

# Sava – the Game of the Drow

Sava's origins are mysterious. According to popular myth, it was gifted to the race of the Ilythiiri by the goddess Lolth, as a way of teaching them the tenets of drow society: treachery, fate, deviousness and careful planning. However, most historians of the game date its appearance to shortly after The Scattering, around -3000 DR, since there appears to be no evidence for its existence prior to this time. Early versions of the game symbolised the drow's ancient and intense warfare with the dwarves, placing one player in control of a side representing the drow and the other playing the dwarven side. However, this version of the game was quickly replaced by the current iteration, placing two drow houses against one another - since no drow ever wanted to play as the dwarves, this greatly increased sava's popularity.

As the drow settled into a less expansionist and (comparatively!) peaceful, urban way of life, the increased leisure time of the nobility led to the development of sava as a pastime. Since it was, and still is, thought to teach many useful lessons about survival as a drow, the Matron Mothers of most clans gave their tacit approval to the game, and some even encouraged it amongst their subordinates. It was considered a vital part of the education of any warband leader, and for a time was played as a devotional rite in the Church of Lolth at Sshamath. Indeed, sava is inexorably entrenched in the religious culture of the drow, with the entire culture of drow civilisation understood metaphorically as a sava match between the goddesses Loth and Elistraee.

In recent centuries sava's popularity amongst the nobility has waned, partly due to an increase in players drawn from the lower classes. Since all that is required to play sava well is a quick mind and a degree of study, many drow from the underclasses who were able to master the game became capable of defeating members of the noble houses. This intolerable state of affairs was notably remarked upon by the Archmage Gromph Baenre, who, when defeated in a sava match by a lowly footsoldier, calmly stated that;

*"... to lose to you [at sava] does not make me the lesser drow. It does, however, make me very, very angry."*

Whereupon he transformed the unfortunate victor into a mushroom.

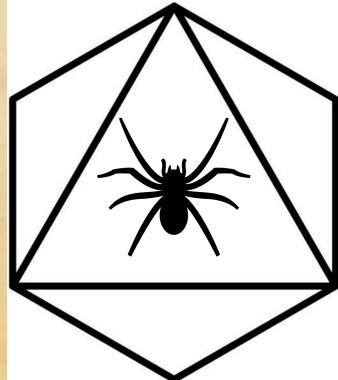
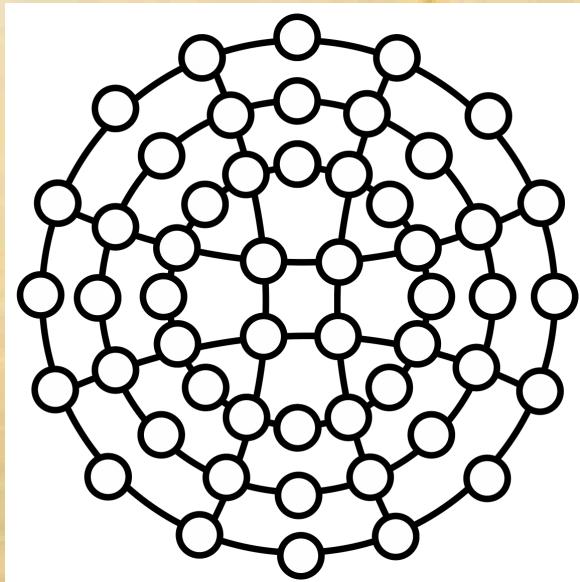
As a result of its universality, sava has become less common in the halls of the nobility, but this decrease in popularity is more than compensated for by its dissemination throughout the rest of drow society. There are even a few non-drow players in existence – the wizard Elminster is known to be a competent player – but few if any of these have ever sat across the table from a competent drow sava master. Partly this is due to the drow race's general reclusiveness, but mostly it's because the dark elves are fiercely protective of their traditional game and tend to flay and/or eviscerate members of any other species whom they find playing it.

In any case, sava can be said to be fully entrenched in the culture of the drow, and no non-drow could ever hope to fully understand its subtler aspects. The game of sava forms a vital lynchpin in the world of the dark elves. Though they would never admit it, the fact that sava is available to all, rich and poor alike, makes it a unifying factor in an otherwise heavily stratified society. It has been said that the world of the drow is one of chaos, treachery and disorder – ironically, the game which codifies these concepts may well be part of the glue that holds that world together.

## Gameplay

This ruleset is derived primarily from descriptions in *Dissolution* by Richard Lee Byers (Wizards of the Coast, 2003).

