

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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BLADES OF THE MOONSEA

BOOK II



ONE

11 Eleint, The Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Nearly fourteen years later and twenty miles from Hulburg, Geran Hulmaster rode over a steep rise on the coastal trail and found pirates plundering a House Sokol merchant ship.

He halted and stared down at the two ships drawn up on the beach of the nameless cove below him before he recovered from his surprise. Then he spurred his mount down from the ridgeline to take cover behind an outcropping of rock. He was fortunate; the sun was setting behind him. Anyone looking up the hillside from the beach below would see nothing but an eyeful of bright sunshine.

Geran patted his horse's neck and whispered soothingly to it. He was a tall, lean man a little over thirty, dressed in a long, weather-beaten cloak over a leather jacket, breeches of dark green wool, and high leather boots. At his hip rode a long elven backsword with a hilt fashioned in the shape of a rose. His trail clung to the hillside above the cove and didn't come all that close to the beach itself, but there was no way he could continue on without being spotted.

"Backtrack and go around?" he wondered aloud. "Or wait until it gets dark and then ride by on the trail?" He decided he preferred to ride past if he could. It should be safe enough if the pirates didn't send out any foraging parties, but any way he looked at it, he'd be riding long after sundown and making a late camp with no fire. He scowled at the thought. The presence of a corsair ship only twenty miles from his home was not a good sign. Piracy had been bad this year, growing worse with each passing month. Hulburg's ships were harried all over the Moonsea. Now here was another cargo that wouldn't reach Hulburg's storehouses. It would be a

heavy blow to the Sokols and to the harmach's coffers too.

He dismounted, looping his horse's reins around a bleached pine stump amid the boulders. As long as he was waiting for nightfall, he might as well see if he could learn anything useful about the corsairs plundering ships on Hulburg's doorstep. Picking his way down the slope to find a better vantage point, he eventually settled under the branches of a wind-sculpted thicket of gorse about fifty yards up the hillside from the strand and studied the scene more carefully.

The pirates were mostly humans, with a mix of other folk—a dwarf or two, some goblins, even one ogre that he could see. They had the Sokol ship's cargo scattered all over the beach, sorting out what was worth taking and what they'd leave behind. Geran couldn't see any of the merchant's crew, but that didn't surprise him. Most likely the pirates had killed them after capturing the ship and dumped the corpses over the side.

He chewed his lower lip, thinking. He'd do something about it if he could, but for the moment it was no real business of his. It was only an accident of fate that he was in the vicinity at all. He'd spent the last few days visiting his mother, who resided in a Selûnite convent in Thentia, and was on his way back to Hulburg. It was usually an uneventful journey, since no one lived along the coastland between Thentia and Hulburg, and most traffic between the two cities went by sea. There wasn't even much reason for highwaymen or marauders from the wilds of Thar to come this way.

"They probably chose this cove just for that reason," he said to himself. They needed a quiet place where they could sort through their plunder, and they weren't likely to be troubled here. He couldn't do much about the Sokol ship now, but at least he could carry news of the attack to Hulburg and let the Sokols know what had happened to their ship. He settled in to study the pirates and their vessel closely while he waited for the sun to set. The pirate vessel was a three-masted war galley, a ship that would be equally handy under sail or oar. Geran couldn't make out any name from where he was hiding, but the figurehead was clear—a mermaidlike creature whose fishy tail was instead a mass of kraken arms. He'd never seen anything like it. There couldn't be too many ships on the Moonsea with that device.

