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Introduction

A seething powerhouse of malevolent drow, each striving tirelessly for supremacy in the eyes of their fell goddess, Menzoberranzan is the pinnacle of conceited depravity. Nevertheless, peer deep through the strata of selfishness, debauchery, and vice and one can behold a grand civilization rich in history, culture, and artistry. It's this tantalizing dichotomy between the beautiful and the profane that draws great interest toward drow society. Presented in this book is the fabled Underdark city of Menzoberranzan, birthplace of famed drow ranger Drizzt Do'Urden. But this isn't his story—it's many stories, yours chief among them.

This book is designed for maximum utility. No matter what edition of the Dungeons & Dragons® rules you're using, you'll find almost all of the material in this book usable in your game. You can use this book to run a campaign set during the years before the birth of Drizzt, in the midst of the War of the Spider Queen, or during the current era of the Forgotten Realms® campaign setting. Menzoberranzan is a whole environment waiting for you and your players to explore, in whatever way you want to use it.

A Menzoberranzan Campaign

Running a group of evil drow characters through adventures rife with intrigue and treachery can be quite a different experience from most Dungeons & Dragons campaigns. These six characteristics best encapsulate the spirit of a *Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue* campaign.

1. You're a Drow

In this campaign setting, you're no goody two-shoes surface dweller visiting the City of Spiders on holiday. No, you're a resident. Whether drow or slave, noble scion or commoner, you call Menzoberranzan home. This is your opportunity to disregard the spiteful propaganda of the surface elves and step into the role of one of D&D's most iconic and insidious races.

2. Evil Reigns

Menzoberranzan is a nasty place. In drow culture, treachery and murder are commonplace, as are acts of debauchery. Drow in this setting routinely have orgies with demons and engage in despicable acts of bloodletting. Although the tenets of drow society are presented tactfully, players should be under no illusions; Menzoberranzan is populated by vile and capricious sadists, who seek to improve their personal standing through the suffering and misery of others.

3. Lolth Is Supreme

No other force in drow society is as pervasive as the Church of Lolth. Although other divine entities have appeared in drow religious rites over the millennia, all are secondary to Lolth and are barely visible in the shadow of the Spider Queen. Beings such as Vhaeraun and Ghaunadaur have adherents in some eras, but few are worshiped with the same devotion—and fear—as Lolth. It is she, and she alone, who stands at the heart of drow religion.

4. Station Is Everything

Despite its members being born of chaos, drow society is governed by a deeply entrenched hierarchy. Each drow divides everyone else—including other drow—into three categories.

- Those with more power, who must be appeased and placated (at least until they can be replaced)
- Those who are useful to one's own advancement, who must be exploited in all ways possible
- The weak, who are worthless except as labor or disposable troops

As drow see it, each day is a new chance to improve your station or to eliminate those in your way.

5. Secrets Are Currency

Drow are not mindless brutes who charge headlong into the unknown. In fact, the residents of Menzoberranzan, called Menzobarranyr, are meticulous and calculating in their endeavors. Although wealth and might are certainly respected, the true currency of the drow lies in secrets. Information is power, and with it an individual can wield influence far beyond his or her station. The machinations of the drow are legendary, and these sorts of long-term schemes should be part of any Menzoberranzan campaign.

6. The Underdark

High adventure isn't confined to the city alone. The myriad intrigues of the drow can send the player characters deep into the gloom of the Underdark. Although drow are renowned for their ruthlessness and villainy, there are creatures in the deep places of the world that give even them pause. Despite the dangers, few Menzoberranyr shy from an opportunity to exploit the myriad riches of the Deep Realms. From the neighboring Dark Dominion to the Shadowed Ways and beyond, adventure in the Underdark awaits.

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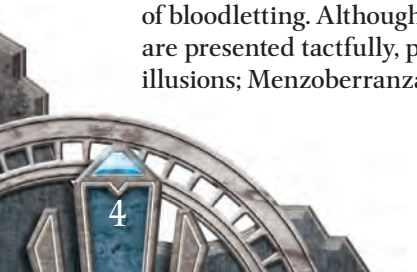



The drow will be your hosts. Watch your back.

FRANCIS TSAI

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For the DM

Most of this book *is* designed primarily with the Dungeon Master in mind. It will help you craft an exciting and memorable campaign centered on drow themes.

Chapter 1: Campaign of Intrigue is advice for you on how to set up the basic framework of a drow campaign.

Chapter 2: The Way of Lolth narrows the scope, revealing the inner workings of drow religion and society. You can share much of this information with players, perhaps leaving some facts for their characters to discover when they begin adventuring.