The objective of the game is to capture the opponent's Matron Mother. In order to do this, both sides (Blue and Red – in the original game, sides were designated by temperature, one warm, one cool, to be easily distinguished by drow infravision. For visual clarity, they are represented herein by colours) are equipped with a small force of pieces of various move values. These are moved in alternate turns, one piece moving on each turn, with the Red player moving first. The 52-space board is in the shape of a stylised spider's web, and pieces move from one space to another along the web's "strands". An element of chance is incorporated in the form of the Spider Dice, which can allow a player to take control of his opponent's pieces - or, conversely, cause him to lose his turn...



Players choose for colour by rolling the Spider Dice – the first to roll "double spiders" takes Red.

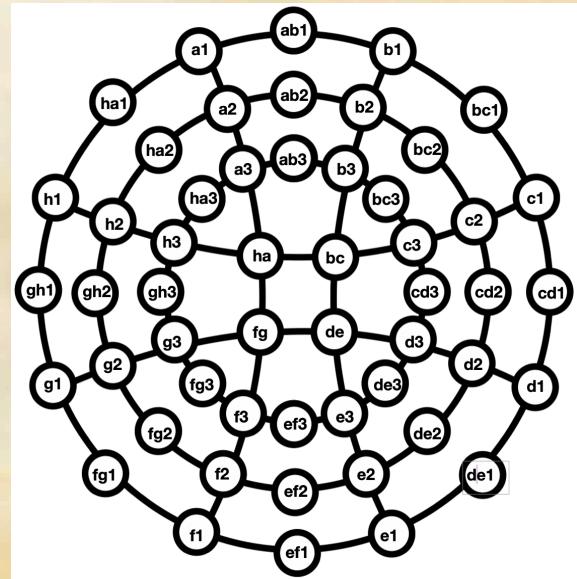
## Notation

The board is divided into three Rings (1, 2 and 3) and eight Threads (a-h). Individual spaces are referenced by their Thread and then Ring, as shown below. Spaces which are not on a Thread are indicated by the letters of the Threads on either side, e.g. cd1, fg1 etc. The four centre spaces are referred to by the two intersecting Threads, with no number (ha, bc, de and fg).

Pieces are referred to by the following abbreviations:

- Matron Mother – M
- Priestess – P
- Wizard – Z
- Weaponmaster – W
- Orc – none

Movement is shown in the following format: (Piece)(Destination space), so that Pfg3 indicates that the player moved their Priestess from wherever it was on the board previously to space fg3. The exception to this is the Orc, which is noted as (Starting space)(Destination space), e.g. d3de shows that the Orc on d3 was moved to space de. This avoids confusion if more than one Orc can move to the same space.



Capture is shown by an x, so Zh2x denotes a Wizard moving to h2 and capturing the piece there. In the case of the Weaponmaster, a capture mid-move is shown by placing the x before the destination; so Wxab2 indicates that the Weaponmaster moved to space ab2 and captured the piece it passed (assuming it started on a1, this would have been the piece on a2). A double capture is shown as Wxab2x ("Weaponmaster moved to square ab2, capturing the intervening piece and the piece at ab2"). In the unusual circumstance that the Weaponmaster has two routes to the same space and could capture mid-move on both of them, the intervening space is included (e.g. Wxded3x shows a Weaponmaster on space e3 choosing to capture the pieces at de and d3, rather than the implied alternative of capturing at de3 and d3). A capital X shows the capture of the Matron Mother and the consequent end of the game.

An Orc entering the opponent's base and promoting, as per the resurrection rule (see below), is indicated by the formula (Orc's move)(Resurrected piece), thus fg2f2W shows an Orc moving into the promotion zone and promoting to Weaponmaster.

If a player opts to roll the Spider Dice, this is shown as an asterisk. If a missed turn results, this is all that is entered in the notation, but if the player rolls double spiders and moves an opposing piece, this is entered after the asterisk, e.g. \*d2d3x shows that the player rolled double spiders, moved his opponent's Orc from d2 to d3 and captured his opponent's piece at d3.

## Pieces and movement values

All pieces capture by positional substitution; a move that places them on the same space as a hostile piece at the end of the turn captures the hostile piece. Each player has one of each of the four capital pieces, and eight Orcs.

### Matron Mother



Represented by the spider-like glyph of the powerful Baenre family, the Matron Mother is the most important piece in Sava. Capture of the opponent's Matron Mother is the goal of the game. The Matron Mother moves one space at a time in any direction along any Thread or Ring.

