

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

PASSAGE TO DAWN
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK X
RA
SALVATORE



She was beautiful, shapely, and pale-skinned with thick, lustrous hair cascading halfway down her naked back. Her charms were offered openly, brazenly, conveyed to him at the end of a gentle touch. So gentle. Little brushing fingers of energy tickled his chin, his jawbone, his neck.

Every muscle of his body tensed and he fought for control, battled the seductress with every bit of willpower remaining in him after so many years.

PROLOGUE

He didn't even know why he resisted anymore, didn't consciously remember what offerings of the other world, the real world, might be fueling his stubbornness. What were "right" and "wrong" in this place? What might be the price of pleasure?

What more did he have to give?

The gentle touch continued, soothing his trembling muscles, raising goose bumps across his skin wherever those fingers brushed. Calling to him. Bidding him to surrender.

Surrender.

He felt his willpower draining away, argued against his stubbornness. There was no reason to resist. He could have soft sheets and a comfortable mattress. The smell—the awful reek so terrible that even years had not allowed him to get used to it—could be taken away. She could do that with her magic. She had promised him.

Falling fast, he half-closed his eyes and felt the touch continuing, felt it more keenly than before.

He heard her snarl, a feral, bestial sound.

Now he looked past her. They were on the lip of a ridge, one of countless ridges across the broken, heaving ground that trembled as if it were a living thing, breathing, laughing at him, mocking him. They were up high. He knew that. The ravine beyond the ridge was wide, and yet he could not see more than a couple of feet beyond the edge. The landscape was lost in the perpetual swirling grayness, the smoky pall.

The Abyss.

Now it was his turn to growl, a sound that was not feral, not primal, but one of rationale, of morality, of that tiny spark that remained in him of who he had been. He grabbed her hand and forced it away, turning it, twisting it. Her strength in resisting confirmed his memories, for it was supernatural, far beyond what her frame should have allowed.

Still, he was the stronger and he forced the hand away, turned it about, then set his stare upon her.

Her thick hair had shifted a bit, and one of her tiny white horns had poked through.

“Do not, my lover,” she purred. The weight of her plea nearly broke him. Like her physical strength, her voice carried more than was natural. Her voice was a conduit of charms, of deceit, of the ultimate lie that was all this place.

A scream erupted from his lips and he heaved her backward with all his strength, hurled her from the ridge.

Huge batlike wings unfolded behind her and the succubus hovered, laughing at him, her open mouth

revealing horrid fangs that would have punctured his neck. She laughed and he knew that although he had resisted, he had not won, could never win. She had almost broken him this time, came closer to it than the last, and would be closer still the next. And so she laughed at him, mocked him. Always mocking him!

He realized that it had been a test, always a test. He knew who had arranged it and was not surprised when the whip tore into his back, laying him low. He tried to take cover, felt the intense heat building all around him, but knew that there was no escape.

A second snapping had him crawling for the ledge. Then came a third lash, and he grabbed on to the lip of the ridge, screamed, and pulled himself over, wanting to pitch into the ravine, to splatter his corporeal form against the rocks. Desperate to die.

Errtu, the great balor, twelve feet of smoking deep red scales and corded muscles, casually walked to the edge and peered over. With eyes that had seen through the mists of the Abyss since the dawn of time, Errtu sought out the falling form, then reached out to him.

He was falling slower. Then he was not falling at all. He was rising, caught in a telekinetic web, reeled in by the master. The whip was waiting and the next lash sent him spiraling, mercifully, into unconsciousness.

Errtu did not retract the whip's cords. The balor used the same telekinetic energy to wrap them about the victim, binding him fast. Errtu looked back to the hysterical succubus and nodded. She had done well this day.

Drool slipped over her bottom lip at the sight of the

unconscious form. She wanted to feast. In her eyes, the table was set and waiting. A flap of her wings brought her back to the ledge and she approached cautiously, seeking some way through the balor's defenses.

Errtu let her get close, so close, then gave a slight tug on the whip. His victim flopped away weirdly, jumping past the balor's perpetual flames. Errtu shifted a step to the side, putting his bulk between the victim and the succubus.

"I must," she whined, daring to move a bit closer, half-walking and half-flying. Her deceptively delicate hands reached out and grasped at the smoky air. She trembled and panted.

Errtu stepped aside. She inched closer.

The balor was teasing her, she knew, but she could not turn away, not with the sight of this helpless one. She whined, knowing she was going to be punished, but she could not stop.

Taking a slightly roundabout route, she walked past the balor. She whined again, her feet digging a firm hold that she might rush to the prone victim and taste of him at least once before Errtu denied her.

