

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE SPINE OF THE WORLD
THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT BOOK XII
RA SALVATORE





I INTO PORT

I do so hate this place,” remarked Robillard, the robed wizard. He was speaking to Captain Deudermont of *Sea Sprite* as the three-masted schooner rounded a long jetty and came in sight of the harbor of the northern port of Luskan.

Deudermont, a tall and stately man, mannered as a lord and with a calm, pensive demeanor, merely nodded at his wizard’s proclamation. He had heard it all before, and many times. He looked to the city skyline and noted the distinctive structure of the Hosttower of the Arcane, the famed wizards’ guild of Luskan. That, Deudermont knew, was the source of Robillard’s sneering attitude concerning this port, though the wizard had been sketchy in his explanations, making a few offhand remarks about the “idiots” running the Hosttower and their inability to discern a true wizardly master from a conniving trickster. Deudermont suspected that Robillard had once been denied admission to the guild.

“Why Luskan?” the ship’s wizard complained. “Would not Waterdeep have better suited our needs? No harbor along the entire Sword Coast can compare with Waterdeep’s repair facilities.”

“Luskan was closer,” Deudermont reminded him.

“A couple of days, no more,” Robillard retorted.

“If a storm found us in those couple of days, the damaged hull might have split apart, and all our bodies would have been food for the crabs and



the fishes,” said the captain. “It seemed a foolish gamble for the sake of one man’s pride.”

Robillard started to respond but caught the meaning of the captain’s last statement before he could embarrass himself further. A great frown shadowed his face. “The pirates would have had us had I not timed the blast perfectly,” the wizard muttered after he took a few moments to calm down.

Deudermont conceded the point. Indeed, Robillard’s work in the last pirate hunt had been nothing short of spectacular. Several years before, *Sea Sprite*—the new, bigger, faster, and stronger *Sea Sprite*—had been commissioned by the lords of Waterdeep as a pirate hunter. No vessel had ever been as successful at the task, so much so that when the lookout spotted a pair of pirate cogs sailing the northern waters off the Sword Coast, so near to Luskan, where *Sea Sprite* often prowled, Deudermont could hardly believe it. The schooner’s reputation alone had kept those waters clear for many months.

These pirates had come looking for vengeance, not easy merchant ship prey, and they were well prepared for the fight, each of them armed with a small catapult, a fair contingent of archers, and a pair of wizards. Even so, they found themselves outmaneuvered by the skilled Deudermont and his experienced crew, and out-enchanted by the mighty Robillard, who had been wielding his powerful *dweomers* in vessel-to-vessel warfare for well over a decade. One of Robillard’s illusions had given the appearance that *Sea Sprite* was dead in the water, her mainmast down across her deck, with dozens of dead men at the rails. Like hungry wolves, the pirates had circled, closer and closer, then had come in, one to port and one to starboard, to finish off the wounded ship.

In truth, *Sea Sprite* hadn’t been badly damaged at all, with Robillard countering the offensive magic of the enemy wizards. The small pirate catapults had little effect against the proud schooner’s armored sides.

Deudermont’s archers, brilliant bowmen all, had struck hard at the closing vessels, and the schooner went from battle sail to full sail with precision and efficiency, the prow of the ship verily leaping from the water as she scooted out between the surprised pirates.

Robillard dropped a veil of silence upon the pirate ships, preventing their wizards from casting any defensive spells, then plopped three fireballs—

Boom! Boom! Boom!—in rapid succession, one atop each ship and one in between. Then came the conventional barrage from ballista and catapult, *Sea Sprite's* gunners soaring lengths of chain to further destroy sails and rigging, and balls of pitch to heighten the flames.

De-masted and drifting, fully ablaze, the two pirates soon went down. So great was the conflagration that Deudermont and his crew managed to pluck only a few survivors from the cold ocean waters.

Sea Sprite hadn't escaped unscathed, though. She was under the power of but one full sail now. Even more dangerous, she had a fair-sized crack just above the waterline. Deudermont had to keep nearly a third of his crew at work bailing, which was why he had steered for the nearest port—Luskan.