The Matron Mother rarely has a chance to capture anything in the course of the game. Its low move rate makes it very vulnerable, and it must be protected from attack by the more mobile pieces. The Matron Mother can easily be trapped by its own forces, so should be moved from its starting position as soon as possible – this manoeuvre is not easy since it necessitates the removal of at least two Orcs from the flanks, and can take as many as eight moves to complete. The threat of the enemy Wizard also prompts a player to open up space around the Matron Mother early in the game, to prevent it being blocked in by friendly pieces when the Wizard attacks. If the Wizard is captured during the opening then it can be an effective tactic to surround the Matron Mother with friendly pieces once again, making it harder for the remaining enemy forces to mount a successful attack.

### Priestess



The Priestess is shown by the stylised whip of the Barrison del'Armago family. It is highly mobile, moving any number of spaces along a continuous, unimpeded Ring or Thread.

The Priestess is arguably the most powerful piece in the game (if placed correctly, it can attack over 40% of the board from a single space), but is hampered in the early stages of the game by the Orcs, which limit its ability to attack around the circumference of the board. For this reason, many players opt either to hold the Priestess in reserve until the later part of the game, when many of the Orcs have been captured, or sacrifice the outlying Orcs in order to make space for the Priestess to attack early.

### Wizard



The Wizard, represented by the wand glyph of House Hlaund, has the most difficult moveset to master. It moves 3 linked spaces in any direction, and may change direction mid-move. The Wizard's movement is unimpeded by any intervening pieces, of either colour.

As in life, one must think several moves ahead with Wizards. Their range and jumping ability make them dangerous, but they have no way to attack at close quarters, and must be placed carefully to make maximum use of their talents. The Wizard is excellent for forking manoeuvres.



## Weaponmaster

The crossed blades of House Everhate represent the Weaponmaster. On its turn, the Weaponmaster moves 2 connected spaces, but each space is treated as a distinct move. The Weaponmaster may capture on one or both spaces, potentially picking off two enemy pieces in a single move. It may not end its turn on the same space as it started (it cannot move, take a piece and then return to its previous position).

The Weaponmaster is in its element when surrounded by adversaries, since this is the point at which its unique double-move is most effective. It is often the first major piece to engage the enemy, and is usually lost in the resulting skirmish. However, since the Weaponmaster can often take two pieces off the board in one move before being captured, the trade is sometimes worthwhile, especially if it results in the capture of the enemy Priestess.