Out shot Errtu's arm, holding a sword that was wrought of lightning. He lifted it high and uttered a command and the ground jolted with the strength of a thunderstroke.

The succubus waited and leaped away, running for the ledge and then flying off of it, shrieking all the while. Errtu's lightning hit her in the back and sent her spinning, and she was far below the edge of the ridge before she regained control.

Back on the ledge, Errtu gave her not another thought. The balor was thinking of his prisoner, always of his prisoner. He enjoyed tormenting the wretch, but had to continually sublimate his bestial urges. He could not destroy this one, could not break him too far, else the victim would hold no value for the balor. This was but one being, and measured against the promise of freedom to walk again on the Prime Material Plane, that did not seem so much.

Only Drizzt Do'Urden, the renegade dark elf, the one who had banished Errtu to a hundred years in the Abyss, could grant that freedom. The drow would do that, Errtu believed, in exchange for the wretch.

Errtu turned his horned, apelike head to look over one massive shoulder. The fires that surrounded the balor burned low now, simmering as was Errtu's rage. Patience, the balor reminded himself. The wretch was valuable and had to be preserved.

The time was coming, Errtu knew. He would speak with Drizzt Do'Urden before another year had passed on the Material Plane. Errtu had made contact with the witch, and she would deliver his message.

Then the balor, one of the true tanar'ri, among the greatest denizens of the lower planes, would be free. Then Errtu could destroy the wretch, could destroy Drizzt Do'Urden, and could destroy every being that loved the renegade drow.

Patience.



PART
ONE

Six years. Not so long in the life span of a drow, and yet, in counting the months, the tendays, the days, the hours, it seemed to me as if I had been away from Mithral Hall a hundred times that number.

The place was removed, another lifetime, another way of life, a mere stepping stone to . . .

WIND AND SPRAY

To what? To where?

My most vivid memory of Mithral Hall is of riding away from the place with Catti-brie at my side, is the view in looking back over the plumes of smoke rising from Settlestone to the mountain called Fourthpeak. Mithral Hall was Bruenor's kingdom, Bruenor's home, and Bruenor was among the most dear of friends to me. But it was not my home, had never been so.

I couldn't explain it then, and still cannot. All should have been well there after the defeat

of the invading drow army. Mithral Hall shared prosperity and friendship with all of the neighboring communities, was part of an assortment of kingdoms with the power to protect their borders and feed their poor.

All of that, but still Mithral Hall was not home. Not for me, and not for Catti-brie. Thus had we taken to the road, riding west to the coast, to Waterdeep.

I never argued with Catti-brie—though she had certainly expected me to—concerning her decision to leave Mithral Hall. We were of like minds. We had never really set down our hearts in the place; we had been too busy, in defeating the enemies who ruled there, in reopening the dwarven mines, in traveling to Menzoberranzan and in battling the dark elves who had come to Mithral Hall. All that completed, it seemed time to settle, to rest, to tell and to lengthen tales of our adventures. If Mithral Hall had been our home before the battles, we would have remained. After the battles, after the losses . . . for both Catti-brie and Drizzt Do'Urden, it was too late. Mithral Hall was Bruenor's place, not ours. It was the war-scarred place where I had to again face the legacy of my dark heritage. It was the beginning of the road that had led me back to Menzoberranzan.

It was the place where Wulfgar had died.

Catti-brie and I vowed that we would return there one day, and so we would, for Bruenor was there, and Regis. But Catti-brie had seen the truth. You can never get the smell of blood out of the stones. If you were there when that

blood was spilled, the continuing aroma evokes images too painful to live beside.

Six years, and I have missed Bruenor and Regis, Stumpet Rakingclaw, and even Berkthgar the Bold, who rules Settlestone. I have missed my journeys to wondrous Silverymoon, and watching the dawn from one of Fourthpeak's many rocky perches. I ride the waves along the Sword Coast now, the wind and spray in my face. My ceiling is the rush of clouds and the canopy of stars; my floor is the creaking boards of a swift, well-weathered ship, and beyond that, the azure blanket, flat and still, heaving and rolling, hissing in the rain and exploding under the fall of a breaching whale.

Is this my home? I know not. Another stepping stone, I would guess, but whether there really is a road that would lead me to a place called home, I do not know.

Nor do I think about it often, because I've come to realize that I do not care. If this road, this series of stepping stones, leads nowhere, then so be it. I walk the road with friends, and so I have my home.

