just a boy, his spirit undaunted by the harsh realities of a brutal world.

Just a boy, but one who had willingly sacrificed everything, a song on his lips, for those he called his friends.

"Farewell," Drizzt whispered, and he was gone, running this time, though no more loudly than he had walked before. In a few seconds, he crossed onto a balcony and down a flight of stairs, into a wide and high chamber. He crossed under the watchful eyes of Mithral Hall's eight kings, their likenesses cut into the stone wall. The last of the busts, that of King Bruenor Battlehammer, was the most striking. Bruenor's visage was stern, a grim look intensified by a deep scar running from his forehead to his jawbone, and with his right eye gone.

More than Bruenor's eye had been wounded, Drizzt knew. More than that dwarvish body, rock tough and resilient, had been scarred. Bruenor's soul was the part most pained, slashed by the loss of a boy he had called his son. Was the dwarf as resilient in spirit as in body? Drizzt knew not the answer. At that moment, staring at Bruenor's scarred face, Drizzt felt that he

should stay, should sit beside his friend and help heal the wounds.

It was a passing thought. What wounds might still come to the dwarf? Drizzt reminded himself. To the dwarf and to all his remaining friends?



Catti-brie tossed and squirmed, reliving that fateful moment, as she did every night—at least, every night that exhaustion allowed her to find sleep. She heard Wulfgar’s song to Tempus, his god of battle, saw the serene look in the mighty barbarian’s eye, the look that denied the obvious agony, the look that allowed him to chop up at the loose stone ceiling, though blocks of heavy granite had begun to tumble all about him.

Catti-brie saw Wulfgar’s garish wounds, the white of bone, his skin ripped away from his ribs by the sharklike teeth of the yochlol, an evil, extradimensional beast, an ugly lump of waxy flesh that resembled a half-melted candle.

The roar as the ceiling dropped over her love brought Catti-brie up in her bed, sitting in the darkness, her thick auburn hair matted to her face by cold sweat. She took a long moment to control her breathing, told herself repeatedly that it was a dream, a terrible memory, but ultimately, an event that had passed. The torchlight outlining her door comforted and calmed her.

She wore only a light slip, and her thrashing had knocked her blankets away. Goose bumps rose on her arms, and she shivered, cold and damp and miserable. She roughly retrieved the thickest of her covers and pulled them tightly to her neck, then lay flat on her back, staring up into the darkness.

Something was wrong. She sensed that something was out of place.

Rationally, the young woman told herself that she was imagining things, that her dreams had unnerved her. The world was not right for Catti-brie, far from right, but she told herself forcefully that she was in Mithral Hall, surrounded by an army of friends.

She told herself that she was imagining things.



Drizzt was a long way from Mithral Hall when the sun came up. He didn't sit and enjoy the dawn this day, as was his custom. He hardly looked at the rising sun, for it seemed to him now a false hope of things that could not be. When the initial glare had diminished, the drow looked out to the south and east, far across the mountains, and remembered.

His hand went to his neck, to the hypnotic ruby pendant Regis had given him. He knew how much Regis relied on this gem, loved it, and considered again the halfling's sacrifice, the sacrifice of a true friend. Drizzt had known true friendship; his life had been

rich since he had walked into a forlorn land called Icewind Dale and met Bruenor Battlehammer and his adopted daughter, Catti-brie. It pained Drizzt to think that he might never again see any of them.

The drow was glad to have the magical pendant, though, an item that might allow him to get answers and return to his friends, but he held more than a little guilt for his decision to tell Regis of his departure. That choice seemed a weakness to Drizzt, a need to rely on friends who, at this dark time, had little to give. He could rationalize it, though, as a necessary safeguard for the friends he would leave behind. He had instructed Regis to tell Bruenor the truth in five tendays, so that, in case Drizzt's journey proved unsuccessful, Clan Battlehammer would at least have time to prepare for the darkness that might yet come.