Chapter 3: Drow Factions provides you with a full set of tools to create exactly the sort of challenge you and your players want to experience. Here are details of the most distinctive drow noble houses in Menzoberranzan; a look at the city's great academy, Tier Breche, and the houseless drow mercenaries known as Bregan D'aerthe; and descriptions of three major power groups that want to destroy the drow and all they stand for. When each player chooses the factions his or her character will be associated with, you can share with that player the background choices and other details provided in that section.

Chapter 4: City of Spiders is where Menzoberranzan comes alive. Each section of the city and its environs is detailed here, so that you can paint a realistic picture as the characters move around in the setting. Much of the general information given here is common knowledge to those who live in the city, and thus likely to be known by drow player characters as well. Some of the specifics, though, are a different matter, and might need to be discovered.

Chapter 5: The Northdark is a collection of Underdark adventuring opportunities, locations that you can bring into play if you decide to take the campaign, quite literally, in a different direction.

Chapter 6: Be a Drow is directed at players, but you should be familiar with it as well.

For Players

Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue discusses the underpinnings of drow society and beliefs, including their Lolth-dominated religion—all of which is vital information to players of drow characters.

In addition, this book includes guidelines for selecting a drow house to ally with, as well as character backgrounds to aid a player in fleshing out a character's backstory and motivations.

Chapter 6: Be a Drow is designed expressly for players, supplementing and fleshing out what the rest of the book covers with advice on how to capture the drow persona at the gaming table.

CHAPTER 1

Campaign of Intrigue



TYLER JACOBSON

Running a game set in a reviled city of villainy such as Menzoberranzan often presents interesting new twists or challenges for Dungeon Masters used to running traditional high fantasy campaigns. Adventures within the city proper have as much excitement, bloodshed, and treasure as a traditional dungeon crawl, but usually involve more intrigue and less exploration. With campaigns centered on intrigue, entire sessions might pass without a single combat encounter. However, the rich possibilities for roleplaying in a world of cruel, ruthless nobles can provide hours of entertainment.

Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue provides a framework for building an entire campaign in the infamous drow city. This chapter provides a springboard for designing an Underdark campaign oriented primarily around a party of drow adventurers. The chapter includes the following sections.

- **Campaign Flavor:** Different campaigns might focus on intrigue or insurrection, raids upon the surface, or all-out war with other Underdark races.
- **Campaign Era:** Determining the time period for your campaign can influence its overall tone and feel. A campaign set during the founding years of the city is very different from one that takes place during the War of the Spider Queen.
- **Schemes in the Shadows:** As your campaign unfolds, the city does not remain static. Menzoberranzan is rife with competing factions, and the characters need to know where they stand with each of those groups at any time. This section gives you a simple system for keeping track of this information, plus some thoughts on plot elements that can radically alter what the adventurers are up against.
- **Making the City Your Own:** This brief section discusses customizing the city for your unique interpretation of the game.

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Campaign Flavor

The first step in creating a Menzoberranzan campaign is deciding on the particular flavor for your campaign. While it's possible to run a typical dungeon crawl campaign with the materials provided in this book, *Menzoberranzan: City of Intrigue* offers a great opportunity for Dungeon Masters to explore alternate styles of gameplay.

Political Intrigue

The everyday plotting and backstabbing common to drow society make for a compelling campaign of political intrigue. The long-simmering rivalries between the noble houses of Menzoberranzan threaten to break out into open warfare at a moment's notice. Sprinkle in the machinations of an outside faction or two, and you have a nearly limitless supply of plot hooks for your campaign.

Placing the player characters within the middle of a power struggle is a hallmark of political intrigue. With the likelihood of the adventurers being of questionable morale character themselves, they might enjoy playing one or more of the factions against each other. Or they might slowly grind both groups down, pretending to maintain the balance of power between the two while they siphon power for themselves.

Goals in a political game can include:

Spy Against your Rivals: Few races are as innately attuned to stealth and subterfuge as drow. A great espionage campaign would evolve over time. At low levels the characters might start out as common burglars or cutpurses working for a Braeryn street gang. As they rise in standing and notoriety, the characters are secretly approached and recruited by Bregan D'aerthe to infiltrate and gather information against the noble houses. Each successive mission becomes more difficult than the last, until they are performing epic feats of espionage such as spying on Lolth in the Demonweb Pits–think Mission Impossible, but even more dangerous.

THE GODFATHER

Did You Know: As R. A. Salvatore was designing the underpinnings of Menzoberranzan society for the novel *Homeland*, his greatest inspiration was drawn from Mario Puzo's epic crime novel *The Godfather*. It's easy to envision a drow matron mother as a mob boss with her house priestesses serving as "made members" of the crime family. Males in this scenario serve the role of *soldato* (soldier), reporting up the hierarchy to a *capo*, represented in drow society as a high priestess.