—Drizzt Do'Urden



THE SEA SPRITE

Drizzt Do'Urden stood on the very edge of the beam, as far forward as he could go, one hand grasping tight the guide rope of the flying jib. This ship was a smooth runner, perfect in balance and ballast and with the best of crews, but the sea was rough this day and the *Sea Sprite* cut and bounced through the rolls at full sail, throwing a heavy spray.

Drizzt didn't mind. He loved the feel of the spray and the wind, the smell of the brine. This was freedom, flying, skimming the water, skipping the waves. Drizzt's thick white hair flipped in the breeze, billowing like his green cape behind him, drying almost as fast as the water soaked it. Splotches of white caked salt could not lessen the luster of his ebony skin, which glistened with wetness. His violet eyes sparkled with joy as he squinted at the horizon and caught a fleeting glimpse of the sails of the ship they pursued.

Pursued and would catch, Drizzt knew, for there was no ship north of Baldur's Gate that could outrun Captain Deudermont's *Sea Sprite*. She was a three-masted schooner, new in design, light, sleek, and full of sail. The square-rigged caravel they were chasing could put up a fair run in a straight line, but anytime the bulkier vessel altered its course even the slightest bit, the *Sea Sprite* could angle inside it, gaining ground. Always gaining ground.

That was what she was meant to do. Built by the finest engineers and wizards of Waterdeep, funded by the lords of that city, the schooner was a



pirate chaser. How thrilled Drizzt had been to discover the good fortunes of his old friend, Deudermont, with whom he had sailed all the way from Waterdeep to Calimshan in pursuit of Artemis Entreri when the assassin had captured Regis the halfling. That journey, particularly the fight in Asavir's Channel when Captain Deudermont had won—with no small help from Drizzt and his companions—against three pirate ships, including the flagship of the notorious Pinochet, had caught the attention of sailors and merchants all along the Sword Coast. When the Lords of Waterdeep had completed this schooner, they had offered it to Deudermont. He loved his little two-master, the original *Sea Sprite*, but no seaman could resist this new beauty. Deudermont had accepted a commission in their service and they had granted him the right to name the vessel and allowed him to handpick his crew.

Drizzt and Catti-brie had arrived in Waterdeep sometime after that. When the *Sea Sprite* next put in to the grand harbor of the seaport, and Deudermont found his old friends, he promptly made room for them among his crew of forty. That was six years and twenty-seven voyages ago. Among those who monitored the shipping lanes of the Sword Coast, particularly among the pirates themselves, the schooner had become a scourge. Thirty-seven victories, and still she sailed.

Now number thirty-eight was in sight.

The caravel had noticed them, from too far away to see the flag of Waterdeep. That hardly mattered, for no other ship in the region carried the distinctive design of the *Sea Sprite*, the three masts of billowing triangular, lateen sails. Up came the caravel's square rigs, and so the chase was on in full.

Drizzt was at the point, one foot on the lion-headed ram, loving every second. He felt the sheer power of the sea bucking beneath him, felt the spray and the wind. He heard the music, loud and strong, for several of the *Sea Sprite*'s crewmen were minstrels and whenever the chase was on, they took up their instruments and played rousing songs.

"Two thousand!" Catti-brie yelled down from the crow's nest. It was a measure of the distance yet to gain. When her estimate got down to five hundred, the crew would move to their battle posts, three going to the large

ballista mounted on a pivot atop the flying deck in the *Sea Sprite*'s stern, two going to the smaller, swiveling crossbows mounted to the forward corners of the bridge. Drizzt would join Deudermont at the helm, coordinating the close combat. The drow's free hand slipped to the hilt of one of his scimitars at the thought. The *Sea Sprite* was a vicious foe from a distance. It had crack archers, a skilled ballista team, a particularly nasty wizard, an evoker full of fireballs and lightning bolts, and of course, Catti-brie with her deadly bow, Taulmaril the Heartseeker. But it was in close, when Drizzt and his panther companion—Guenhwyvar—and the other skilled warriors could get across, that the *Sea Sprite* was truly deadly.

"Eighteen hundred!" came Catti-brie's next call. Drizzt nodded at the confirmation of their speed, though the gain was truly startling. The *Sea Sprite* was running faster than ever. Drizzt had to wonder if her keel was even getting wet!

The drow dropped a hand into his pouch, feeling for the magical figurine that he used to summon the panther from the Astral Plane, wondering if he should even call to Guenhwyvar this time. The panther had been aboard for much of the last tenday, hunting the hundreds of rats that threatened the ship's food stores, and was likely exhausted.