Deudermont considered it a fine choice, indeed. He preferred Luskan to the much larger port of Waterdeep, for while his financing had come from the southern city and he could find dinner at the house of any lord in town, Luskan was more hospitable to his common crew members, men without the standing, the manners, or the pretensions to dine at the table of nobility. Luskan, like Waterdeep, had its defined classes, but the bottom rungs on Luskan's social ladder were still a few above the bottom of Waterdeep's.

Calls of greeting came to them from every wharf as they neared the city, for *Sea Sprite* was well known here and well respected. The honest fishermen and merchant sailors of Luskan, of all the northern reaches of the Sword Coast, had long ago come to appreciate the work of Captain Deudermont and his swift schooner.

"A fine choice, I'd say," the captain remarked.

"Better food, better women, and better entertainment in Waterdeep," Robillard replied.

"But no finer wizards," Deudermont couldn't resist saying. "Surely the Hosttower is among the most respected of mage guilds in all the Realms."

Robillard groaned and muttered a few curses, pointedly walking away.

Deudermont didn't turn to watch him go, but he couldn't miss the distinctive stomping of the wizard's hard-soled boots.





“Just a short ride, then,” the woman cooed, twirling her dirty blonde hair in one hand and striking a pouting posture. “A quick one to take me jitters off before a night at the tables.”

The huge barbarian ran his tongue across his teeth, for his mouth felt as if it were full of fabric, and dirty cloth at that. After a night’s work in the tavern of the Cutlass, he had returned to the wharves with Morik for a night of harder drinking. As usual, the pair had stayed there until after dawn, then Wulfgar had crawled back to the Cutlass, his home and place of employment, and straight to his bed.

But this woman, Delly Curtie, a barmaid in the tavern and Wulfgar’s lover for the past few months, had come looking for him. Once, he had viewed her as a pleasurable distraction, the icing on his whisky cake, and even as a caring friend. Delly had nurtured Wulfgar through his first difficult days in Luskan. She had seen to his needs, emotional and physical, without question, without judgment, without asking anything in return. But of late the relationship had begun to shift, and not even subtly. Now that he had settled more comfortably into his new life, a life devoted almost entirely to fending the remembered pain of his years with Errtu, Wulfgar had come to see a different picture of Delly Curtie.

Emotionally, she was a child, a needful little girl. Wulfgar, who was well into his twenties, was several years older than she. Now, suddenly, he had become the adult in their relationship, and Delly’s needs had begun to overshadow his own.

“Oh, but ye’ve got a few moments for me, me Wulfgar,” she said, moving closer and rubbing her hand across his cheek.

Wulfgar grabbed her wrist and gently but firmly moved her hand away. “A long night,” he replied. “And I had hoped for more rest before beginning my duties for Arumn.”

“But I’ve got a tingling—”

“More rest,” Wulfgar repeated, emphasizing each word.

Delly pulled away from him, her seductive pouting pose becoming suddenly cold and indifferent. “Good enough for ye, then,” she said coarsely. “Ye think ye’re the only man wanting to share me bed?”

Wulfgar didn’t justify the rant with an answer. The only answer he could have given was to tell her he really didn’t care, that all of this—his drinking, his fighting—was a manner of hiding and nothing more. In truth, Wulfgar

did like and respect Delly and considered her a friend—or would have if he honestly believed that he could be a friend. He didn't mean to hurt her.

Delly stood in Wulfgar's room, trembling and unsure. Suddenly, feeling very naked in her slight shift, she gathered her arms in front of her and ran out into the hall and to her own room, slamming the door hard.

Wulfgar closed his eyes and shook his head. He chuckled helplessly and sadly when he heard Delly's door open again, followed by running footsteps heading down the hall toward the outside door. That one, too, slammed, and Wulfgar understood that all the ruckus had been for his benefit. Delly wanted him to hear that she was, indeed, going out to find comfort in another's arms.