Run a Gang: Lead an alliance of noble houses and wage war against your rivals. The characters might start as low-level enforcers for one or two houses, tasked with overtly intimidating a rival house or faction. As they succeed in their assigned duties, the adventurers gain in station, which in turn permits them to rise quickly within the organization. The key to this storyline is to have the characters graduate quickly from being mere pawns and thugs, to being a driving force for the organization. As a drow of low station, one or more of the characters might have sought the support of a rival house or an individual patron. Now that those characters are indebted to that rival faction or individual, they could be asked to carry out secret tasks that run counter to the goals of the party as a whole, creating further plot lines.

Ideological Scheming

Another campaign flavor you could explore is one of ideological conflict. As presented, Menzoberranzan is firmly under the influence of Lolth's strong-handed dogma. An intriguing campaign seed might be to pick one or more long-standing tenets of drow society, and then pit the player characters against that ideal.

An ideological game might include one of the following goals.

Abolish the Matriarchy: Establish equality for males in Menzoberranzan society. This seed works best with a male-dominated party that has at least one high-ranking female sympathetic to their cause.

Spread Heresy: Spread the teachings of other faiths beyond Lolth. The characters might adopt the faiths of Eilistraee, Vhaeraun, or Ghaunadaur and work to weaken the Church of Lolth, either secretly or overtly.

Spread Insurrection: Lead the slaves of Menzoberranzan to freedom or open rebellion. Whether out of genuine sympathy or as a power play, the characters galvanize the non-drow communities toward insurrection.

Topple the Nobility: Weaken the influence of the Ruling Council to affect change in the city. Perhaps the characters are members of a merchant clan or other commoner organization that seeks to strip the nobility of their undue privilege.

Lead an Exodus: Break the drow free of their subterranean shackles and lead them into the world above. Perhaps the characters have discovered that *faerzress* is responsible for the drow compulsion to remain in the Underdark and they're seeking a magical means of freeing their people from this millennia-old affliction.

Turning the Tables: As an alternative to any of these options, the player characters can be drow who are tasked by their houses to put down the rebellious efforts of undesirable forces in the city.

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Rise of the Underdark

In a Rise of the Underdark campaign, the player characters are drow of Menzoberranzan who are focused on raiding the surface world for any of a variety of purposes. Menzoberranzan is their home base, their place of (relative) safety, while their adventures take place mostly on the surface world or in Underdark passages leading from the city to the surface. Such a campaign is not necessarily free of all the intrigue and backstabbing that characterizes drow society, but it becomes a background element rather than the primary focus of the game.

Here are three possible reasons for raiding the surface world.

Harness Arcane Power for Lolth: In 1480 DR, Lolth is trying to take over dead Mystra's control of arcane magic. Under the command of her priestesses, drow raiding parties seek out magical artifacts, the remains of mighty dead wizards, and places of power. At these sites, the drow seize control of the item in question or siphon the magical energy of the place off and bring it to Lolth through her priestesses. The following section discussing Campaign Eras gives more information about this effort.

Capture Slaves: The proper functioning of Menzoberranzan relies on the labor of slaves, many of which are captured from the surface world. The characters might be part of an organized force that regularly brings slaves to the city for sale, or independent drow looking for a quick profit. In a twist, they might be duergar or members of other slaving races hoping to capture slaves for eventual sale in the drow city.

Kill All the Elves: Inspired by religious fervor, a thirst for personal revenge, or sheer hatred, the drow often raid the surface for the sole reason of killing as many surface-dwelling elves as possible.

Drow at War

A campaign centered on war pits the drow player characters against the dwarves of Mithral Hall, the deep gnomes of Blingdenstone, or other races in the Underdark. Such a campaign might focus on defending Menzoberranzan or on assaulting the cities and strongholds of its enemies, or a mix of the two as the fortunes of war shift. A war campaign might also involve multiple different wars against different foes and under different circumstances.

A war campaign offers an opportunity to play through some of the great events of Menzoberranzan's history described in the next section of this chapter, including the Time of Troubles and the War of the Spider Queen.

Any of the following directions can provide interesting direction to a drow campaign.

Punish the Offenders: The drow of Menzoberranzan marshal their warriors to strike against a nearby community as an act of revenge for some slight, real or imagined. For example, in 1371 DR, Triel Baenre ordered the destruction of Blingdenstone in retaliation for their support of the dwarves of Mithral Hall during an earlier conflict. The offense might also be a matter of encroaching on territory or stealing resources, harboring a drow fugitive, or simply drawing the ire of Lolth in some manner.