It was a logical act, but Drizzt had to admit that he had told Regis because of his own need, because he had to tell someone.

And what of the magical mask? he wondered. Had he been weak in refusing that, too? The powerful item might have aided Drizzt and, thus, aided his friends, but he had not the strength to wear it, to even touch it.

Doubts floated all about the drow, hovered in the air before his eyes, mocking him. Drizzt sighed and rubbed the ruby between his slender black hands. For all his prowess with the blade, for all his dedication to principles, for all his ranger stoicism, Drizzt

Do'Urden needed his friends. He glanced back toward Mithral Hall and wondered, for his own sake, if he had chosen rightly in undertaking this quest privately and secretly.

More weakness, stubborn Drizzt decided. He let go of the ruby, mentally slapped away the lingering doubts, and slid his hand inside his forest-green traveling cloak. From one of its pockets he produced a parchment, a map of the lands between the Spine of the World Mountains and the Great Desert of Anauroch. In the lower right-hand corner Drizzt had marked a spot, the location of a cave from which he had once emerged, a cave that would take him home.



PART ONE

No race in all the Realms better understands
the word vengeance than the drow. Vengeance is their dessert at their daily table, the sweetness they taste upon their smirking lips as though

DUTY BOUND

it was the ultimate delicious pleasure. And so hungry did the drow come for me.

I cannot escape the anger and the guilt I feel for the loss of Wulfgar, for the pains the enemies of my dark past have brought to the friends I hold so dear. Whenever I look into Catti-brie's fair face, I see a profound and everlasting sadness that should not be there, a burden that has no place in the sparkling eyes of a child.

Similarly wounded, I have no words to comfort her and doubt that there are any words that might bring solace. It is my course, then, that I must continue to protect my friends. I have come

to realize that I must look beyond my own sense of loss for Wulfgar, beyond the immediate sadness that has taken hold of the dwarves of Mithral Hall and the hardy men of Settlestone.

By Catti-brie's account of that fateful fight, the creature Wulfgar battled was a yochlol, a handmaiden of Lolth. With that grim information, I must look beyond the immediate sorrow and consider that the sadness I fear is still to come.

I do not understand all the chaotic games of the Spider Queen—I doubt that even the evil high priestesses know the foul creature's true designs—but there lies in a yochlol's presence a significance that even I, the worst of the drow religious students, cannot miss. The handmaiden's appearance revealed that the hunt was sanctified by the Spider Queen. And the fact that the yochlol intervened in the fighting does not bode well for the future of Mithral Hall.

It is all supposition, of course. I know not that my sister Vierna acted in concert with any of Menzoberranzan's other dark powers, or that, with Vierna's death, the death of my last relative, my link to the city of drow would ever again be explored.

When I look into Catti-brie's eyes, when I look upon Bruenor's horrid scars, I am reminded that hopeful supposition is a feeble and dangerous thing. My evil kin have taken one friend from me.

They will take no more.

I can find no answers in Mithral Hall, will never know for certain if the dark elves hunger still for vengeance, unless another force from Menzoberranzan comes to the surface to claim the bounty on my head. With this truth bending low my shoulders, how could I ever travel to Silverymoon, or to any other nearby town, resuming my normal lifestyle? How could I sleep in peace while holding within my heart the very real fear that the dark elves might soon return and once more imperil my friends?

The apparent serenity of Mithral Hall, the brooding quiet, will show me nothing of the future designs of the drow. Yet, for the sake of my friends, I must know those dark intentions. I fear that there remains only one place for me to look.

Wulfgar gave his life so that his friends might live. In good conscience, could my own sacrifice be any less?

—Drizzt Do'Urden



I THE AMBITIOUS ONE

The mercenary leaned against the pillar anchoring the wide stairway of Tier Breche, on the northern side of the great cavern that housed Menzoberranzan, the city of drow. Jarlaxle removed his wide-brimmed hat and ran a hand over the smooth skin of his bald head as he muttered a few curses under his breath.