As the sun set, the pirates built a bonfire on the beach and broke out casks of wine taken from their prize. Geran judged that it was dark enough to make his way back up to where he'd left his horse. But just as he was

about to crawl out from under the gorse, he heard a scream. From behind the hull of the pirate ship, two crewmen dragged a young woman in a fine, blue dress with a bodice of dove gray into sight and roughly tied her to the pirate vessel's kedging anchor up on the beach. She'd been hidden on the far side of the ship from Geran's vantage point. One of the ruffians knotted his hand in the woman's long, golden hair, pressed his bearded face against hers, and forced a kiss. Then he reached up with his other hand and stripped her to the waist, tearing away her bodice. She snarled at him and struggled to get free, but her hands were bound behind her back. The pirate laughed and sauntered away. Geran started to draw his blade and surge from his hiding place, but he forced himself to stop and consider his actions. If he acted rashly, he could get both himself and the woman killed.

"Ah, damn it all," Geran muttered. "Now what do I do?" A moment ago there would have been no shame in slipping away and making sure the tale of the Sokol ship's fate reached Hulburg. He wouldn't have lost a moment's sleep over leaving a scene where the murders had already taken place. But it was all too clear what a beautiful woman unfortunate enough to have been a passenger on the wrong ship could expect in the pirates' camp. If he rode off and abandoned her to her fate, he'd hear her screams in his conscience for a long time. He had to do *something*. The only question was, what? He might have considered attacking a handful of enemies who weren't expecting trouble, but there must have been sixty or seventy men on the beach and likely more he just hadn't seen yet. Pirate vessels carried large crews so that they could overwhelm their victims through weight of numbers.

It'll have to be stealth, he realized. Or a diversion of some kind. I need something to take their attention away from her long enough to cut her free and spirit her away. And the longer I wait, the better—they'll get themselves falling-down drunk if I give them the chance. But how long will they wait before they turn their attention on the woman? And are there other captives I haven't seen yet?

Geran waited impatiently, watching from his hiding place. The pirates tapped another cask and drank eagerly, roaring with laughter and admiring their spoils. Several times he tensed and prepared to burst out of his place of concealment when one or another of the crewmen approached the woman, but each time the pirate retreated. Finally Geran decided that the master of the pirate ship must have been saving her for himself. She was

certainly pretty enough. She slumped with her chin down, held upright by the lashings that bound her to the anchor. He wondered who she was and how she'd come to be on the ship.

Finally, he judged that the moment was as right as it would ever be. It was possible that more of the pirates would drink themselves into a stupor if he waited longer, but the leader might appear and rape or kill the woman at any time. Besides, Geran could see a silver glimmer to the southeast that hinted at a big, bright moon. Scowling at the foolishness of his own conscience, he slipped out of the brush and darted down to the water's edge. There was no surf to speak of, just small wavelets less than a foot tall. Wading out into the cold darkness until he was thigh-deep in water, he crouched down and began to creep toward the stern of the Sokol ship, which still jutted out a fair distance from the shore. The pirate vessel might be better for what he had in mind, but it was farther away, and he didn't want too many enemies between him and his horse if things went poorly.

The Moonsea was never warm even in the middle of summer; on a clear, dark, autumn evening, it was bitterly cold. Geran's teeth chattered, and he shivered from toe to crown. But the water provided the best avenue toward his goal without crossing the open, firelit beach. The pirates' shouts and coarse jests rang out over the water, filling the cove with their callousness. After wading a short distance, he reached the stern of the Sokol ship, and paused to listen closely. He could hear muffled thumps, gruff voices, and planks creaking; at least a few of the pirates still searched the holds of the merchant ship, but he didn't think he heard anyone up on the deck. As stealthily as he could, Geran clambered up the ship's side toward the quarterdeck and risked a quick look. No one was in sight.

He swung himself over the rail and moved back to the ship's sternlamp. It was a big lantern of wrought iron, suspended from a short pole fixed to the rail. He pulled it down and glanced inside; oil sloshed in the reservoir. He poured it out on the deck then splashed some on the rigging lines and the furled sail of the mizzenmast close by. From the caravel's quarterdeck he could see the pirates' bonfire on the beach. Several men were gathered around their captive, leering and pawing at her. She's almost out of time, he realized.