Smite the Infidels: This is a war against another drow city. It might be a city where a god other than Lolth is worshiped (for example, Ghaunadaur and Vhaeraun were worshiped alongside Lolth in nearby Eryndlyn before its destruction in the Spellplague), or a city that has (at least in the opinion of Menzoberranzan's priestesses) earned Lolth's disfavor through some blasphemous act. In such a campaign, priestesses play a very important role, and there's no room for anything but unswerving devotion to Lolth—unless one or more of the characters turns out to be a secret sympathizer with the enemy!

War of Conquest: For some reason, the drow decide that Menzoberranzan isn't big enough and a war party sets out to conquer territory for the city's expansion. This campaign might take place at a point in time where Menzoberranzan's population is exploding and the drow simply need more room. Alternatively, a dissident group or sect might flee Menzoberranzan and launch an assault in an effort to found a new city free from the tyrannical rule of House Baenre.

Defend Menzoberranzan: In this campaign, it is Menzoberranzan that is under attack, whether it's from duergar, dwarves, svirfneblin, illithids, or some other Underdark race. The characters' role might be shoring up the city's defenses, or they could form a strike team sent on missions to disrupt enemy supply trains, assassinate their leaders, or plant magical explosives in their midst. During the War of the Spider Queen, Menzoberranzan came under attack by duergar from Gracklstugh, the Scourged Legion, and agents of the Jaezred Chaulssin.

Civil War: From time to time, intrigue among the noble houses rises to such a fever pitch that outright war breaks out. It's common enough for one house to launch an assault against another, but such conflicts can escalate if the attacking house doesn't finish the job quickly. If the defenders have time to call on their allies, the twisted networks of allied and rival houses can erupt into open conflict with two or multiple different sides.

Sample file

Campaign Era

Once you've chosen a campaign flavor, give some thought to the time setting of your campaign. Your choice of flavor might suggest a certain era of play—for example, if you want to run a Rise of the Underdark campaign featuring drow characters harnessing arcane power for Lolth, you might set your campaign around the time of Danifae's appearance in the city, in 1480 DR. Most of the material in this book will be useful to you regardless of which era you choose, so select the era that holds the most appeal for you and your players.

Presented below are brief campaign ideas tied to specific periods in the history of Menzoberranzan.

The Founding

(-3917 DR to 1297 DR)

Five thousand years ago, the great drow city of Golothaer was busily destroying itself in a civil war. Drow houses faithful to the Spider Queen battled for supremacy against renegade factions aligned with the slime deity Ghaunadaur. As decades of death and destruction plunged the once-spectacular city into ruin, a proud and formidable priestess of Lolth named Menzoberra turned away from the fray, gathering seven families of wealth and station to found a new settlement loyal to the Way of Lolth.

Leaving the chaos of war-torn Golothaer, Menzoberra's band set forth into the unknown, trusting to Lolth's guidance. As Lolth's chosen one, Menzoberra received dream-visions sent by the Spider Queen to guide the refugees' progress through the Underdark. After wandering the Underdark for many years, the band of pilgrims suffered its first major setback in a bloody confrontation with the dwarves of the Black Axe Clan. The drow lost nearly half their number that day in the Cavern of Cloven Heads. Before his body faded mysteriously into the stone floor, the last dwarf to fall wished upon the drow invaders "the doom of many eyes."

Menzoberra's band eventually came to a huge vault filled with giant, edible mushrooms, overrun with swarms of spiders that bubbled up from the depths, and illuminated by the soft radiance of a myriad of prismatic lichens. A brief survey of the region found the ground choked with the bones of dwarves who had fallen prey to the cavern's current tenant: an immense beholder whose body was as wide as the base of Golothaer's largest tower.

Finding themselves promptly engaged in a perilous confrontation with the gigantic beholder (called Many Eyes by local dwarves, the drow later learned) and its mind-slaved minions, the drow made preparations for a hasty retreat. Suddenly, the drow were gifted by a rare visit from Lolth, who floated above the beleaguered band in the form of a beautiful female head whose tresses trailed away into long, dark arachnid legs. The Spider Queen told the drow that they were her chosen people, and this was the place she had chosen for them. If they were worthy of her, they would defeat Many Eyes and make this cavern their home.

Many drow perished fighting Many Eyes, but in the end they prevailed, and it was Menzoberra who delivered the killing blow. Left to stand with her at the baptism of their new home were the families named S'sril, Thaeyalla, Baenre, Masq'il'yr, Nasadra, Tucheth, and Uusralla. They made a home together in the beholder's treasure-strewn lair, a large cave in the southern wall of the great vault. There they raised an altar to Lolth, which was rewarded by the appearance of a demonic yochlol. This handmaiden of Lolth told the survivors to call their home Menzoberranzan, in recognition of the priestess's favor earned in the service of the Spider Queen.