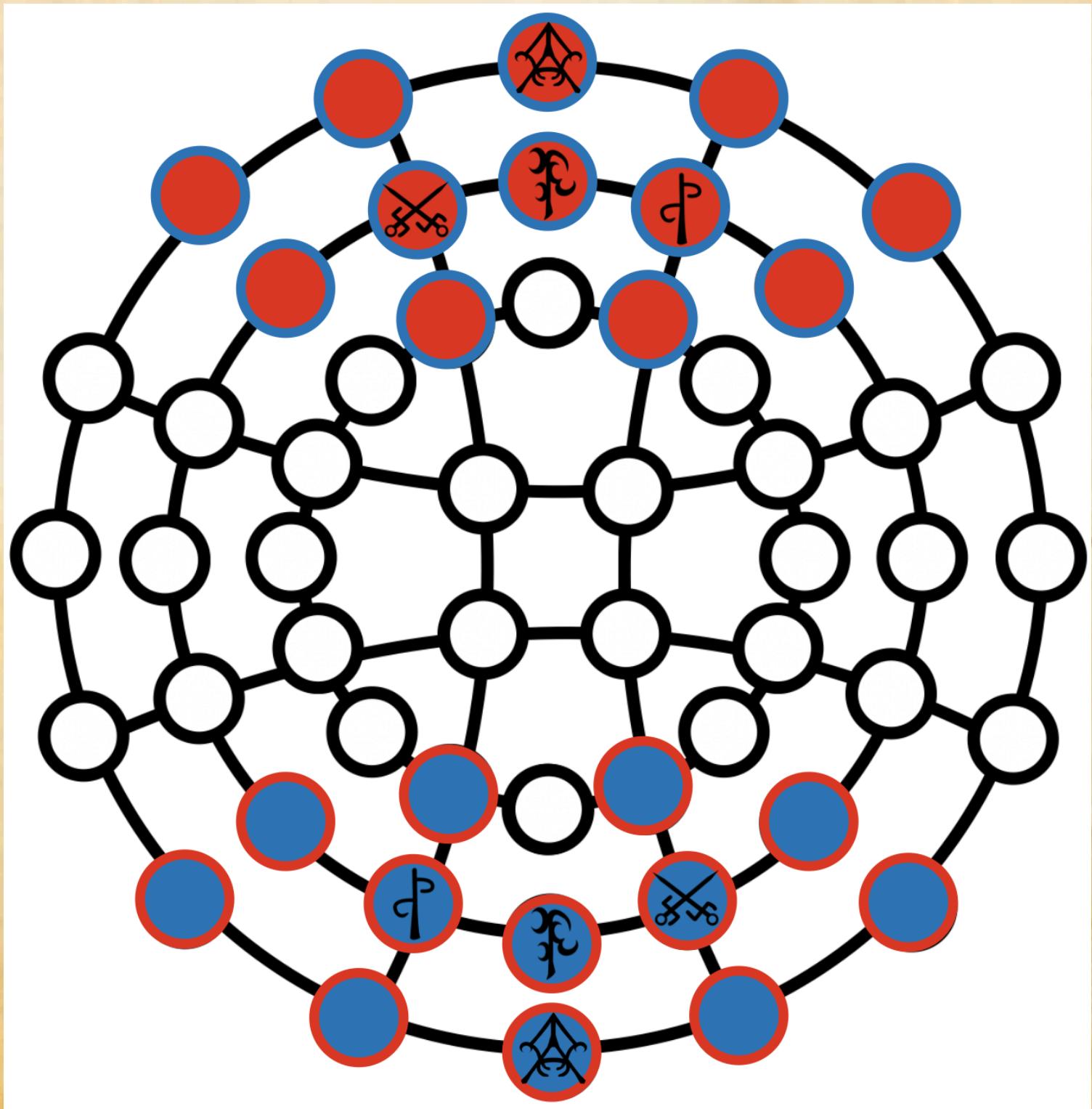
## Orcs

Orcs are the expendable footsoldiers of the Sava army. The Orc is represented by a blank token, as they are not worthy of representation by a House Glyph. They may move one space in any direction along any Thread or Ring, but cannot make a move that would take them further away from an enemy on the same Thread or Ring, unless doing so would capture an enemy piece.

Orcs are weak, and a canny opponent can use the special “cannot move away from an enemy” rule to dictate their movements and even paralyse them entirely. However, they are far more numerous than the other pieces, provide excellent defence, and can be used in conjunction with a Wizard or Weaponmaster to apply a lethal pincer check on the enemy Matron Mother. They can also exert considerable influence when they occupy at least two of the four central spaces.

The difficult feat of capturing a Matron Mother with an Orc is regarded as a very skilful play. Usually, it occurs due to a blunder by the opponent, at which point the winning player (and any observers) will taunt the loser, laugh at his ineptitude, and occasionally inflict light stab wounds.

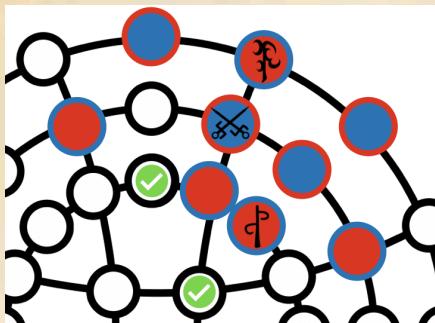
Starting board setup



## Example movesets

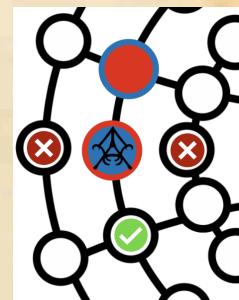
### Matron Mother

The blue Matron Mother on space gh2 can move to capture the Orc on h2 or to space g2. It cannot move to gh1 or gh3 as there is no connecting line between these spaces.



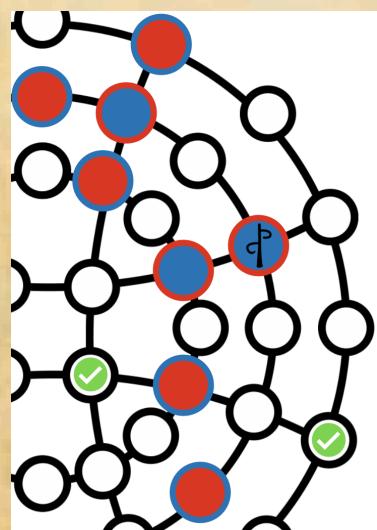
### Weaponmaster

The blue Weaponmaster can capture the Orc on b3 and the Wizard on bc3, or the Orc on a2. It can also capture the Orc at b3 and continue to ab3 or bc. It cannot capture the Orc at c2, because the blue Orc is in the way. It also cannot capture the Priestess, because the two blue Orcs at ab1 and bc1 mean that it could not complete its move.



