



Paths of Darkness

THE SILENT BLADE



THE SPINE OF THE WORLD



SERVANT OF THE SHARD



SEA OF SWORDS

R.A. Salvatore



**THE
SILENT BLADE**



Prologue

Wulfgar lay back in his bed, pondering, trying to come to terms with the abrupt changes that had come over his life. Rescued from the demon Errtu and his hellish prison in the Abyss, the proud barbarian found himself once again among friends and allies. Bruenor, his adopted dwarven father, was here, and so was Drizzt, his dark elven mentor and dearest friend. Wulfgar could tell from the snoring that Regis, the chubby halfling, was sleeping contentedly in the next room.

And Catti-brie, dear Catti-brie, the woman Wulfgar had come to love those years before, the woman whom he had planned to marry seven years previously in Mithral Hall. They were all here at their home in Icewind Dale, reunited and presumably at peace, through the heroic efforts of these wonderful friends.

Wulfgar did not know what that meant.

Wulfgar, who had been through such a terrible ordeal over six years of torture at the clawed hands of the demon Errtu, did not understand.

The huge man crossed his arms over his chest. Sheer exhaustion put him here in bed, forced him down, for he would not willingly choose sleep. Errtu found him in his dreams.

BOOK ONE + THE SILENT BLADE

And so it was this night. Wulfgar, though deep in thought and deep in turmoil, succumbed to his exhaustion and fell into a peaceful blackness that soon turned again into the images of the swirling gray mists that were the Abyss. There sat the gigantic, bat-winged Errtu, perched upon his carved mushroom throne, laughing. Always laughing that hideous croaking chuckle. That laugh was borne not out of joy, but was rather a mocking thing, an insult to those the demon chose to torture. Now the beast aimed that unending wickedness at Wulfgar, as was aimed the huge pincer of Bizmatec, another demon, minion of Errtu. With strength beyond the bounds of almost any other human, Wulfgar ferociously wrestled Bizmatec. The barbarian batted aside the huge humanlike arms and the two other upper-body appendages, the pincer arms, for a long while, slapping and punching desperately.

But too many flailing limbs came at him. Bizmatec was too large and too strong, and the mighty barbarian eventually began to tire.

It ended—always it ended—with one of Bizmatec’s pincers around Wulfgar’s throat, the demon’s other pincer arm and its two humanlike arms holding the defeated human steady. Expert in this, his favorite torturing technique, Bizmatec pressed oh so subtly on Wulfgar’s throat, took away the air, then gave it back, over and over, leaving the man weak in the legs, gasping and gasping as minutes, then hours, slipped past.

Wulfgar sat up straight in his bed, clutching at his throat, clawing a scratch down one side of it before he realized that the demon was not there, that he was safe in his bed in the land he called home, surrounded by his friends.

Friends . . .

What did that word mean? What could they know of his torment? How could they help him chase away the enduring nightmare that was Errtu?

The haunted man did not sleep the rest of the night, and when Drizzt came to rouse him, well before the dawn, the dark elf found Wulfgar already dressed for the road. They were to leave this day, all five, bearing the artifact Crenshinibon far, far to the south and west. They were bound for Caradoon on the banks of Impresk Lake, and then into the Snowflake Mountains to a great monastery called Spirit Soaring where a priest named Cadderly would destroy the wicked relic.

Crenshinibon. Drizzt had it with him when he came to get Wulfgar that morning. The drow didn’t wear it openly, but Wulfgar knew it was there. He could sense it, could feel its vile presence. For Crenshinibon remained linked to its last master, the demon Errtu. It tingled with the energy of the demon, and because Drizzt had it on him and was standing so close, Errtu, too, remained close to Wulfgar.

“A fine day for the road,” the drow remarked lightheartedly, but his tone was strained, condescending, Wulfgar noted. With more than a little difficulty, Wulfgar resisted the urge to punch Drizzt in the face.

Instead, he grunted in reply and strode past the deceptively small dark elf. Drizzt was but a few inches over five feet, while Wulfgar towered closer to seven feet than to six, and carried fully twice the weight of the drow. The barbarian's thigh was thicker than Drizzt's waist, and yet, if it came to blows between them, wise bettors would favor the drow.

"I have not yet wakened Catti-brie," Drizzt explained.