Kneeling by the oil he'd poured out on the deck, Geran focused his mind into the clear, still calm necessary for spellcasting. He whispered

words in Elvish he'd learned years ago in Myth Drannor: "*Ammar gerele.*" In the palm of his upturned hand a bright yellow flame the size of an apple appeared. He flicked it down to the oil-soaked deck. As the pool ignited and flames began to climb into the rigging, Geran quickly scrambled back over the side and dropped back into the water. Ruddy light blossomed on the quarterdeck behind him.

"The prize!" someone shouted. "She's burning!"

Geran glided away from the burning ship as quickly as he could, hoping that none of the pirates would think to look for an enemy creeping away in the water. He heard more shouts behind him and risked a quick look; men on the beach leaped to their feet and dashed for the grounded Sokol ship. Others stood staring in dumb amazement until their officers cuffed them into action. "Put it out! Put it out, you dogs!" they shouted. Fire was the one thing that sailors feared more than anything else, for there were a thousand things on a ship that burned well given the chance. If there had been a strong wind blowing, Geran might have hoped for the flames to spread to the other vessel, but even without that, it seemed that the fire was doing its part in diverting the pirates.

He floundered back to the wet sand and gravel fifty yards from the caravel, with no cover to speak of—but he was in the darkness, and the pirates' attention was fixed on the bright fire. Men were swarming over the rail to battle the blaze now, beating at the flames with wet blankets and old cloaks or throwing buckets of water and sand as quickly as they could draw them. Several pirates still lingered near the place where the woman was tied up, but they were looking at the fire as well.

"Tymora, favor a fool," he said aloud. Then he drew his elven blade, locked his eyes on the place he wanted to be, and spoke another spell. "*Sieroch!*" he said. In a single, dark, dizzying instant he vanished from where he was standing and appeared beside the golden-haired woman. She looked up, startled, and he saw that she had elf blood in her; her violet eyes showed just the slightest tilt, subtle points graced her ears, and her features had a fine, sharp cast to them. She was slender of build and tall, but her pale bosom had a human fullness, and her hips were well curved. He pressed his hand over her mouth before she could give him away with a startled cry and quickly set the edge of his blade to her bonds.

A dozen pirates were sprawled on the ground nearby, too drunk to be roused by the fire. Three more stood within ten or fifteen feet, but they

were watching their fellows fight the fire; their backs were to Geran.

“Don’t speak,” Geran whispered into the half-elf’s ear. “I’m going to try to rescue you.” The panic in her eyes faded, and she gave him a single quick nod. He took his hand from her mouth and turned his attention to slicing through the ropes binding her as quickly and quietly as he could. It was harder than he’d thought; the firelight cast dark, dancing shadows, and he didn’t want to cut her by mistake. He finally found the right angle for his sword and sawed through the cords binding her wrists together.

“Behind you!” the half-elf hissed urgently.

Geran looked up and found that one of the pirates who’d had his back turned a moment ago was looking right at him. He was a burly fellow with a mop of straw-colored hair and a scarred jaw. “Who the devil’re you, and what d’you think you’re doing with our pris’ner?” the man demanded. The other crewmen standing nearby turned to look at Geran.

Geran seized the half-elf by her wrist and dashed off into the darkness. They struggled through the loose sand, but so did the men who pursued them. In twenty steps they were out of the firelight, and Geran began to hope that they might be able to simply outrun the corsairs’ pursuit. Then he saw a brawny half-orc moving to intercept them, a heavy hand axe grasped in one thick fist. They must have posted some sentries after all, Geran realized.

The half-orc didn’t waste time on challenges. Baring his fangs in a fierce growl, he flung himself at Geran with a roar of rage, his axe raised high. Geran quickly stepped in front of the captive and met the half-orc’s rush with an arcane word and a lunge. His sword burst into emerald flame and took the half-orc in the notch of his collarbone, grating on bone as it struck deep. The pirate stumbled heavily and fell into the swordmage; Geran shouldered him to the side, then whirled to face the big straw-haired man and the other two pursuing from the fireside.