"Only if I need you, my friend," Drizzt whispered. The *Sea Sprite* cut hard to starboard and Drizzt had to take up the guide rope in both hands. He steadied himself and remained silent, his gaze to the horizon, to the square-rigged ship growing larger by the minute. Drizzt felt deep within himself, mentally preparing for the coming battle. He immersed himself in the hiss and splash of the water below him, in the rousing music cutting the wind, and in Catti-brie's calls.

Fifteen hundred, a thousand.

"Black cutlass, lined in red!" the young woman shouted down when, thanks to her spyglass, she was able to discern the design on the snapping flag of the caravel.

Drizzt didn't know the insignia, didn't care about it. The caravel was a pirate ship, one of the many who had overstepped their bounds near Waterdeep's harbors. As in any waters with trading routes, there had always been pirates on the Sword Coast. Until the last few years, though, the



pirates had been somewhat civil, following specific codes of conduct. When Deudermont had defeated Pinochet in Asavir's Channel, he had subsequently let the pirate go free. That was the way, the unspoken agreement.

No longer was that the case. The pirates of the north had become bolder and more vicious. Ships were no longer simply looted, but the crews, particularly if any females were aboard, were tortured and murdered. Many ruined hulks had been found adrift in the waters near Waterdeep. The pirates had crossed the line.

Drizzt, Deudermont, and all the *Sea Sprite's* crew, were being paid handsomely for their work, but down to every last man and woman—with the possible exception of the wizard, Robillard—they weren't chasing pirates for the gold.

They were fighting for the victims.

"Five hundred!" Catti-brie called down.

Drizzt shook himself from his trance and looked to the caravel. He could see the men on her decks now, scrambling, preparing for the fight, an army of ants. The *Sea Sprite's* crew was outnumbered, possibly two to one, Drizzt realized, and the caravel was heavily armed. She carried a fair-sized catapult on her stern deck, and probably a ballista beneath that, ready to shoot out from the open windows.

The drow nodded and turned back to the deck. The crossbows fixed on the bridge and the ballista was manned. Many of the crew lined the rail, testing the pull of their longbows. The minstrels played on as they would right up until the boarding began. High above the deck, Drizzt spotted Catti-brie, Taulmaril in one hand, her spyglass in the other. He whistled to her and she gave a quick wave in response, her excitement obvious.

How could it be otherwise? The chase, the wind, the music, and the knowledge that they were doing good work here. Smiling widely, the drow skittered back along the beam and then the rail, joining Deudermont at the wheel. He noticed Robillard the wizard, looking bored as usual, sitting on the edge of the poop deck. Every so often he waved one hand in the direction of the mainmast. Robillard wore a huge ring on that hand, a silver band set with a diamond, and its sparkle now came from more than a reflection of the light. With every gesture from the wizard, the ring loosed its magic, sending

a strong gust of wind into the already straining sails. Drizzt heard the creak of protest from the mainmast and understood their uncanny speed.

“Carrackus,” Captain Deudermont remarked as soon as the drow was beside him. “Black cutlass outlined in red.”

Drizzt looked at him curiously, not knowing the name.

“Used to sail with Pinochet,” Deudermont explained. “First mate on the pirate’s flagship. He was among those we battled in Asavir’s Channel.”

“Captured?” Drizzt asked.

Deudermont shook his head. “Carrackus is a scrag, a sea troll.”

“I do not remember him.”

“He has a penchant for staying out of the way,” Deudermont replied. “Likely he dived overboard, taking to the depths as soon as Wulfgar turned us about to ram his ship.”

Drizzt remembered the incident, the incredible pull of his strong friend that nearly turned the original *Sea Sprite* on its stern, right into the faces of so many surprised pirates.

“Carrackus was there, though,” Deudermont continued. “By all reports, it was he who rescued Pinochet’s wounded ship when I set him adrift outside of Memnon.”

“And is the scrag allied with Pinochet still?” Drizzt asked.

Deudermont nodded grimly. The implications were obvious. Pinochet couldn’t come after the troublesome *Sea Sprite* personally because in return for his freedom he had sworn off vengeance against Deudermont. The pirate had other ways of repaying enemies. He had many allies like Carrackus who were not bound by his personal oath.

Drizzt knew at that moment that Guenhwyvar would be needed and he took the intricate figurine from his pouch. He studied Deudermont carefully. The man stood tall and straight, slender but well-muscled, his gray hair and beard neatly trimmed. He was a refined captain, his dress impeccable, as at home in a grand ball as on the open sea. Now his eyes, so light in hue that they seemed to reflect the colors about them rather than to possess any color of their own, revealed his tension. Rumors had followed the *Sea Sprite* for many months that the pirates were organizing against the vessel. With confirmation that this caravel was allied with Pinochet, Deudermont



believed that this might be more than a chance crossing.