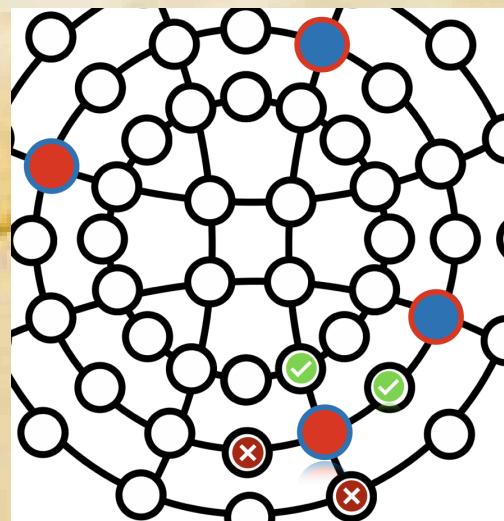
### Orc

The red Orc at e2 can move to e3 or de2, as these are directly linked to its current space.. However, it cannot move to e1 or ef2, because either of these moves would take it further away from a blue piece (b2 or d2, respectively).



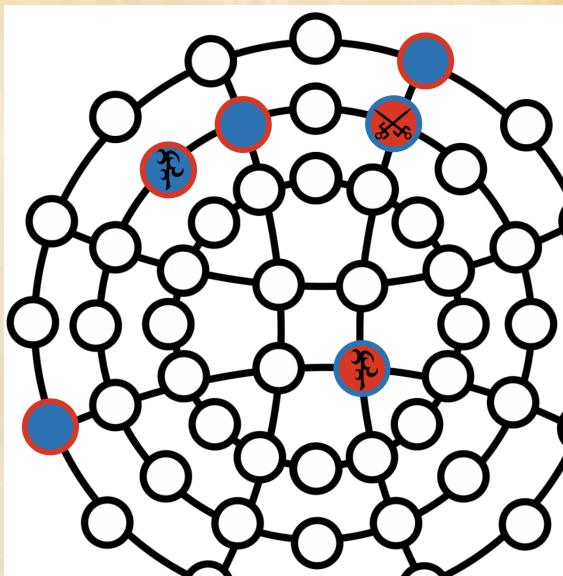
### Wizard

The blue Wizard on c2 can move to and capture any of the red Orcs on the board, including the one at ab2 (the Wizard ignores the intervening piece at b2). It can also move to de (via c1 and cd, even though there is a blue piece at c1) or d1. These are the only available moves for the Wizard - all of the closer spaces are unavailable to it.



## Priestess

The red Priestess can capture the Orc at g1, but not the Orc at b1 because the red Weaponmaster is in the way. The blue Priestess can capture the Weaponmaster in spite of the blue Orc blocking it at a2, because it can travel widdershins around the 2-Ring and capture from the other side.



## Dice

The chaotic nature of Drow society is manifested in Sava in the form of the Spider Dice. Rather than move a piece on their turn, a player may choose instead to roll two special octahedral dice. One die has three blank faces and five faces with a spider symbol, the other has two blank faces and six spiders. If the player rolls "double spiders", i.e. *both* dice land with spiders on their uppermost faces (which occurs slightly less than half the time, with a probability of about 0.47), he or she may move one of their opponent's pieces (the "turncoat") according to its usual movement value, capturing the opponent's pieces as though the turncoat piece was one of their own. Turncoat Orcs treat both sides as hostile, giving them additional movement options. The player may not capture the Matron Mother with the turncoat piece, since Matron Mothers are too aware of treachery in their ranks to be caught unawares by such a gambit. The Matron Mother may be chosen as the turncoat, though. If any roll other than "double spiders" results, the player forfeits their move on that turn, and play passes back to their opponent.

After the player has moved the turncoat, play passes to his or her opponent again. The opponent may not immediately move the turncoat piece back to its previous position, although it can be moved to another position on this turn.

Since the chance of rolling double spiders on the dice is only slightly less than 50%, many players avoid using them unless in dire need (for example, to move or capture a piece which has the Matron Mother in check). However, good players recognise that it is better to use the dice when a potential missed turn will not cost them too dearly, in the opening and middle game rather than in an all-or-nothing panic in the endgame. There are also more opportunities to cause havoc in the enemy ranks when there are more pieces on the board.

There is no limit to when or how many times a player can throw the dice instead of making a move, but it is considered vulgar to resort to the dice before at least two moves have been made, and the height of crassness to simply roll the dice on every turn, hoping for a lucky break. The Drow may venerate Lolth's chaotic ways, but they know that the Spider Queen

also helps those who help themselves, rather than relying on luck. A player who never rolls the dice may be regarded as somewhat irreverent, though, so it is thought to be good form to make at least one roll per game.