Wulfgar turned fast at the mention of the name. He stared hard into the drow's lavender eyes, his own blue orbs matching the intensity that always seemed to be there.

"But Regis is already awake and at his morning meal—he is hoping to get two or three breakfasts in before we leave, no doubt," Drizzt added with a chuckle, one that Wulfgar did not share. "And Bruenor will meet us on the field beyond Bryn Shander's eastern gate. He is with his own folk, preparing the priestess Stumpet to lead the clan in his absence."

Wulfgar only half heard the words. They meant nothing to him. All the world meant nothing to him.

"Shall we rouse Catti-brie?" the drow asked.

"I will," Wulfgar answered gruffly. "You see to Regis. If he gets a belly full of food, he will surely slow us down, and I mean to be quick to your friend Cadderly, that we might be rid of Crenshinibon."

Drizzt started to answer, but Wulfgar turned away, moving down the hall to Catti-brie's door. He gave a single, thunderous knock, then pushed right through. Drizzt moved a step in that direction to scold the barbarian for his rude behavior—the woman had not even acknowledged his knock, after all—but he let it go. Of all the humans the drow had ever met, Catti-brie ranked as the most capable at defending herself from insult or violence.

Besides, Drizzt knew that his desire to go and scold Wulfgar was wrought more than a bit by his jealousy of the man who once was, and perhaps was soon again, to be Catti-brie's husband.

The drow stroked a hand over his handsome face and turned to find Regis.

* * * * *

Wearing only a slight undergarment and with her pants half pulled up, the startled Catti-brie turned a surprised look on Wulfgar as he strode into her room. "Ye might've waited for an answer," she said dryly, brushing away her embarrassment and pulling her pants up, then going to retrieve her tunic.

Wulfgar nodded and held up his hands—only half an apology, perhaps, but a half more than Catti-brie had expected. She saw the pain in the man's sky blue eyes and the emptiness of his occasional strained smiles. She had talked with Drizzt about it at length, and with Bruenor and Regis, and they had all decided to be patient. Time alone could heal Wulfgar's wounds.

BOOK ONE + THE SILENT BLADE

“The drow has prepared a morning meal for us all,” Wulfgar explained. “We should eat well before we start on the long road.”

“‘The drow’?” Catti-brie echoed. She hadn’t meant to speak it aloud, but so dumbfounded was she by Wulfgar’s distant reference to Drizzt that the words just slipped out. Would Wulfgar call Bruenor “the dwarf”? And how long would it be before she became simply “the girl”? Catti-brie blew a deep sigh and pulled her tunic over her shoulders, reminding herself pointedly that Wulfgar had been through hell—literally. She looked at him now, studying those eyes, and saw a hint of embarrassment there, as though her echo of his callous reference to Drizzt had indeed struck him in the heart. That was a good sign.

He turned to leave her room, but she moved to him, reaching up to gently stroke the side of his face, her hand running down his smooth cheek to the scratchy beard that he had either decided to grow or simply hadn’t been motivated enough to shave.

Wulfgar looked down at her, at the tenderness in her eyes, and for the first time since the fight on the ice floe when he and his friends had dispatched wicked Errtu, there came a measure of honesty in his slight smile.

* * * * *

Regis did get his three meals, and he grumbled about it all that morning as the five friends started out from Bryn Shander, the largest of the villages in the region called Ten Towns in forlorn Icewind Dale. Their course was north at first, moving to easier ground, and then turning due west. To the north, far in the distance, they saw the high structures of Targos, second city of the region, and beyond the city’s roofs could be seen shining waters of Maer Dualdon.

By mid-afternoon, with more than a dozen miles behind them, they came to the banks of the Shaengarne, the great river swollen and running fast with the spring melt. They followed it north, back to Maer Dualdon, to the town of Bremen and a waiting boat Regis had arranged.

Gently refusing the many offers from townsfolk to remain in the village for supper and a warm bed, and over the many protests of Regis, who claimed that he was famished and ready to lay down and die, the friends were soon west of the river, running on again, leaving the towns, their home, behind.

Drizzt could hardly believe that they had set out so soon. Wulfgar had only recently been returned to them. All of them were together once more in the land they called their home, at peace, and yet, here they were, heeding again the call of duty and running down the road to adventure. The drow had the cowl of his traveling cloak pulled low about his face, shielding his sensitive eyes from the stinging sun.

Thus his friends could not see his wide smile.