Many lights were on in the city. Torches flickered in the high windows of houses carved from natural stalagmite formations. Lights in the drow city! Many of the elaborate structures had long been decorated by the soft glow of faerie fire, mostly purple and blue hues, but this was different.

Jarlaxle shifted to the side and winced as his weight came upon his recently wounded leg. Triel Baenre herself, the matron mistress of Arach-Tinilith, among the highest-ranking priestesses in the city, had tended the wound, but Jarlaxle suspected that the wicked priestess had purposely left the job unfinished, had left a bit of the pain to remind the mercenary of his failure in recapturing the renegade Drizzt Do'Urden.

"The glow wounds my eyes," came a sarcastic remark from behind. Jarlaxle turned to see Matron Baenre's oldest daughter, that same Triel. She was shorter than most drow, nearly a foot shorter than Jarlaxle, but she carried herself with undeniable dignity and poise. Jarlaxle understood her

powers—and her volatile temperament—better than most, and he certainly treated the diminutive female with the greatest caution.

Staring, glaring, out over the city with squinting eyes, she moved beside him. “Curse the glow,” she muttered.

“It is by your matron’s command,” Jarlaxle reminded her. His one good eye avoided her gaze; the other lay beneath a patch of shadow, which was tied behind his head. He replaced his great hat, pulling it low in front as he tried to hide his smirk at her resulting grimace.

Triel was not happy with her mother. Jarlaxle had known that since the moment Matron Baenre had begun to hint at her plans. Triel was possibly the most fanatic of the Spider Queen’s priestesses and would not go against Matron Baenre, the first matron mother of the city—not unless Lolth instructed her to.

“Come along,” the priestess growled. She turned and made her way across Tier Breche to the largest and most ornate of the drow Academy’s three buildings, a huge structure shaped to resemble a gigantic spider.

Jarlaxle pointedly groaned as he moved, and lost ground with every limping step. His attempt to solicit a bit more healing magic was not successful, though, for Triel merely paused at the doorway to the great structure and waited for him with a patience that was more than a bit out of character, Jarlaxle knew, for Triel never waited for anything.

As soon as he entered the temple, the mercenary was assaulted by myriad aromas, everything from incense to the drying blood of the latest sacrifices, and chants rolled out of every side portal. Triel took note of none of it; she shrugged past the few disciples who bowed to her as they saw her walking the corridors.

The single-minded Baenre daughter moved into the higher levels, to the private quarters of the school’s mistresses, and walked down one small hallway, its floor alive with crawling spiders—including a few that stood as tall as Jarlaxle’s knee).

Triel stopped between two equally decorated doors and motioned for

Jarlaxle to enter the one on the right. The mercenary paused, did well to hide his confusion, but Triel was expecting it.

She grabbed Jarlaxle by the shoulder and roughly spun him about. “You have been here before!” she accused.

“Only upon my graduation from the school of fighters,” Jarlaxle said, shrugging away from the female, “as are all of Melee-Magthere’s graduates.”

“You have been in the upper levels,” Triel snarled, eyeing Jarlaxle squarely. The mercenary chuckled.

“You hesitated when I motioned for you to enter the chamber,” Triel went on, “because you know that the one to the left is my private room. That is where you expected to go.”

“I did not expect to be summoned here at all,” Jarlaxle retorted, trying to shift the subject. He was indeed a bit off guard that Triel had watched him so closely. Had he underestimated her trepidation at her mother’s latest plans?

Triel stared at him long and hard, her eyes unblinking and jaw firm.

“I have my sources,” Jarlaxle admitted at length.

Another long moment passed, and still Triel did not blink.

“You asked that I come,” Jarlaxle reminded her.

“I demanded,” Triel corrected.

Jarlaxle swept into a low, exaggerated bow, snatching off his hat and brushing it out at arm’s length. The Baenre daughter’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Enough!” she shouted.