### Resurrection

If an Orc manages to travel across the board to the opposite promotion zone (the block of nine spaces comprising the bulk of the opponent's starting position – for Red, a1, a2, a3, ab1, ab2, ab3, b1, b2, b3, for Blue, e1, e2, e3, ef1, ef2, ef3, f1, f2, f3), it may be removed from play and replaced with any piece which the opponent has captured. If none of the player's capital pieces have been taken, nothing happens. If, after the Orc has entered the promotion zone, a capital piece is captured, the Orc must move to another space within the promotion zone in order to enact the substitution.

### Stalemate

It is possible for the game to reach a point where all of the pieces except for the two Matron Mothers have been captured, and at this point it is no longer possible for either player to win the game by tactical play alone. Should this state of affairs occur, it is conventional for the match to be decided by single combat between the players, using whatever weapons or spells they have to hand. It is thus common, when a game starts to look as though it will reach this position, for any observers to surreptitiously begin edging away from the game table (and to start quietly laying new bets on the outcome of the upcoming fight).

Combat may be to first blood or to the death, usually the latter. Should the two players be considerably mismatched in terms of their fighting ability, resignation by the physically weaker player is an acceptable resolution, although they are likely to be mocked for their cowardice by the victor and any bystanders.

## Variations

Since the drow find it difficult to agree on anything, numerous alternative rulesets for playing sava have evolved over the centuries.

In *Baenre Sava*, popular in Menzoberranzan, the Matron Mother gains the same move ability as the Priestess if the Priestess is captured. This makes it rather unwise to take the enemy Priestess except under very specific circumstances. This variation gained its name not because it was invented, or even played, by House Baenre, but because the denizens of Menzoberranzan associated the need to avoid aggravating a priestess quite closely with the First House.

*Ched Nased Sava* is a variant with a promotion, rather than a resurrection, rule – Orcs reaching the promotion zone can promote to capital pieces even if the player already has a piece of that type on the board, making it possible to have multiple Wizards, Weaponmasters or Priestesses in play.



*Seveltarm's Sava*, a popular variant, adds an extra piece, the Warrior (S), which has the move ability of a Priestess combined with the Wizard's jumping ability; it ignores intervening pieces between its starting space and its destination. The Warrior is represented by a spider token, which starts on the front line of the opening setup – ab3 for Blue and ef3 for Red. In spite of its substantial move tree, the Warrior cannot capture or be captured, making it useful for blocking enemy attacks (although in some varieties of Seveltarm's Sava, the Warrior is allowed to make captures and be captured when the other three capital pieces have been taken). This is the variant still played occasionally as a religious sacrament.

*Great Wheel Sava* is played on a larger board, with an extra Ring (24 spaces) around the circumference. Two extra Orcs are added, and each of the capital pieces except the Matron Mother is duplicated. An extra space, designated the Hub, appears in the centre of the board, and links the spaces ha, bc, de and fg. The Hub is treated as a promotion zone for both sides. Great Wheel Sava is regarded as a novelty, and is not played seriously by very many drow.