She was a complicated one, the barbarian understood, carrying more emotional turmoil than even he, if that were possible. He wondered how it had ever gone this far between them. Their relationship had been so simple at the start, so straightforward: two people in need of each other. Recently, though, it had become more complex, the needs having grown into emotional crutches. Delly needed Wulfgar to take care of her, to shelter her, to tell her she was beautiful, but Wulfgar knew he couldn't even take care of himself, let alone another. Delly needed Wulfgar to love her, and yet the barbarian had no love to give. For Wulfgar there was only pain and hatred, only memories of the demon Errtu and the prison of the Abyss, wherein he had been tortured for six long years.

Wulfgar sighed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then reached for a bottle, only to find it empty. With a frustrated snarl, he threw it across the room, where it shattered against a wall. He envisioned, for just a moment, that it had smashed against Delly Curtie's face. The image startled Wulfgar, but it didn't surprise him. He vaguely wondered if Delly hadn't brought him to that point on purpose. Perhaps the woman was no innocent child, but a conniving huntress. When she had first come to him, offering comfort, had she intended to take advantage of his emotional weakness to pull him into a trap? To get him to marry her, perhaps? To rescue him that he might one day rescue her from the miserable existence she had carved out for herself as a tavern wench?

Wulfgar realized that his knuckles had gone white from clenching his hands so very hard, and he pointedly opened them and took several deep,



steadying breaths. Another sigh, another rub of his tongue over dirty teeth, and the man stood and stretched his huge, nearly seven-foot, frame. He discovered, as he did nearly every afternoon when he went through this ritual, that he had even more aches in his huge muscles and bones this day. Wulfgar glanced over at his large arms, and though they were still thicker and more muscular than that of nearly any man alive, he couldn't help but notice a slackness in those muscles, as if his skin was starting to hang a bit too loosely on his massive frame.

How different his life was now than it had been those mornings years ago in Icewind Dale, when he had worked the long day with Bruenor, his adoptive dwarven father, hammering and lifting huge stones, or when he had gone out hunting for game or giants with Drizzt, his warrior friend, running all the day, fighting all the day. The hours had been even more strenuous then, more filled with physical burden, but that burden had been just physical and not emotional. In that time and in that place, he felt no aches.

The blackness in his heart, the sorest ache, was the source of it all.

He tried to think back to those lost years, working and fighting beside Bruenor and Drizzt, or when he had spent the day running along the wind-blown slopes of Kelvin's Cairn, the lone mountain in Icewind Dale, chasing Catti-brie. . . .

The mere thought of the woman stopped him cold and left him empty, and in that void, images of Errtu and the demon's minions inevitably filtered in. Once, one of those minions, the horrid succubus, had assumed the form of Catti-brie, a perfect image, and Errtu had convinced Wulfgar that he had managed to snare the woman, that she had been taken to suffer the same eternal torment as Wulfgar, *because* of Wulfgar.

Errtu had taken the succubus, Catti-brie, right before Wulfgar's horrified eyes and had torn the woman apart limb from limb, devouring her in an orgy of blood and gore.

Gasping for his breath, Wulfgar fought back to his thoughts of Catti-brie, of the real Catti-brie. He had loved her. She was, perhaps, the only woman he had ever loved, but she was lost to him now forever, he believed. Though he might travel to Ten-Towns in Icewind Dale and find her again, the bond between them had been severed, cut by the sharp scars of Errtu and by Wulfgar's own reactions to those scars.

The long shadows coming in through the window told him that the day neared its end and that his work as Arumn Gardpeck's bouncer would soon begin. The weary man hadn't lied to Delly when he had declared that he needed more rest, though, and so he collapsed back onto his bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Night had settled thickly about Luskan by the time Wulfgar staggered into the crowded common room of the Cutlass.

"Late again, as if we're to be surprised by that," a thin, beady-eyed man named Josi Puddles, a regular at the tavern and a good friend of Arumn Gardpeck, remarked to the barkeep when they both noticed Wulfgar's entrance. "That one's workin' less and drinkin' ye dry."