Drizzt glanced back at Robillard, who was up on one knee now, arms outstretched and eyes closed, deep in meditation. Now the drow understood the reason Deudermont had put them at such a reckless speed.

A moment later, a wall of mist rose around the *Sea Sprite*, dimming the view of the caravel, which was now barely a hundred yards away. A loud splash to the side told them that the catapult had begun firing. A moment later, a burst of fire erupted in the air before them, dissipating into a cloud of hissing steam as they and their defensive mist wall streamed through it.

“They’ve a wizard,” Drizzt remarked.

“Not surprising,” Deudermont was quick to reply. He looked back to Robillard. “Keep your measures defensive,” he ordered. “We can take them with ballista and bow!”

“All the fun for you,” Robillard called back dryly.

Deudermont managed a smile, despite his obvious tension.

“Bolt!” came a cry, several cries, from forward. Deudermont instinctively spun the wheel. The *Sea Sprite* leaned into the leeward turn so deeply that Drizzt feared they would capsize.

At the same moment, Drizzt heard a rush of wind to his right as a huge ballista bolt ripped past, snapping a line, skipping off the edge of the poop deck right beside a surprised Robillard and rebounding to tear a small hole in the crossjack—the sail on the mizzenmast.

“Secure that line,” Deudermont instructed coolly.

Drizzt was already going that way, his feet moving impossibly fast. He got the snapping line in hand and quickly tied it off, then got to the rail as the *Sea Sprite* straightened. He looked to the caravel, now barely fifty yards ahead and to starboard. The water between the two ships rolled wildly. Whitecaps spit water that was blown into mist, caught in a tremendous wind.

The crew of the caravel didn’t understand, and so they put their bows in line and began firing, but even the heaviest of their crossbow quarrels was turned harmlessly aside as it tried to cut through the wall of wind that Robillard had put between the ships.

The archers of the *Sea Sprite*, accustomed to such tactics, held their shots.

Catti-brie was above the wind wall as was the archer poised in the crow's nest of the other ship—an ugly seven-foot-tall gnoll with a face that seemed more canine than human.

The monstrous creature loosed its heavy arrow first, a fine shot that sank the bolt deep into the mainmast, inches below Catti-brie's perch. The gnoll ducked below the wooden wall of its own crow's nest, readying another arrow.

No doubt the dumb creature thought itself safe, for it didn't understand Taulmaril.

Catti-brie took her time, steadied her hand as the *Sea Sprite* closed.

Thirty yards.

Her arrow went off like a streak of lightning, trailing silver sparks and blasting through the feeble protection of the caravel's crow's nest as though it were no stronger than a sheet of old parchment. Splinters and the unfortunate lookout were thrown high into the air. The doomed gnoll gave a shriek, bounced off the crossbeam of the caravel's mainmast, and spun head over heels to splash into the sea, quickly left behind by the speeding ships.

Catti-brie fired again, angling down, concentrating on the catapult crew. She hit one man, a half-orcish brute by the looks of him, but the catapult launched its load of burning pitch.

The caravel's gunners hadn't properly compensated for the sheer speed of the *Sea Sprite* and the schooner crossed under the pitch and was long gone by the time it hit the water, hissing in protest.

Deudermont brought the schooner alongside the caravel, barely twenty yards of water between them. Suddenly the water in that narrow channel stopped its wind-whipped turmoil and the archers of the *Sea Sprite* let fly many of their arrows that sported small gobs of flaming pitch.

Catti-brie let fly for the catapult itself this time, her enchanted arrow blasting a deep crack along the machine's throwing beam. *Sea Sprite's* deadly ballista drove a heavy bolt right into the caravel's hull at sea level.

Deudermont spun the wheel to port, angling away, satisfied with the pass. More missiles, many flaming, soared between the ships before Robillard created a wall of blocking mist behind the *Sea Sprite's* stern.

The caravel's wizard put a lightning bolt right into the mist. Though the



energy was dispersed somewhat, it crackled all about the edges of the *Sea Sprite*, knocking several men to the deck.

Drizzt, leaning far over the rail and straining to watch the caravel's deck with his hair flying wildly from the energy of the lightning bolt, spotted the wizard, amidships, near the mainmast. Before the *Sea Sprite*, now running perpendicular to the pirate ship, was too far away, the drow called upon his innate powers, summoned a globe of impenetrable darkness and dropped it over the man.