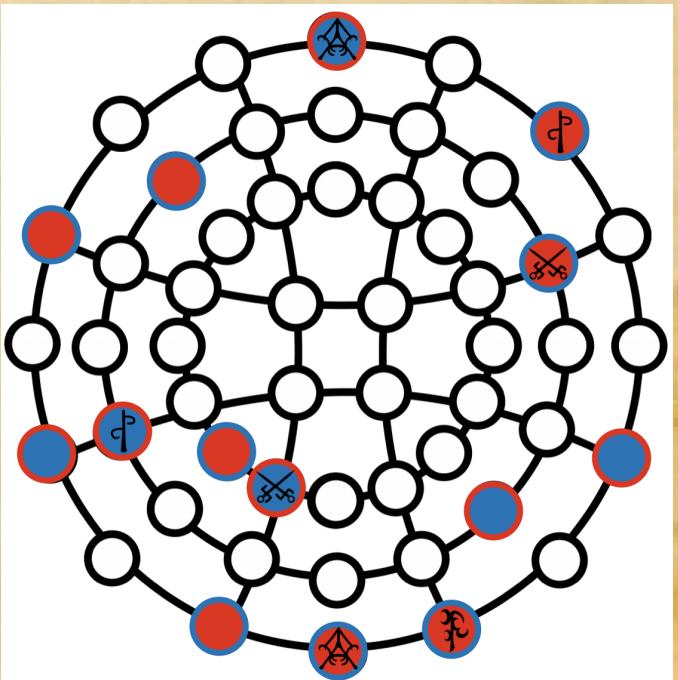
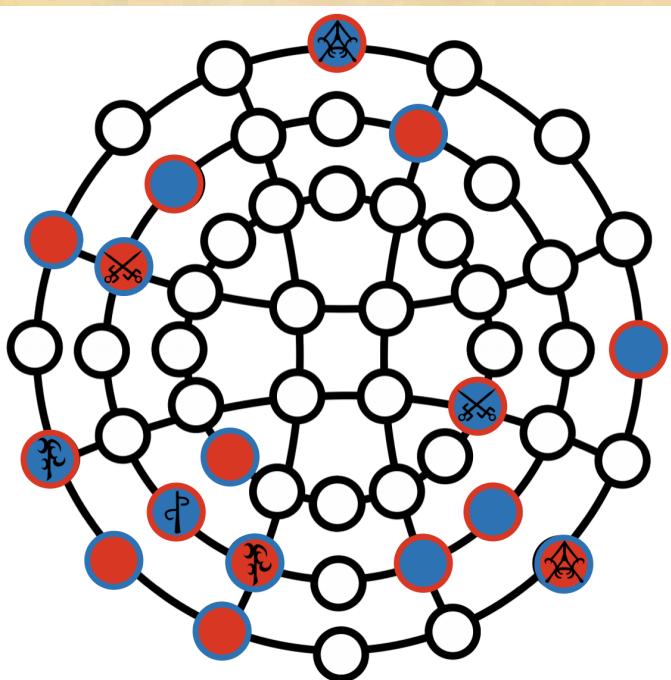
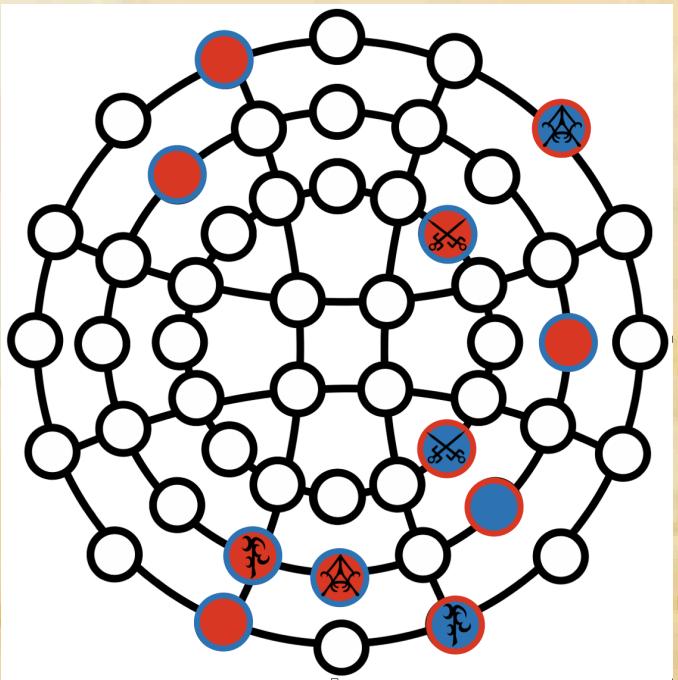
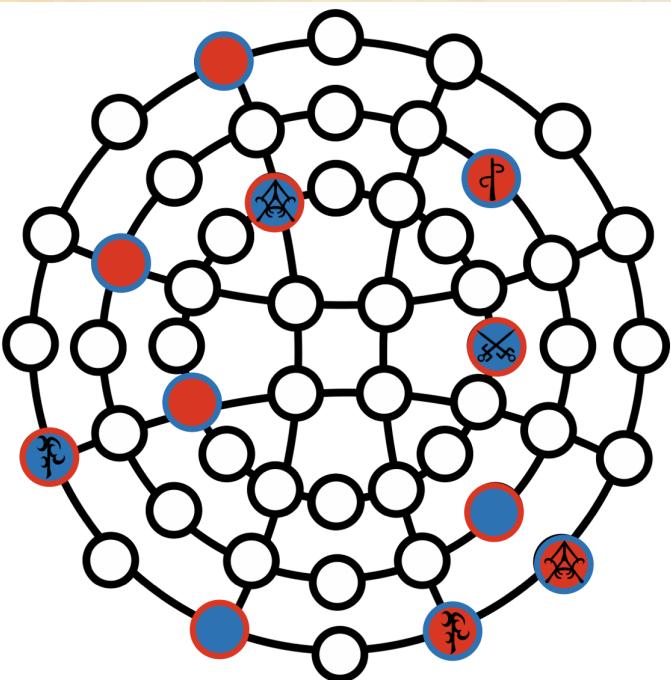
In *Dice Sava*, the Spider Dice are slightly different, with each die having three blank faces, one face with a knife image and four spider sigils. A throw of one spider grants a player the usual turncoat move, whilst a throw of double spiders allows him to remove one of their opponent's pieces (with the exception of the Matron Mother) entirely. However, a throw of double knives grants the thrower's opponent the option to remove a piece instead, representing the risk involved in attempting betrayal of one's House.