Arumn Gardpeck, a kind but stern and always practical man, wanted to give his typical response, that Josi should just shut his mouth, but he couldn't refute Josi's claim. It pained Arumn to watch Wulfgar's descent. He had befriended the barbarian those months before, when Wulfgar had first come to Luskan. Initially, Arumn had shown interest in the man only because of Wulfgar's obvious physical prowess—a mighty warrior like Wulfgar could indeed be a boon to business for a tavern in the tough dock section of the feisty city. After his very first conversation with the man, Arumn had understood that his feelings for Wulfgar went deeper than any business opportunity. He truly liked the man.

Always, Josi was there to remind Arumn of the potential pitfalls, to remind Arumn that, sooner or later, mighty bouncers made meals for rats in gutters.

"Ye thinkin' the sun just dropped in the water?" Josi asked Wulfgar as the big man shuffled by, yawning.

Wulfgar stopped, and turned slowly and deliberately to glare at the little man.

"Half the night's gone," Josi said, his tone changing abruptly from accusational to conversational, "but I was watchin' the place for ye. Thought I might have to break up a couple o' fights, too."

Wulfgar eyed the little man skeptically. "You couldn't break up a pane of thin glass with a heavy cudgel," he remarked, ending with another profound yawn.

Josi, ever the coward, took the insult with a bobbing head and a self-deprecating grin.



“We *do* have an agreement about yer time o’ work,” Arumn said seriously.

“And an understanding of your true needs,” Wulfgar reminded the man. “By your own words, my real responsibility comes later in the night, for trouble rarely begins early. You named sundown as my time of duty but explained that I’d not truly be needed until much later.”

“Fair enough,” Arumn replied with a nod that brought a groan from Josi. He was anxious to see the big man—the big man whom he believed had replaced him as Arumn’s closest friend—severely disciplined.

“The situation’s changed,” Arumn went on. “Ye’ve made a reputation and more than a few enemies. Every night, ye wander in late, and yer . . . our enemies take note. I fear that one night soon ye’ll stagger in here past the crest o’ night to find us all murdered.”

Wulfgar put an incredulous expression on his face and turned away with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Wulfgar,” Arumn called after him forcefully.

The barbarian turned around, scowling.

“Three bottles missing last night,” Arumn said calmly, quietly, a note of concern evident in his tone.

“You promised me all the drink I desired,” Wulfgar answered.

“For yerself,” Arumn insisted. “Not for yer skulking little friend.”

All around widened their eyes at that remark, for not many of Luskan’s tavernkeepers would speak so boldly concerning the dangerous Morik the Rogue.

Wulfgar lowered his gaze and chuckled, shaking his head. “Good Arumn,” he began, “would you prefer to be the one to tell Morik he is not welcome to your drink?”

Arumn narrowed his eyes, and Wulfgar returned the glare for just a moment.

Delly Curtie entered the room just then, her eyes red and still lined with tears. Wulfgar looked at her and felt a pang of guilt, but it was not something he would admit publicly. He turned and went about his duties, moving to threaten a drunk who was getting a bit too loud.

“He’s playing her like he’d pick a lute,” Josi Puddles remarked to Arumn.

Arumn blew a frustrated sigh. He had become quite fond of Wulfgar, but the big man’s increasingly offensive behavior was beginning to wear

that fondness thin. Delly had been as a daughter to Arumn for a couple of years. If Wulfgar was playing her without regard for her emotions, he and Arumn were surely heading for a confrontation.

Arumn turned his attention from Delly to Wulfgar just in time to see the big man lift the loudmouth by the throat, carry him to the door, and none too gently heave him out into the street.

“Man didn’t do nothing,” Josi Puddles complained. “He keeps with that act, and you’ll not have single customer.”

Arumn merely sighed.



A trio of men in the opposite corner of the bar also studied the huge barbarian’s movements with more than a passing interest. “Cannot be,” one of them, a skinny, bearded fellow, muttered. “The world’s a wider place than that.”

“I’m telling ye it is,” the middle one replied. “Ye wasn’t aboard *Sea Sprite* back in them days. I’d not forget that one, not Wulfgar. Sailed with him all the way from Waterdeep to Memnon, I did, then back again, and we fought our share o’ pirates along the way.”