He clenched his fist when he saw the globe moving along the caravel's deck, for he had hit the mark and the globe's magic had caught the wizard. It would follow and blind him, until he found some way to counter the magic. Even more than that, the ten-foot ball of blackness marked the dangerous wizard clearly.

"Catti-brie!" Drizzt cried.

"I have him!" she replied, and Taulmaril sang out, once and then again, sending two streaks into that ball of blackness.

Still it continued its run. Catti-brie hadn't dropped the wizard, but surely she and Drizzt had given the man something to think about!

A second ballista bolt soared out from the *Sea Sprite*, cutting across the bow of the caravel, and then a fireball from Robillard exploded high in the air before the rushing ship. The caravel, not agile and no longer equipped with an able wizard, rushed right into the explosions. As the fireball disappeared, both masts of the square-rigger were tipped in flames, giant candles on the open sea.

The caravel tried to respond with its catapult, but Catti-brie's arrows had done their work and the throwing beam split apart as soon as the crew cranked too much tension on it.

Drizzt rushed back to the wheel. "One more pass?" he asked Deudermont.

The Captain shook his head. "Time for only one," he explained. "And no time to stop and board."

"Two thousand yards! Two ships!" Catti-brie called out.

Drizzt looked at Deudermont with sincere admiration. "More of Pinochet's allies?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"That caravel alone could not defeat us," the seasoned captain coolly

added. "Carrackus knows that and so would Pinochet. She was to lead us in."

"But we were too fast for that tactic," Drizzt reasoned.

"Are you ready for a fight?" Deudermont asked slyly.

Before the drow could even answer, Deudermont pulled hard and the *Sea Sprite* leaned into a starboard turn until it came about to face the slowed caravel. The square-sailed ship's topmasts were burning and half her crew busy trying to repair the rigging, to at least keep her under half-sail. Deudermont angled his ship to intercept, to cut across the prow, in what the archers called a "bow rake."

And the wounded caravel couldn't maneuver out of harm's way. Her wizard, though blinded, had kept the presence of mind to put up a wall of thick mist, the standard and effective defensive seaboard tactic.

Deudermont measured his angle carefully, wanting to turn the *Sea Sprite* right against the edge of that mist and the whipping water, to get as close to the caravel as he could. This was their last pass, and it had to be devastating or else the caravel would be able to limp into the fight with its sister ships, which were closing fast.

There came a flash on the square-rigged ship's deck, a spark of light that countered Drizzt's darkness spell.

From her high perch above the defensive magic, Catti-brie saw it. She was already training on the darkness when the wizard emerged. The robed man went immediately into a chant, meaning to hurl a devastating spell in the path of the *Sea Sprite* before she could cross the caravel's bow, but only a couple of words had escaped his lips when he felt a tremendous thump against his chest and heard the planks of the ship's deck splinter behind him. He looked down at the blood beginning to pour onto the decking and realized that he was sitting, then lying, and all the world grew dark.

The wall of mist the wizard had put up fell away.

Robillard saw it, recognized it, and clapped his hands and sent twin bolts of lightning slashing across the caravel's deck, slamming the masts and killing many pirates. The *Sea Sprite* crossed in front of the caravel, and the archers let fly. So, too, did the ballista crew, but they did not hurl a long spear this time. They used a shortened and unbalanced bolt, trailing a chain lined



with many-pronged grapnels. The contraption twirled as it flew, entangling many lines, fouling up the caravel's rigging.

Another missile, a living missile, six hundred pounds of sleek and muscled panther, soared from the *Sea Sprite* as she crossed by and caught the caravel's beam.

"Are you ready, drow?" Robillard called, seeming excited for the first time this fight.

Drizzt nodded and motioned to his fighting companions, the score of veterans who comprised the *Sea Sprite's* crack boarding crew. They scrambled toward the wizard from all sections of the ship, dropping their bows and drawing out weapons for close melee. By the time Drizzt, leading the rush, got near to Robillard, the wizard already had a shimmering field—a magical door—on the deck beside him. Drizzt didn't hesitate, charging right through, scimitars in hand. One of them, Twinkle, glowed a fierce blue.

Out the other end of Robillard's magical tunnel he came, arriving in the midst of many surprised pirates aboard the caravel. Drizzt slashed left and right, clearing a hole in their ranks, and he darted through, his feet a blur. He turned sharply, fell to the side and rolled as one archer shot harmlessly above him. He came back to his feet, darted straight for the bowman and cut him down.

More of the *Sea Sprite's* warriors poured through the gate and the middle of the caravel erupted in wild battle.