All too soon, the same feuding that destroyed Golothaer, born of pride, cruelty, and bloodlust, surfaced within the drow of Menzoberranzan. A blood feud between House Thaeyalla and House Nasadra quickly threatened to destabilize the newly founded settlement. When Menzoberra sided with House Nasadra, the wizards of House Thaeyalla spent their own lives to fuel a ritual that rent the side cavern of the noble houses asunder. In a single cataclysmic strike, the explosion obliterated the houses of Thaeyalla, Masq'il'yr, Tucheth, and Uusralla, as well as Menzoberra herself.

The explosion transformed the former side cavern into the great plateau that came to be known as Qu'ellarz'orl. By some miracle, the great central pillar of the main cavern survived the explosion, keeping the entire vault from collapsing. The drow called it Narbondel for its strength.

The bitter Nasadra survivors sought to proclaim their rule over the other remaining drow, but the tattered priestesses of House S'sril defied them. The other surviving house was Baenre, which was powerful enough to decide the issue either way. In the end, House Baenre sided with S'sril. To prevent further bloodshed, it was proposed that House Nasadra would travel on to found another city devoted to the glory of Lolth.

Lolth appeared directly, and firmly blessed the wisdom and forbearance of House Baenre. The Spider Queen then laid down the Way of Lolth, the basic laws under which both cities would live. She also decreed that the two cities must remain amicable to each other without fail, or both would face her wrath. House Nasadra left Menzoberranzan that night, and went on to found the drow city of Ched Nasad decades later.

Sample file

A campaign set during this period could focus on the founding itself. If the "Exploring the Deeps" style of campaign flavor appeals to you, perhaps the player characters start by journeying from Golothaer with Menzoberra, serving as advance scouts for the exiles and navigating the hazards of the Underdark. Even in this earliest stage, rivalry among the seven noble houses could be a significant factor in the campaign, made all the more interesting by the fact that the houses are not yet established in any ranking.

Alternatively, a similar campaign could take place in the early years after the establishment of the city. The player characters could be responsible for exploring the caverns and tunnels around Menzoberranzan, ensuring that the city is relatively safe.

If a "Rise of the Underdark" campaign is what you're after, the year 942 DR saw drow raiders plundering cities along the Sword Coast, enslaving many humans living along the Dessarin River. Two small nations (Talmost and Harpshield) near present-day Waterdeep were ravaged and burned.

If you want to run a "Drow at War" campaign, consider the strange conflict against Chaulssin in 734 DR. Raiders from Menzoberranzan arrived at the city and found it deserted, though it was haunted by creatures from the realm of shadow. A few days before Menzoberranzan's attack, the god Vhaeraun had warned the drow of Chaulssin of the impending assault and helped them flee into Shadow, where they founded their own city.

Finally, this period covers more than five thousand years, during which time the city experienced tumult enough to fuel a hundred campaigns. The recorded history of the Realms tells us little about these events, so you should feel free to make up events of your own and set them in whatever year you choose. Surely during those years the city was from time to time wracked by civil war, ravaged by plague, and besieged by duergar, illithids, or other Underdark denizens. This period offers you the greatest degree of creative flexibility of all the eras discussed here.

Sable Years

(1297 DR to 1358 DR)

In the Year of the Singing Skull (1297 DR), an infant named Drizzt was born to House Do'Urden, marking the beginning of its end. Destined to be sacrificed to Lolth as the third-born male of his family, the young drow survived only through a series of fortuitous events.

As an adolescent, Drizzt brought great favor to House Do'Urden through his accolades at the Academy. Yet by the time he graduated from Tier Breche in the Year of the Adder (1327 DR), it had become increasingly noticeable that the young warrior did not possess a drow's love of treachery and intrigue. Early the following year, Drizzt fled Menzoberranzan for the wilds of the Underdark. With only the magical panther Guenhwyvar as a companion, Drizzt endured ten years of exile in the Dark Dominion that stretched out beyond the city. Unable to slay Drizzt and reclaim Lolth's favor, House Do'Urden was later destroyed by House Baenre in the Year of the Prince (1357 DR).

A campaign set during the period between the birth of Drizzt and the demise of his house provides many tantalizing possibilities for fans of the *Legend of Drizzt* series of novels by R.A. Salvatore. One scenario might see a player taking on the role of Drizzt, with the rest of the party adopting other personas within House Do'Urden. Through careful roleplaying, the Drizzt character might persuade others in his family (the party members) to join him in a crusade against the injustices of the Way of Lolth.

An intriguing alternative would be to alter the course of history by having the infant Drizzt sacrificed to Lolth on the evening of his birth as was planned. Without Drizzt around to bring disfavor to House Do'Urden, who knows how far the ambitions of Matron Malice might take her?