“Looks like a good one to have along for a pirate fight,” remarked Waillan Micanty, the third of the group.

“So ’tis true!” said the second. “Not as good as his companion, though. Ye’re knowin’ that one. A dark-skinned fellow, small and pretty lookin’, but fiercer than a wounded sahuagin, and quicker with a blade—or a pair o’ the things—than any I ever seen.”

“Drizzt Do’Urden?” asked the skinny one. “That big one traveled with the drow elf?”

“Yep,” said the second, now commanding their fullest attention. He was smiling widely, both at being the center of it all and in remembering the exciting voyage he had taken with Wulfgar, Drizzt, and the drow’s panther companion.

“What about Catti-brie?” asked Waillan, who, like all of Deudermont’s crew, had developed a huge crush on the beautiful and capable woman soon after she and Drizzt had joined their crew a couple of years before. Drizzt, Catti-brie, and Guenhwyvar had sailed aboard *Sea Sprite* for many months,



and how much easier scuttling pirates had been with that trio along!

“Catti-brie joined us south o’ Baldur’s Gate,” the storyteller explained. “She came in with a dwarf, King Bruenor of Mithral Hall, on a flying chariot that was all aflame. Never seen anything like it, I tell ye, for that wild dwarf put the thing right across the sails o’ one o’ the pirate ships we was fighting. Took the whole danged ship down, he did, and was still full o’ spit and battle spirit when we pulled him from the water!”

“Bah, but ye’re lyin’,” the skinny sailor started to protest.

“No, I heard the story,” Waillan Micanty put in. “Heard it from the captain himself, and from Drizzt and Catti-brie.”

That quieted the skinny man. All of them just sat and studied Wulfgar’s movements a bit longer.

“Ye’re sure that’s him?” the first asked. “That’s the Wulfgar fellow?”

Even as he asked the question, Wulfgar brought Aegis-fang off of his back and placed it against a wall.

“Oh, by me own eyes, that’s him,” the second answered. “I’d not be forgettin’ him or that hammer o’ his. He can split a mast with the thing, I tell ye, and put it in a pirate’s eye, left or right, at a hunnerd long strides.”

Across the room, Wulfgar had a short argument with a patron. With one mighty hand the barbarian reached out and grabbed the man’s throat and easily, so very easily, hoisted him from his seat and into the air. Wulfgar strode calmly across the inn to the door and tossed the drunk into the street.

“Strongest man I ever seen,” the second sailor remarked, and his two companions weren’t about to disagree. They drained their drinks and watched a bit longer before leaving the Cutlass for home, where they found themselves running anxiously to inform their captain of who they’d seen.



Captain Deudermont rubbed his fingers pensively across his neatly trimmed beard, trying to digest the tale Waillan Micanty had just related to him. He was trying very hard, for it made no sense to him. When Drizzt and Catti-brie had sailed with him during those wonderful early years of chasing pirates along the Sword Coast, they had told him a sad tale of Wulfgar’s demise. The story had had a profound effect on

Deudermont, who had befriended the huge barbarian on that journey to Memnon years before.

Wulfgar was dead, so Drizzt and Catti-brie had claimed, and so Deudermont had believed. Yet here was one of Deudermont's trusted crewmen claiming that the barbarian was very much alive and well and working in the Cutlass, a tavern Deudermont had frequented.

The image brought Deudermont back to his first meeting with the barbarian and Drizzt in the Mermaid's Arms tavern in Waterdeep. Wulfgar had avoided a fight with a notorious brawler by the name of Bungo. What great things the barbarian and his companions had subsequently accomplished, from rescuing their little halfling friend from the clutches of a notorious pasha in Calimport to the reclamation of Mithral Hall for Clan Battlehammer. The thought of Wulfgar working as a brawler in a seedy tavern in Luskan seemed preposterous.

Especially since, according to Drizzt and Catti-brie, Wulfgar was dead.

Deudermont thought of his last voyage with the duo when *Sea Sprite* had put onto a remote island far out at sea. A blind seer had accosted Drizzt with a riddle about one he thought he had lost. The last time Deudermont had seen Drizzt and Catti-brie was at their parting, on an inland lake, no less, where *Sea Sprite* had been inadvertently transported.