The confusion on the caravel's bow was no less as Guenhwyvar, all teeth and claws she seemed, slashed and tore through the mass of men who wanted nothing more than to be away from this mighty beast. Many were pulled down under those powerful claws, and several others simply turned to the side and leaped overboard, ready to take their chances with the sharks.

Again the *Sea Sprite* bent low in the water, Deudermont pulling her hard to port, angling away from the caravel and turning to meet the charge of the coming duo head-on. The tall captain smiled as he heard the fighting on the ship behind him, confident in his boarding party, though they were still likely outnumbered two to one.

The dark elf and his panther tended to even such odds.

From her high perch, Catti-brie picked several more shots, each one taking down a strategically-placed pirate archer, and one driving through a man to kill the pirate goblin sitting next to him!

Then the young woman turned her attention away from the caravel, looking forward in order to direct the *Sea Sprite's* movements.

Drizzt ran and rolled, leaped in confusing spins and always came down with his scimitars angled for an enemy's most vital areas. Under his boots, he wore bands of gleaming mithral rings secured around black material, enchanted for speed. Drizzt had taken these from Dantrag Baenre, a famed drow weaponmaster. Dantrag had used them as bracers to speed his hands, but Drizzt understood the truth of the items. On his ankles, they allowed the drow to run and dart like a wild hare.

He used them now, along with his amazing agility, to confuse the pirates, to keep them unsure of where he was, or where they could next expect him to be. Whenever one of them guessed wrong and was caught off guard, Drizzt seized the opportunity and came in hard, scimitars slashing away. He made his way generally forward, seeking to join up with Guenhwyvar, the fighting companion who knew him best and complimented his every move.

He didn't quite get there. The rout on the caravel was nearly complete, many pirates dead, others throwing down their weapons, or throwing themselves overboard in sheer desperation. One of the crew, the most seasoned and most fearsome, a personal friend of Pinochet, wasn't so quick to surrender.

He emerged from his cabin under the forward bridge, his body bent over because the low construction of the ship would not accommodate his ten-foot height. He wore only a sleeveless red vest and short breeches, which barely covered his scaly green skin. Limp hair the color of seaweed hung below his broad shoulders. He carried no weapon fashioned on a smithy's anvil but his dirty claws and abundant teeth seemed deadly enough.

"So the rumors were true, dark elf," he said in a wet, bubbly voice. "You have returned to the sea."

"I do not know you," Drizzt said, skidding to a stop a cautious distance from the scrag. He guessed the pirate to be Carrackus, the sea troll Deudermont had spoken of, but could not be sure.

“I know you!” the scrag growled. He charged, his clawed hands slashing for Drizzt’s head.

Three quick steps brought Drizzt out of the monster’s path. The drow dropped to one knee and spun about, both scimitars slashing across, blades barely an inch apart.

More agile than Drizzt expected, the opponent turned the opposite way and twirled, pulling in his trailing leg. The drow’s scimitars barely nicked the monster as they passed.

The scrag charged, meaning to bury Drizzt where he knelt, but again the drow was too quick for such a straightforward tactic. He came up to his feet and started left, then, as the scrag took the bait and began to turn, Drizzt came back fast to the right, underneath the monster’s swinging arm.

Twinkle stabbed a hip and Drizzt’s other blade followed with a deep cut along the scrag’s side.

Drizzt accepted the backhand his opponent launched his way, knowing that the off-balance scrag couldn’t put much of its formidable strength and weight behind it. The long and skinny arm thudded off the drow’s shoulder and then off his parrying blades as he spun to face the lurching brute.

Now it was Drizzt’s turn to charge, lightning fast and straight ahead. He slid Twinkle under the elbow of the outstretched scrag arm, drawing a deep gash and then hooked the fine-edged and curving blade underneath the hanging flap of skin. His other scimitar poked for the scrag’s chest, slipped past the frantic block of the other arm.

There was only one way for the off-balance monster to move. Drizzt knew that, anticipated the scrag’s retreat perfectly. The drow secured his grip on Twinkle, even braced his shoulder against the weapon’s hilt to hold it firm. The scrag roared in agony and dived back and to the side, directly opposite the angle of Twinkle’s nasty bite. The sickly flesh peeled from the scrag’s arm, all the way from its biceps to its wrist. The torn lump fell to the deck with a sickening thud.

His black eyes filled with outrage and hatred. The scrag looked down to the exposed bone, to the writhing lump of troll flesh on the deck. And finally, to Drizzt, who stood casually, scimitars crossed down low in front of him.

“Damn you, Drizzt,” the monstrous pirate growled.

“Strike your colors,” Drizzt ordered.

“You think you have won?”