“And enough of your games!” Jarlaxle spat back. “You asked that I come to the Academy, a place where I am not comfortable, and so I have come. You have questions, and I, perhaps, have answers.”

His qualification of that last sentence made Triel narrow her eyes. Jarlaxle was ever a cagey opponent, she knew as well as anyone in the drow city. She had dealt with the cunning mercenary many times and still wasn’t quite sure if she had broken even against him or not. She turned and motioned for him to enter the left-hand door instead, and, with another graceful bow,

he did so, stepping into a thickly carpeted and decorated room lit in a soft magical glow.

“Remove your boots,” Triel instructed, and she slipped out of her own shoes before she stepped onto the plush rug.

Jarlaxle stood against the tapestry-adorned wall just inside the door, looking doubtfully at his boots. Everyone who knew the mercenary knew that these were magical.

“Very well,” Triel conceded, closing the door and sweeping past him to take a seat on a huge, overstuffed chair. A rolltop desk stood behind her, in front of one of many tapestries, this one depicting the sacrifice of a gigantic surface elf by a horde of dancing drow. Above the surface elf loomed the nearly translucent specter of a half-drow, half-spider creature, its face beautiful and serene.

“You do not like your mother’s lights?” Jarlaxle asked. “You keep your own room aglow.”

Triel bit her lower lip and narrowed her eyes once more. Most priestesses kept their private chambers dimly lit, that they might read their tomes. Heat-sensing infravision was of little use in seeing the runes on a page. There were some inks that would hold distinctive heat for many years, but these were expensive and hard to come by, even for one as powerful as Triel.

Jarlaxle stared back at the Baenre daughter’s grim expression. Triel was always mad about something, the mercenary mused. “The lights seem appropriate for what your mother has planned,” he went on.

“Indeed,” Triel remarked, her tone biting. “And are you so arrogant as to believe that you understand my mother’s motives?”

“She will go back to Mithral Hall,” Jarlaxle said openly, knowing that Triel had long ago drawn the same conclusion.

“Will she?” Triel asked coyly.

The cryptic response set the mercenary back on his heels. He took a step toward a second, less-cushiony chair in the room, and his heel clicked hard, even though he was walking across the incredibly thick and soft carpet.

Triel smirked, not impressed by the magical boots. It was common knowledge that Jarlaxle could walk as quietly or as loudly as he desired on any type of surface. His abundant jewelry, bracelets and trinkets seemed equally enchanted, for they would ring and tinkle or remain perfectly silent, as the mercenary desired.

“If you have left a hole in my carpet, I will fill it with your heart,” Triel promised as Jarlaxle slumped back comfortably in the covered stone chair, smoothing a fold in the armrest so that the fabric showed a clear image of a black and yellow *gee’antu* spider, the Underdark’s version of the surface tarantula.

“Why do you suspect that your mother will not go?” Jarlaxle asked, pointedly ignoring the threat, though in knowing Triel Baenre, he honestly wondered how many other hearts were now entwined in the carpet’s fibers.

“Do I?” Triel asked.

Jarlaxle let out a long sigh. He had suspected that this would be a moot meeting, a discussion where Triel tried to pry out what bits of information the mercenary already had attained, while offering little of her own. Still, when Triel had insisted that Jarlaxle come to her, instead of their usual arrangement, in which she went out from Tier Breche to meet the mercenary, Jarlaxle had hoped for something substantive. It was quickly becoming obvious to Jarlaxle that the only reason Triel wanted to meet in Arach-Tinilith was that, in this secure place, even her mother’s prying ears would not hear.

And now, for all those painstaking arrangements, this all-important meeting had become a useless bantering session.

Triel seemed equally perturbed. She came forward in her chair suddenly, her expression fierce. “She desires a legacy!” the female declared.

Jarlaxle’s bracelets tinkled as he tapped his fingers together, thinking that now they were finally getting somewhere.

“The rulership of Menzoberranzan is no longer sufficient for the likes of Matron Baenre,” Triel continued, more calmly, and she moved back in her seat. “She must expand her sphere.”