“Ho, so you’ve some fight in you after all!” the big man said. “I thought you were going to just run off there!” He had a cutlass in his hand, and he started forward with a more cautious advance than his crewmate had tried. The second man came up close behind him with a short boarding pike; the third fellow struggled to catch up.

“More are coming,” the half-elf woman said. And she was right; by the bonfire Geran could see more of the pirates turning aside from the fire aboard the Sokol ship and moving in their direction. He didn’t have time for a defensive fight.

He launched an attack on the big man. The fellow parried his first thrust, and blocked the slash that Geran followed with, but then Geran looped his point over the man's guard and stabbed him deeply in the meat of his sword arm. The pirate dropped his cutlass with a startled oath; before the man could recover, Geran flung out an arm and snarled another spell, flinging up a shield of ghostly white. The glowing disk caught the man with the boarding pike as he worked around to Geran's flank and knocked him down in the sand. The fellow started to scramble to his feet, but a fist-sized rock sailed over Geran's shoulder and caught him in the mouth. He fell back again, spitting broken teeth.

The third pirate looked up at Geran, realizing that neither of his two comrades was still in the fight. He was armed only with a long dagger, but he must have been daunted by Geran's longer blade or magic, because he hesitated and then backed away. "Over here!" he shouted. "The girl's getting away! Here!"

Geran snarled in frustration. He'd been within a few feet of escaping without notice! The man with the dagger realized his danger at the last moment and tried to retreat, but he lost his footing in the sand and fell. Geran silenced him with a savage kick to the jaw. Geran wheeled to face the big, yellow-haired man, just in time to duck under a wild, left-handed slash of the man's cutlass. This man was the one who'd stripped the captive and toyed with her while she was helpless. Eyes blazing with wrath, Geran slapped his cutlass out of the way and rammed the point of his backsword into the man's belly. The man howled in agony; Geran jerked back his point and finished the pirate with a cut that took off half of his face. He looked around for another foe to sate his anger, but no more were near.

The half-elf winced when he met her eyes and retreated a step. Geran took a breath, mastered his fury, and lowered his sword. Before any more foes could catch up, he seized the woman's hand again and hurried her up the beach. "You're handy with a rock, but it's time to leave," he told her. "We've worn out our welcome."

Together they scrambled through the brush at the edge of the beach and ran up the hillside. When Geran risked another look over his shoulder, he could see dozens of men seizing burning brands from their bonfire and starting up the hill after them. The slope was treacherous in the dark; loose soil and rock slipped under their feet, and he had to keep an eye

ahead to make sure they didn't flee into a bluff they couldn't scale, as well as watching the pirates who followed.

He found their way blocked by a thick patch of brush at the foot of the cliff and realized they were climbing up by a different way than he'd come down. He paused, trying to find his bearings, but the half-elf took one glance and pulled him toward the left. "There's a better path over here," she said. Geran decided to trust her judgment and followed after her. With her elf blood, she could probably see in the dark much better than he could. When they got around the thicket, he took the lead again and steered her toward the spot where he'd left his horse.

They reached the boulders where Geran's horse was tethered. The animal, a big, gray gelding, scented danger and pranced nervously. Geran sheathed his sword—he hated to do that with blood on the blade, but he'd just have to clean it up as best he could later—and unlooped the reins as the half-elf climbed into the saddle. Then he hauled himself up into the saddle behind her and set his heels to the horse's flanks. They pelted out of cover along the trail as the first of the pirates reached the top behind them. The swordmage risked a glance backward and saw angry corsairs running after them brandishing torches and cutlasses. Then he leaned forward in the saddle, arms around the woman in front of him, and urged the gelding to its best speed.

His horse's hoofbeats thundering in the night, Geran galloped out of the cove with the pirates' captive on his saddle and leaping red firelight behind him.