So might Wulfgar be alive? Captain Deudermont had seen too much to dismiss the possibility out of hand.

Still, it seemed likely to the captain that his crewmen had been mistaken. They had little experience with northern barbarians, all of whom seemed huge and blond and strong. One might look like another to them. The Cutlass had taken on a barbarian warrior as a bouncer, but it was not Wulfgar.

He thought no more of it, having many duties and engagements to attend at the more upscale homes and establishments in the city. Three days later, however, when dining at the table of one of Luskan's noble families, the conversation turned to the death of one of the city's most renowned bullies.

"We're a lot better off without Tree Block Breaker," one of the guests insisted. "The purest form of trouble ever to enter our city."

"Just a thug and nothing more," another replied, "and not so tough."

"Bah, but he could take down a running horse by stepping in front of the thing," the first insisted. "I saw him do so!"



“But he couldn’t take down Arumn Gardpeck’s new boy,” the other put in. “When he tried to fight that fellow, our Tree Block Breaker flew out of the Cutlass and brought the frame of a door with him.”

Deudermont’s ears perked up.

“Yeah, that one,” the first agreed. “Too strong for any man, from the stories I am hearing, and that warhammer! Most beautiful weapon I’ve ever seen.”

The mention of the hammer nearly made Deudermont choke on his food, for he remembered well the power of Aegis-fang. “What is his name?” the captain inquired.

“Who’s name?”

“Arumn Gardpeck’s new boy.”

The two men looked at each other and shrugged. “Wolf-something, I believe,” the first said.

When he left the noble’s house, a couple of hours later, Captain Deudermont found himself wandering not back to *Sea Sprite*, but along infamous Half-Moon Street, the toughest section of Luskan, the home of the Cutlass. He went in without hesitation, pulling up a chair at the first empty table. Deudermont spotted the big man before he even sat down. It was, without doubt, Wulfgar, son of Beornegar. The captain hadn’t known Wulfgar very well and hadn’t seen him in years, but there could be no question about it. The sheer size, the aura of strength, and the piercing blue eyes of the man gave him away. Oh, he was more haggard-looking now, with an unkempt beard and dirty clothes, but he was Wulfgar.

The big man met Deudermont’s stare momentarily, but there was no recognition in the barbarian’s eyes when he turned away. Deudermont became even more certain when he saw the magnificent warhammer, Aegis-fang, strapped across Wulfgar’s broad back.

“Ye drinking or looking for a fight?”

Deudermont turned around to see a young woman standing beside his table, tray in hand.

“Well?”

“Looking for a fight?” the captain repeated dully, not understanding.

“The way ye’re staring at him,” the young woman responded, motioning toward Wulfgar. “Many’s the ones who come in here looking for a fight.”

Many's the ones who get carried away from here. But good enough for ye if ye're wanting to fight him, and good enough for him if ye leave him dead in the street."

"I seek no fight," Deudermont assured her. "But, do tell me, what is his name?"

The woman snorted and shook her head, frustrated for some reason Deudermont could not fathom. "Wulfgar," she answered. "And better for us all if he never came in here." Without asking again if he wanted a drink, she merely walked away.

Deudermont paid her no further heed, staring again at the big man. How had Wulfgar wound up here? Why wasn't he dead? And where were Drizzt, and Catti-brie?

He sat patiently, watching the lay of the place as the hours passed, until dawn neared and all the patrons, save he and one skinny fellow at the bar, had drifted out.

"Time for leaving," the barkeep called to him. When Deudermont made no move to respond or rise from his chair, the man's bouncer made his way over to the table.

Looming huge, Wulfgar glared down upon the seated captain. "You can walk out, or you can fly out," he explained gruffly. "The choice is yours to make."

"You have traveled far from your fight with pirates south of Baldur's Gate," the captain replied. "Though I question your direction."

Wulfgar cocked his head and studied the man more closely. A flicker of recognition, just a flicker, crossed his bearded face.