*Chaos Sava* uses specialised versions of the playing pieces which are red on one side and blue on the other. It introduces two additional rules. Firstly, a player may use their move to return a captured piece to the board as part of their own side, flipping it to represent the betrayal; this piece can be placed on any free space (though it cannot be moved until the player's next turn). This is indicated in notation as (Destination)(Dropped piece), so f2W indicated that the player dropped a captured Weaponmaster at space f2. Dropping an Orc is indicated by just the destination space (de2 = captured Orc placed at de2). Secondly, a piece designated the turncoat by a roll of the spider dice is flipped permanently, and becomes part of the dice-thrower's side. Since pieces in this version can appear anywhere on the board at any time, Chaos Sava requires quite different tactics to the common form of the game.

*Blade Sava* is usually only played by young bravos or those who have drunk too much mushroom wine. The rules are identical to normal sava, but every time a piece is captured, the capturing player is allowed to inflict a minor, non-fatal knife wound on their opponent. The winner of the game is entitled to remove a body part of his choice from his opponent, as long as this does not result in (immediate) death. Blade Sava is strongly discouraged by the ruling Houses, and players may find themselves facing stiff corporal punishment (such as the removal of more life-sustaining body parts) if caught. Nevertheless, a small but devoted underground following exists, seeing this version of the game as the most authentic experience of sava.

## Puzzles

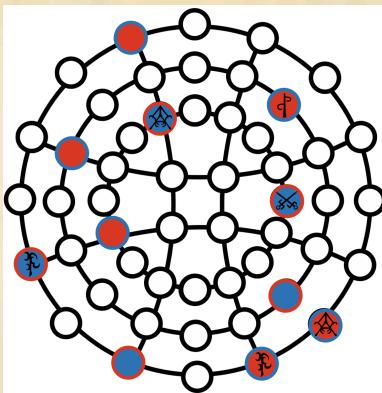
Some simple puzzles to help sharpen the mind. In all of the examples below, Red moves first, and the goal is to capture the Blue Matron Mother in *exactly* three moves. The Spider Dice are not used in any of the solutions.



## Solutions

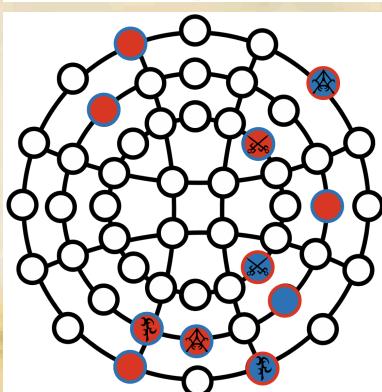
### Puzzle 1

- 1.Pb3 - Mha
- 2.h2h3 ...
  - Mh3x
- 3.Ph3X
  - Mfg
- 3.g3f3X
  - Mbc
- 3..ZbcX



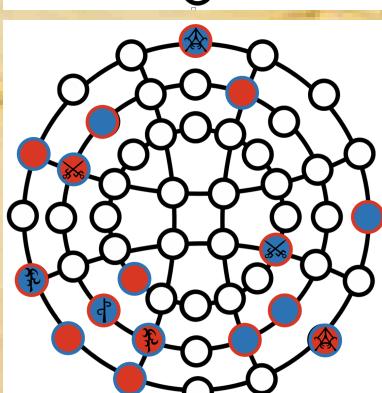
### Puzzle 2

- 1.Wc2 - Mb1
- 2.ha2a2Z ...
  - Mab1
- 3.a1ab1X
  - Mb2
- 3.Wb2X
  - Any other move
- 3.Zb1X



### Puzzle 3

- 1.Pa1 - Ma1x
- 2.b2b1P ...
  - Ma2
- 3.Wxa2X
  - Mha1
- 3.Pha1x
  - Any other move
- 3.Pa2X
  - (if after 1.Pa1 - Mb1, then 2.Pb1X)



### Puzzle 4

- 1.Zab2 - Ma1
- 2.h1ha1...
  - Mha1x
- 3.ZhaX
  - Ma2
- 3.ha2a2X
  - Any other move
- 3.ha1a1X
  - Alternatively:
- 1.Wb2 - Ma1
- 2.Wa2... etc.