In response, Drizzt looked down to the slab of meat.

“It will heal, foolish dark elf!” the pirate insisted.

Drizzt knew that the scrag spoke truly. Scraggs were close relatives of trolls, horrid creatures renowned for their regenerative powers. A dead dismembered troll could come back together.

Unless . . .

Drizzt called upon his innate abilities once more, that small part of magic inherent in the dark elf race. A moment later, purplish flames climbed the towering scrag’s form, licking at green scales. This was only faerie fire, harmless light the dark elves could use to outline their opponents. It had no power to burn, nor could it prevent the regenerative process of a troll.

Drizzt understood that, but he was betting the monster did not.

The scrag’s gruesome features twisted in an expression of sheer horror. He flailed his good arm, beat it against his leg and hip. The stubborn purple flames would not relent.

“Strike your colors and I will release you of the flames that your wounds might heal,” Drizzt offered.

The scrag snapped a look of pure hatred at the drow. He took a step forward, but up came Drizzt’s scimitars. He decided he didn’t want to feel their bite again, especially if the flames prevented him from healing!

“We will meet again!” the scrag promised. The creature wheeled about to see dozens of faces—Deudermont’s crew and captured pirates—staring at him in disbelief. He howled and charged across the deck, scattering those in the way of the furious rush. The pirate leaped from the rail, back to the sea, back to his true home where he might heal.

So quick was Drizzt that he got across the deck and managed yet another hit on him before the scrag got off the rail. The drow had to stop there, unable to pursue and fully aware that the sea troll would indeed regenerate to complete health.

He hadn’t even gotten a curse of frustration out of his mouth when he saw a fast movement to his side, a rush of black. Guenhwyvar leaped past Drizzt,

flew out from the rail, and splashed into the sea right behind the troll.

The panther disappeared under the azure blanket and the rough and choppy waves quickly covered any indication that the scrag and the cat had gone in.

Several of the *Sea Sprite's* boarding party peered intently over the rail, worried for the panther who had become such a friend to them.

“Guenhwyvar is in no danger,” Drizzt reminded them, producing the figurine and holding it high so that all could see. The worse the scrag could do was send the panther back to the Astral Plane, where the cat would heal any wounds and be ready to return to Drizzt’s next call. Still, the drow’s expression was not bright as he considered the spot where Guenhwyvar had gone in, as he considered that the panther might be in pain.

The deck of the captured caravel went perfectly quiet, save the creaking of the old vessel’s timbers.

An explosion to the south turned all heads, all eyes strained to perceive tiny sails, still far away. One of the pirate ships had turned away. The other caravel burned while the *Sea Sprite* literally sailed circles about her. Flash after flash of silver streaking arrows came from the *Sea Sprite's* crow’s nest, battering the hull and masts of the damaged, seemingly helpless ship.

Even from this great distance, the people on the captured caravel could see the pirate flag go down the mainmast, colors struck in surrender.

That brought a cheer from the *Sea Sprite's* boarding party, a rousing yell that was halted abruptly by churning waters just off the side of the caravel. They saw green scales and black fur tumbling in the turmoil. A scrag arm floated out from the mass, and Drizzt was able to sort the confusing scene out enough to realize that Guenhwyvar had gotten onto the scrag’s back. Her forelegs were tight about the monster’s shoulders, her back legs were kicking, raking wildly, and the panther’s powerful jaws were clamped tight onto the back of the scrag’s neck.

Dark blood stained the sea, mixing with torn pieces of the pirate’s flesh and bone. Soon enough, Guenhwyvar sat still, teeth and claws securely in place on the back of the dead, floating scrag.

“Better fish the thing out,” one of the *Sea Sprite's* boarding party remarked, “or we’ll be growing a whole crew o’ stinking trolls!”

Men arrived at the rail with long gaff hooks and began the gruesome task of hauling in the carcass. Guenhwyvar got back to the caravel easily enough, clambering over the rail and then giving a good shake, spraying water on all those nearby.

“Scraggs don’t heal if they’re out o’ the sea,” a man remarked to Drizzt. “We’ll haul this one up the yardarm to dry, then burn the damned thing.”

Drizzt nodded. The boarding party knew their duty well enough. They would organize and supervise the captured pirates, freeing the rigging and getting the caravel as seaworthy as possible for the trip back to Waterdeep.

Drizzt looked to the southern horizon and saw the *Sea Sprite* returning. The damaged pirate ship limped alongside.

“Thirty-eight and thirty-nine,” the drow muttered.

Guenhwyvar gave a low growl in reply and shook vigorously again, soaking her dark elf companion.