Another interesting possibility might be to center a campaign on the Academy. Each character is a member of a different house serving his or her final year at the Academy. The campaign is organized as a series of tests and challenges for the young drow students. The final assessment of their skills might even involve a contest against the star of the Academy, Drizzt Do'Urden, in the Grand Melee (page 99).

Time of Troubles

(1358 DR to 1372 DR)

The Year of Shadows (1358 DR) witnessed the gods being cast out of their planar dominions and forced to walk Faerûn as mortals. During the four-month period in which this tumultuous event took place, all priests lost access to their divine spells, while arcane spellcasters suffered through the unpredictable effects of wild magic. To the great advantage of practitioners of psionic power, such as House Oblodra, the mind magic of the Invisible Art remained unaffected by the magical chaos.

Even more fantastic, the avatar of Lolth appeared in Menzoberranzan during the later weeks of the crisis. The presence of Lolth within the City of Spiders was kept secret by House Baenre, and during her brief stay, the Queen of Spiders made her displeasure with House Oblodra known to Matron Yvonnel Baenre. When the crisis finally abated, Matron Yvonnel used her Lolth-granted abilities to summon an elder evil to drag House Oblodra down into the Clawrift and into oblivion.

The appearance of Lolth's avatar can be a significant event in a campaign featuring the Time of

Sample file

Troubles. What if House Baenre had failed to keep the event secret? The public revelation of Lolth's divine presence within the city could spark an all-out civil war as each house seeks to gain Lolth's favor. Alternatively, the Queen of Spiders might rally all the drow houses under a single banner and instigate an attack against Menzoberranzan's neighboring settlements in the Underdark.

A psionic-themed campaign set in Menzoberranzan during this era could be entertaining. Matron K'yorl Oblodra was foolish and failed to attack her rivals until it was too late. By placing the characters at the helm of House Oblodra's destiny, coupled with a well-timed betrayal of Matron Baenre by her illithid advisor Methil, it wouldn't be hard to envision the fall of House Baenre and the ascendancy of a new drow psiocracy in Menzoberranzan.

Yvonnel's Folly: Exuberant with the favor of Lolth, Matron Yvonnel Baenre turned her sights on the dwarven delve of Mithral Hall. In a single stroke, she sought to slay the renegade Drizzt Do'Urden and secure for House Baenre the valuable mithral mines held by Clan Battlehammer. Unfortunately for Yvonnel, her hubris ultimately failed her, leading to her own demise and the loss of six thousand troops. This ill-fated war could serve as the setting for a "Drow at War" campaign.

Triel Ascendant: For a brief time after the death of Yvonnel, Menzoberranzan's history is marked by the rise of Triel Baenre as matron mother of the First House of Menzoberranzan. With House Baenre's position called into question by the defeat at Mithral Hall, Triel had her hands full trying to solidify her position as matron mother. Her early reign was marked by mounting unrest throughout the city as rival houses sought to test the inexperienced matron.

Fall of Blingdenstone: In the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR), Triel made a desperate gamble to secure the support of the Ruling Council and strengthen her hold on the reins of power. She launched an attack on the deep gnomes of Blingdenstone, in revenge for the assistance they had given to Mithral Hall. Through the casting of great magic rituals, the drow conjured a horde of demons and loosed it upon the svirfneblin city. In the span of a few hours, the horde eradicated the city's population.

War of the Spider Queen

(1372 DR to 1385 DR)

Lolth's Silence: In the summer of 1372 DR, Lolth inexplicably fell silent, cutting off the flow of divine magic to her priestesses. The Jaezred Chaulssin took advantage of the situation to launch attacks on drow-ruled cities throughout the Northdark. By year's end, Menzoberranzan was besieged: the Jaezred Chaulssin secured an alliance with House Agrach Dyrr and brought a large duergar army from Gracklstugh to the city, bolstered by Kaanyr Vhok's Scourged Legion. The following year, Lolth's Silence ended and the drow broke the siege of the City of Spiders. The Jaezred Chaulssin quickly moved to cement their control over the ruins of Ched Nasad.

A campaign set during Lolth's silence might feature player characters taking the place of the heroes of the *War of the Spider Queen* novel series, traveling to the Demonweb Pits to investigate the cause of the Silence and vying to become Lolth's *Yor'thae*, her Chosen.

Alternatively, it could focus on the state of Menzoberranzan during the silence. The instability of the priesthood as divine practitioners try to conceal their sudden weakness provides a fine opportunity for insurrection in an "Ideological Scheming" campaign. The continuing intrigue among the houses comes to a height, and the threats from beyond the city, the attacks of the Jaezred Chaulssin and the Scourged Legion, make a fine backdrop for a "Drow at War" campaign.