"Have you forgotten our voyage south?" Deudermont prompted him. "The fight with pirate Pinochet and the flaming chariot?"

Wulfgar's eyes widened. "What do you know of these things?"

"Know of them?" Deudermont echoed incredulously. "Why, Wulfgar, you sailed on my vessel to Memnon and back. Your friends, Drizzt and Catti-brie, sailed with me again not too long ago, though surely they thought you dead!"

The big man fell back as if he had been slapped across the face. A jumbled mixture of emotions flashed across his clear blue eyes, everything from nostalgia to loathing. He spent a long moment trying to recover from the shock.

"You are mistaken, good man," he replied at last to Deudermont's surprise.



“About my name and about my past. It is time for you to leave.”

“But Wulfgar,” Deudermont started to protest. He jumped in surprise to find another man, small and dark and ominous, standing right behind him, though he had heard not a footfall of approach. Wulfgar looked to the little man, then motioned to Arumn. The barkeep, after a moment’s hesitation, reached behind the bar and produced a bottle, tossing it across the way where sure-fingered Morik caught it easily.

“Walk or fly?” Wulfgar asked Deudermont again. The sheer emptiness of his tone, not icy cold, but purely indifferent, struck Deudermont profoundly, told him that the man would make good on the promise to launch him out of the tavern without hesitation if he didn’t move immediately.

“*Sea Sprite* is in port for another tenday at the least,” Deudermont explained, rising and heading for the door. “You are welcomed there as a guest or to join the crew, for I have not forgotten,” he finished firmly, the promise ringing in his wake as he slipped from the inn.

“Who was that?” Morik asked Wulfgar after Deudermont had disappeared into the dark Luskan night.

“A fool,” was all that the big man would answer. He went to the bar and pointedly pulled another bottle from the shelf. Turning his gaze from Arumn to Delly, the surly barbarian left with Morik.



Captain Deudermont had a long walk ahead of him to the dock. The sights and sounds of Luskan’s nightlife washed over him—loud, slurred voices through open tavern windows, barking dogs, clandestine whispers in dark corners—but Deudermont scarcely heard them, engrossed as he was in his own thoughts.

So Wulfgar *was* alive, and yet in worse condition than the captain could ever have imagined the heroic man. His offer to the barbarian to join the crew of *Sea Sprite* had been genuine, but he knew from the barbarian’s demeanor that Wulfgar would never take him up on it.

What was Deudermont to do?

He wanted to help Wulfgar, but Deudermont was experienced enough

in the ways of trouble to understand that you couldn't help a man who didn't want help.

"If you plan to leave a dinner engagement, kindly inform us of your whereabouts," came a reproachful greeting as the captain approached his ship. He looked up to see both Robillard and Waillan Micanty staring down at him from the rail.

"You shouldn't be out alone," Waillan Micanty scolded, but Deudermont merely waved away the notion.

Robillard frowned his concern. "How many enemies have we made these last years?" the wizard demanded in all seriousness. "How many would pay sacks of gold for a mere chance at your head?"

"That's why I employ a wizard to watch over me," Deudermont replied calmly, setting foot up the plank.

Robillard snorted at the absurdity of the remark. "How am I to watch over you if I don't even know where you are?"

Deudermont stopped in his tracks, and a wide smile creased his face as he gazed up at his wizard. "If you can't locate me magically, what faith should I hold that you could find those who wish me harm?"

"But it is true, Captain," Waillan interjected while Robillard flushed darkly. "Many would love to meet up with you unguarded in the streets."

"Am I to bottle up the whole crew, then?" Deudermont asked. "None shall leave, for fear of reprisals by friends of the pirates?"

"Few would leave *Sea Sprite* alone," Waillan argued.

"Fewer still would be known enough to pirates to be targets!" Robillard spouted. "Our enemies would not attack a minor and easily replaced crewman, for to do so would incur the wrath of Deudermont and the lords of Waterdeep, but the price might be worth paying for the chance to eliminate the captain of *Sea Sprite*." The wizard blew a deep sigh and eyed the captain pointedly. "You should not be out alone," he finished firmly.