“I had thought your mother’s visions Lolth-given,” Jarlaxle re-marked, and he was sincerely confused by Triel’s obvious disdain.

“Perhaps,” Triel admitted. “The Spider Queen will welcome the conquest of Mithral Hall, particularly if it, in turn, leads to the capture of that renegade Do’Urden. But there are other considerations.”

“Blingdenstone?” Jarlaxle asked, referring to the city of the svirfnebli, the deep gnomes, traditional enemies of the drow.

“That is one,” Triel replied. “Blingdenstone is not far off the path to the tunnels connecting Mithral Hall.”

“Your mother has mentioned that the svirfnebli might be dealt with properly on the return trip,” Jarlaxle offered, figuring that he had to throw some tidbit out if he wanted Triel to continue so openly with him. It seemed to the mercenary that Triel must be deeply upset to be permitting him such an honest view of her most private emotions and fears.

Triel nodded, accepting the news stoically and without surprise. “There are other considerations,” she repeated. “The task Matron Baenre is undertaking is enormous and will require allies along the way, perhaps even illithid allies.”

The Baenre daughter’s reasoning struck Jarlaxle as sound. Matron Baenre had long kept an illithid consort, an ugly and dangerous beast if Jarlaxle had ever seen one. He was never comfortable around the octopus-headed humanoids. Jarlaxle survived by understanding and outguessing his enemies, but his skills were sorely lacking where illithids were concerned. The mind flayers, as members of the evil race were called, simply didn’t think the same way as other races and acted in accord with principles and rules that no one other than an illithid seemed to know.

Still, the dark elves had often dealt successfully with the illithid community. Menzoberranzan housed twenty thousand skilled warriors, while the illithids in the region numbered barely a hundred. Triel’s fears seemed a bit overblown.

Jarlaxle didn’t tell her that, though. Given her dark and volatile mood, the mercenary preferred to do more listening than speaking.

Triel continued to shake her head, her expression typically sour. She leaped up from the chair, her black-and-purple, spider-adorned robes swishing as she paced a tight circle.

“It will not be House Baenre alone,” Jarlaxle reminded her, hoping to comfort Triel. “Many houses show lights in their windows.”

“Mother has done well in bringing the city together,” Triel admitted, and the pace of her nervous stroll slowed.

“But still you fear,” the mercenary reasoned. “And you need information so that you might be ready for any consequence.” Jarlaxle couldn’t help a small, ironic chuckle. He and Triel had been enemies for a long time, neither trusting the other—and with good reason! Now she needed him. She was a priestess in a secluded school, away from much of the city’s whispered rumors. Normally her prayers to the Spider Queen would have provided her all the information she needed, but now, if Lolth sanctioned Matron Baenre’s actions—and that fact seemed obvious—Triel would be left, literally, in the dark. She needed a spy, and in Menzoberranzan, Jarlaxle and his spying network, Bregan D’aerthe, had no equal.

“We need each other,” Triel pointedly replied, turning to eye the mercenary squarely. “Mother treads on dangerous ground, that much is obvious. If she falters, consider who will assume the seat of the ruling house.”

True enough, Jarlaxle silently conceded. Triel, as the eldest daughter of the house, was indisputably next in line behind Matron Baenre and, as the matron mistress of Arach-Tinilith, held the most powerful position in the city behind the matron mothers of the eight ruling houses. Triel already had established an impressive base of power. But in Menzoberranzan, where pretense of law was no more than a facade against an underlying chaos, power bases tended to shift as readily as lava pools.

“I will learn what I may,” Jarlaxle answered, and he rose to leave. “And will tell you what I learn.”

Triel understood the half-truth in the sly mercenary’s words, but she had to accept his offer.