The Reckoning: Soon after the end of Lolth's silence, Lolth and Eilistraee played a cosmic match of *sava* (a drow-invented game similar to chess) to determine the destiny of the drow. While the competition played out, Lolth's new champion, the Lady Penitent, returned to Faerûn to destroy the last hope of the drow race. As the followers of Eilistraee fell one by one to the Lady Penitent's wrath, Lolth turned her attention to the other gods of the drow pantheon.

The Reckoning began as Eilistraee killed Vhaeraun, and it ended with the Dark Maiden, in the mortal body of her Chosen, being decapitated by the Lady Penitent. After Eilistraee's fall in 1379 DR, only the ancient entity Ghaunadaur remained to challenge Lolth for supremacy among the deities of the drow. The Spider Queen attempted to destroy Ghaunadaur, but That Which Lurks proved to be a stronger foe than Lolth suspected.

A campaign set during this period could cast the characters as faithful servitors of Lolth helping the Lady Penitent to track down the apostates who serve Eilistraee, or the characters could be such apostates themselves, constantly hunted for their beliefs and their rejection of the Way of Lolth.

The Spellplague

(1385 DR to 1480 DR)

The Spellplague that ravaged Faerûn in 1385 DR brought little change to Menzoberranzan. The lands of the north, whether on the surface or deep underground, were not racked with the same changes seen in places such as Chessenta and Mulhorand. The city was not untouched by any means—spellscarred monsters rampaging through the Underdark erupted

Sample file

into the heart of the city, strange magical effects blew through like storms, and Menzoberranzan's neighbors launched half-hearted attacks to test the city's defenses. In this time of crisis, the rival noble houses and other factions actually came together and worked in relative harmony like never before.

If you want to run a campaign that downplays the intrigue and rivalry among the drow houses, this is a good era in which to do so. Such a campaign could center instead on the role of outside factions such as the Jaezred Chaulssin or the Sept of Ill'Ghact. You could postulate a series of surface raids as the drow try to take advantage of the instability in the sunlit world above, or concentrate on war with other Underdark races. You might also decide that the Spellplague opened up new caverns and tunnels beneath Menzoberranzan, and cast the player characters in the role of the first intrepid explorers of this uncharted territory.

The Demon Weave (1480 DR): Following her ascension to greater godhood, Lolth has been biding her time, spinning her webs of treachery and ambition, and looking for ways to increase her sway still further. Her goal in this age is to seize control of arcane magic in the wake of Mystra's death.

To facilitate this grasp for power, Lolth has sent a prophet, Danifae Yauntyrr, to all the cities of the drow. During the War of the Spider Queen, Danifae was a fallen priestess, a scoundrel, and a seductress, but her journey to the Demonweb Pits marked her as Lolth's *Yor'thae,* her Chosen. Lolth devoured and assimilated Danifae to complete her transformation.

Danifae has now returned to Menzoberranzan, apparently as an avatar of Lolth herself. Danifae whispers to the leaders of all the great drow houses, bringing a revelation of Lolth's divine will. Lolth will be served by priests and wizards alike, she says, as the Spider Queen spins the Demon Weave to replace Mystra's unraveled Weave. Danifae spurs the drow leaders to gather ancient knowledge to aid Lolth's continued ascent.

During this period, the drow are scouring the world for great relics, gathering artifacts once sacred to Mystra, and fighting for control of magical locations on the world's surface.

As the drow gather arcane energy and channel it to Lolth, the goddess's power grows. Her web extends to cover most of the world, forming a Demon Weave to replace the sundered Weave that Mystra had maintained—a new fabric of arcane magic. Now the priests and wizards who serve Lolth have access to greater power than ever before, and their task is to use it.

Across the surface world, Lolth's servitors draw on the Demon Weave to create shrouds of darkness that cover league upon league of surface lands. Under this pall of darkness, the drow can move and fight freely during what would normally be daylight hours. With this aid, they can complete Lolth's transformation and bring the world to ruin.

Drow society is strained to the breaking point by Danifae's revelation. The female-dominated priesthood doesn't care to hear her message, which would dilute their own importance and raise up male wizards as equals, or worse. They invent reasons to doubt Danifae's provenance as an avatar. Many reject her and her message, and try to brand her as a fraud and a heretic.

But wizards among the drow, and the priestesses of wizard-friendly houses (including Barrison Del'Armgo and Xorlarrin, among others) set about carrying out Lolth's plan. They intend to lay the foundation for a new Weave . . . and bring about the everlasting darkness that will cover the world above.

A campaign set in this era could focus on the surface raiding that facilitates Lolth's ascent to power. Player characters can form or join raiding parties with a clear objective: to acquire some element of magical power and then channel that power to Lolth.