"I had to check on an old friend," Deudermont explained.

"Wulfgar, by name?" asked the perceptive wizard.

"So I thought," replied Deudermont sourly as he continued up the plank and by the two men, going to his quarters without another word.





It was too small and nasty a place to even have a name, a gathering hole for the worst of Luskan's wretches. They were sailors mostly, wanted by lords or angry families for heinous crimes. Their fears that walking openly down a street in whatever port their ship entered would get them arrested or murdered were justified. So they came to holes like this, back rooms in shanties conveniently stocked near to the docks.

Morik the Rogue knew these places well, for he'd got his start on the streets working as lookout for one of the most dangerous of these establishments when he was but a young boy. He didn't go into such holes often anymore. Among the more civilized establishments, he was highly respected and regarded, and feared, and that was probably the emotion Morik most enjoyed. In here, though, he was just another thug, a little thief in a nest of assassins.

He couldn't resist entering a hole this night, though, not with the captain of the famed *Sea Sprite* showing up to have a conversation with his new friend, Wulfgar.

"How tall?" asked Creeps Sharky, one of the two thugs at Morik's table. Creeps was a grizzled old sea dog with uneven clumps of dirty beard on his ruddy cheeks and one eye missing. "Cheap Creeps," the patrons often called him, for the man was quick with his rusty old dagger and slow with his purse. So tight was Creeps with his booty that he wouldn't even buy a proper patch for his missing eye. The dark edge of the empty socket stared out at Morik from beneath the lowest folds of the bandana Creeps had tied around his head.

"Head and a half taller than me," Morik answered. "Maybe two."

Creeps glanced to his pirate companion, an exotic specimen, indeed. The man had a thick topknot of black hair and tattoos all around his face, neck, and practically every other patch of exposed flesh—and since all he wore was a kilt of tiger skin, there was more than a little flesh exposed. Just following Creeps's glance to the other sent a shudder along Morik's spine, for while he didn't know the specifics of Creeps's companion, he had certainly heard the rumors about the "man," Tee-a-nicknick. This pirate was only half human, the other half being qullan, some rare and ferocious warrior race.

"*Sea Sprite's* in port," Creeps remarked to Morik. The rogue nodded, for he had seen the three-masted schooner on his way to this drinking hole.

“He wore a beard just about the jawline,” Morik added, trying to give as complete a description as he could.

“He sit straight?” the tattooed pirate asked.

Morik looked at Tee-a-nicknick as if he did not understand.

“Did he sit straight in his chair?” Creeps clarified, assuming a pose of perfect posture. “Lookin’ like he had a plank shoved up his arse all the way to his throat?”

Morik smiled and nodded. “Straight and tall.”

Again the two pirates shared a glance.

“Soundin’ like Deudermont,” Creeps put in. “The dog. I’d give a purse o’ gold to put me knife across that one’s throat. Put many o’ me friends to the bottom, he has, and cost all o’ us prettily.”

The tattooed pirate showed his agreement by hoisting a bulging purse of coins onto the table. Morik realized then that every other conversation in the hole had come to an abrupt halt and that all eyes were upon him and his two rakish companions.

“Aye, Morik, but ye’re likin’ the sight,” Creeps remarked, indicating the purse. “Well, it’s yer own to have, and ten more like it, I’m guessin’.” Creeps jumped up suddenly, sending his chair skidding back across the floor. “What’re ye sayin’, lads?” he cried. “Who’s got a gold coin or ten for the head o’ Deudermont o’ *Sea Sprite*?”

A great cheer went up throughout the rat hole, with many curses spoken against Deudermont and his pirate-killing crew.

Morik hardly heard them, so focused was he on the purse of gold. Deudermont had come to see Wulfgar. Every man in the place, and a hundred more like them, no doubt, would pitch in a few more coins. Deudermont knew Wulfgar well and trusted him. A thousand gold pieces. Ten thousand? Morik and Wulfgar could get to Deudermont, and easily. Morik’s greedy, thieving mind reeled at the possibilities.