Jarlaxle was walking freely down the wide, curving avenues of Menzoberranzan a short while later, passing by the watchful eyes and readied weapons of house guards posted on nearly every stalagmite mound—and on the ringed balconies of many low-hanging stalactites as well. The mercenary was not afraid, for his wide-brimmed hat identified him clearly to all in the city, and no house desired conflict with Bregan D'aerthe. It was the most secretive of bands—few in the city could even guess at the numbers in the group—and its bases were tucked away in the many nooks and crannies of the wide cavern. The company's reputation was widespread, though, tolerated by the ruling Houses, and most in the city would name Jarlaxle among the most powerful of Menzoberranzan's males.

So comfortable was he that Jarlaxle hardly noticed the lingering stares of the dangerous guards. His thoughts were inward, trying to decipher the subtle messages of his meeting with Triel. The assumed plan to conquer Mithral Hall seemed very promising. Jarlaxle had been to the dwarven stronghold, had witnessed its defenses. Though formidable, they seemed meager against the strength of a drow army. When Menzoberranzan conquered Mithral Hall, with Matron Baenre at the head of the force, Lolth would be supremely pleased, and House Baenre would know its pinnacle of glory.

As Triel had put it, Matron Baenre would have her legacy.

The pinnacle of power? The thought hung in Jarlaxle's mind. He paused beside Narbondel, the great pillar time clock of Menzoberranzan, a smile widening across his ebon-skinned face.

"Pinnacle of power?" he whispered aloud.

Suddenly Jarlaxle understood Triel's trepidations. She feared that her mother might overstep her bounds, might be gambling an already impressive empire for the sake of yet another acquisition. Even as he considered the notion, Jarlaxle understood a deeper significance to it all. Suppose that Matron Baenre was successful, that Mithral Hall was conquered and Blingdenstone after that? he mused. What enemies would then be left to threaten the drow city, to hold together the tentative hierarchy in Menzoberranzan?

For that matter, why had Blingdenstone, a place of enemies so near Menzoberranzan, been allowed to survive for all these centuries? Jarlaxle knew the answer. He knew that the gnomes unintentionally served as the glue that kept Menzoberranzan's houses in line. With a common enemy so near, the drow's constant infighting had to be kept under control.

But now Matron Baenre hinted at ungluing, expanding her empire to include not only Mithral Hall, but the troublesome gnomes as well. Triel did not fear that the drow would be beaten; neither did she fear any alliance with the small colony of illithids. She was afraid that her mother would succeed, would gain her legacy. Matron Baenre was old, ancient even by drow standards, and Triel was next in line for the house seat. At present, that would be a comfortable place indeed, but it would become far more tentative and dangerous if Mithral Hall and Blingdenstone were taken. The binding common enemy that kept the houses in line would be no more, and Triel would have to worry about a tie to the surface world a long way from Menzoberranzan, where reprisals by the allies of Mithral Hall would be inevitable.

Jarlaxle understood what Matron Baenre wanted, but now he wondered what Lolth, backing the withered female's plans, had in mind.

"Chaos," he decided. Menzoberranzan had been quiet for a long, long time. Some houses fought—that was inevitable. House Do'Urden and House DeVir, both ruling houses, had been obliterated, but the general structure of the city had remained solid and unthreatened.

"Ah, but you are delightful," Jarlaxle said, speaking his thoughts of Lolth aloud. He suddenly suspected that Lolth desired a new order, a refreshing housecleaning of a city grown boring. No wonder that Triel, in line to inherit her mother's legacy, was not amused.

The bald mercenary, himself a lover of intrigue and chaos, laughed heartily and looked to Narbondel. The clock's heat was greatly diminished, showing it to be late in the Underdark night. Jarlaxle clicked his heels against the stone and set out for the Qu'ellarz'orl, the high plateau on Menzoberranzan's eastern wall, the region housing the city's most powerful house.



He didn't want to be late for his meeting with Matron Baenre, to whom he would report on in his "secret" meeting with her eldest daughter.

Jarlaxle pondered how much he would tell the withered matron mother, and how he might twist his words to his best advantage.

How he loved the intrigue.