Alternatively, the campaign could focus more on Menzoberranzan and the effects of Danifae's machinations. The increasing importance of wizards, and therefore of males, shatters the unity among the houses that was engendered during the Spellplague and leads to infighting between and even within houses. It also provides yet another opportunity for insurrection against the priestesses.

THE COUNCIL OF SPIDERS

Arcane spellcasters across Menzoberranzan view the creation of the Demon Weave as an opportunity to elevate their social standing. A group of wizards drawn from several noble houses has dubbed itself the Council of Spiders, acknowledging the supremacy of Lolth even as it obliquely challenges the authority of the city's Ruling Council of priestesses. Their goal is to see wizards represented on the Ruling Council, overturning thousands of years of tradition—but remaining true to Lolth's will as she has expressed it through her prophet.

Various lesser wizards of House Xorlarrin and House Barrison Del'Armgo form the backbone of the Council of Spiders. These two houses are both known for the prominent roles of their wizards, and Xorlarrin in particular scandalously grants its prominent males near-equality with the females. A number of wizards from other houses are involved in the council as well, but as yet no house wizards or masters of Sorcere have given their full support to the council's agenda.

Sample file

Schemes in the Shadows

It's possible to run a campaign featuring drow characters much like you'd run any other Dungeons & Dragons campaign, with the characters exploring the deeps, fighting monsters (and members of other civilized races), and interacting with the other residents of Menzoberranzan. At the same time, the City of Intrigue lends itself well to a campaign featuring a more intricate web of schemes, allegiances, and treachery that can dominate the action or add a fascinating twist to more standard adventuring.

Naturally, a campaign focused on flavors of political infighting or ideological scheming will be rich in opportunities for intrigue, but even if you've chosen a different flavor for your campaign, the relationship of the characters to the houses and factions of the city, and the interactions among those factions, can exert a strong influence over the campaign.

Factions

Key to adding this level of intrigue to your Menzoberranzan campaign are the factions detailed in chapter 3, which include the major noble houses of the city as well as the three branches of the Academy, the mercenary company of Bregan D'aerthe, and a couple of factions opposed to the drow. As much as the player characters might try to remain independent agents, they're almost inevitably tangled up in the schemes of these factions.

When you're creating a Menzoberranzan campaign, it's best to choose a few factions—three is a fine starting point—that will be the major players in your game. The interactions among three factions are more complex than a simple dichotomy but not so complicated that they'll make your head swim trying to keep them straight. Picking three factions from chapter 3 gives you a ready supply of NPCs with their own goals, alliances, and rivalries, which you can then drop the player characters into.

Player character drow might be connected to the noble houses or other factions already—in fact, it's a good idea to encourage these sorts of connections. You can choose to limit the players' options to the three (or so) factions you've chosen, but you don't have to. When players choose different houses for their characters, it adds additional strands of potential conflict and alliances into the mix, but those houses can remain relatively minor players in the grand political game of your campaign.

Characters and Factions

In an intrigue-laden campaign, it's important to keep track of each player character's relationships with the key factions in your game. You can measure these relationships on a five-step scale: hostile, suspicious, indifferent, tolerant, or allied.

A hostile faction actively seeks the death of the character. The faction might send assassins after its enemy, arrange an "accident" in the Underdark near the city, or send thugs to assault the character in one of the seedier parts of the city.

A suspicious faction keeps its eye on the character, watching his or her every move carefully. The faction's members or leadership assume that the character is plotting against them, and are simply waiting for evidence to confirm it. They might send spies to follow the characters, intercept their communications, or otherwise keep tabs on their actions in the city.

An indifferent faction is either unaware of the character because he or she hasn't come to its notice yet, or it's uninterested in the character because his or her actions have no bearing on the faction's interests or goals.

A tolerant faction gives some favor to the character. The character might be able to pull some strings to get assistance from the faction, though not at the risk of anyone's life or standing. In another culture, a tolerant faction might be considered friendly, but the drow know that friends are friends only as long as one remains useful to them.

An allied faction regards the character as a member in good standing, affording the character all the privileges of membership.

As the descriptions above suggest, it's best to track each character's relationship to each faction separately. It's quite common for characters to perform side quests or minor missions on behalf of their houses that help their standing with their own houses but have no impact on the standing of the rest of the party.

To track each character's relationship to the factions in your game, use a system of pluses and minuses. Each time the character helps the faction in some way, give the character a plus for that faction. Each time the character crosses the faction, give the character a minus for that faction. For example:

+ The character completes a quest on behalf of a member of the faction.
+ The character performs an action that directly aids the faction's goals.
+ The character does something that harms a rival of the faction or interferes with a rival's goals.
- The character insults a member of the faction or refuses to take on a mission on behalf of that individual.
- The character directly harms a member of the faction or interferes with the faction's goals.
- The character aids one of the faction's rivals.

Sample file