

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

Tangled Webs

Starlight &
Shadows

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CHAPTER ONE



SKULLPORT

Far below the streets of Waterdeep, in a cavern buried beneath the bottom of the sea, lay the hidden city that legend and rumor had named Skullport. Most of those who came here sought to trade in goods that were banned in civilized ports, and the dregs of a hundred warring races did business in an atmosphere of knife-edged danger. Yet beneath the streets of Skullport were even deeper realms, places that the most intrepid merchants strove to avoid. In one particularly noisome labyrinth—a series of winding tunnels and despoiled crypts—a dungeon had been fashioned for those who disturbed the tenuous balance of the city.

Once the burial place of a long-vanished tribe of dwarves, over the centuries these catacombs had become home to other, more dangerous creatures. From time to time, treasure hunters came seeking an undiscovered dwarven cache; most of these seekers remained as piles of moldering bones, giving powerful testament to the traps and monsters that lingered in the dank stone passages.

It was a forbidding place, even to a drow accustomed to walking the endless tunnels of the Underdark. Magical elven boots muted the sound of her footsteps, and a glittering *piwafwi* cloaked her with invisibility, yet Liriel Baenre kept keenly alert for possible dangers. To speed her way, she carried foremost in her thoughts the remembered face of the man imprisoned in this, the worst of Skullport's dungeons.

Slender as a human girl-child and seemingly not much older, the young drow appeared delicate to the point of fragility. Her black-satin skin gave her the look of living sculpture, an image that was enhanced by the supple, tightly fitted black leathers and ebony-hued chain mail she wore. She was beautiful in the fey manner of elvenkind, with fine, sharp features and a cloud of thick white hair as glossy as moonlight on new snow. Hers was a mobile face that could be one moment impish, the next coldly beautiful, dominated by a pair of large, almond-shaped eyes the color of Rashemaar amber. These eyes spoke of a restless intelligence and an ever-ready supply of mischief. By all appearances, the drow girl hardly seemed capable of storming this deeply buried stronghold. That was, however, precisely what she intended to do.

Liriel moved easily through the utter darkness of the tunnel. The gloom presented no problem, for the eyes of a drow could detect subtle heat patterns in the rock and the air currents. The eyes of a drow *wizard* were even more sensitive; in the tunnel ahead, Liriel perceived the faint, bluish aura—visible only to those who had inherent magical talent and assiduous training—that warned of magic at work.

The drow crept cautiously closer. The eerie glow curtailed off the tunnel like a luminous sheet, but since it was a magical aura, it cast no illumination upon the scene around it. Liriel debated for a moment whether to risk creating a true light and decided it might be wise to view the trap through the eyes of those who had created it. That it *was* a trap, she did not doubt for a moment.

As easily as thought, Liriel conjured a globe of faerie fire. The magical light bobbed in the air beside her, floating here and there in response to her unspoken directions and bathing the grim scene in faint white light.

Bones littered the tunnel on both sides of the telltale blue aura, tumbled haphazardly together with abandoned weapons and gear. The tunnel's floor and walls had been splashed repeatedly with gore, and the stone was caked with the dull, dark red of long-dried blood. Whatever the trap was, it had certainly proven effective.

Liriel's gaze fell upon a shallow, much-dented bronze bowl embossed with finely wrought designs and lined with ivory. It seemed strangely out of place among the grisly remains and the practical tools scattered around her feet, and the curious drow crouched to examine it. As she picked it up, the "lining" fell out—it was not ivory but bone, and too thick to be anything but the skull of a dwarf.

The drow settled back on her heels to examine this discovery. Something had sliced neatly through the dwarf's head, cutting through helm and bone so cleanly that the edges of both were as smooth as if they'd been ground and polished by a master gem-cutter. This told her much about the dwarf's death.

Liriel kicked through the scattered debris until she found a heavy thigh bone that had once belonged to a good-sized ogre. As she expected, the bone was severed near the upper joint, at just about the spot where a dwarf's head would reach if the two treasure-hunting fools had stood side by side. The drow rummaged through the pile, selecting similarly cut bones from the remains of several different races, and then laid them out beside each other. In moments she had a fairly precise idea of the trap's danger—and its limitations.

Liriel took up the ogre's leg bone once again. Keeping her hand well away from the magical danger zone, she thrust one end of the bone into the glowing aura. From either side of the tunnel wall, discs of gleaming blue whirled out from the solid rock. The spinning blades met, crossed, and disappeared back into the stone.

The drow regarded the bone in her hand. The tip had been sheared off, so quickly that she hadn't even felt the impact, so silently that the only telltale sound was the muffled clatter as the bone shard fell to the blood-encrusted rock.

Not bad, Liriel acknowledged silently, but too predictable.

A drow wizard would have enspelled the blades for random attack, so that each strike would come from a different place. Or perhaps such a provision *had* been made to deal with those who might figure out the first attack and try to slip in under the trigger area.

Liriel picked up two more long bones, one in each hand, and held the first into the glowing aura. Again the blue discs sped from the tunnel walls. The moment they crossed paths through the first bone, Liriel thrust the second one down low. The blades continued undeterred along their course and disappeared into the rock. The second bone did not trigger the magical trap at all.

Too easy! Her lips twisted into a smile that mingled triumph with contempt. A drow would have expected a second intrusion—and a third!—and would have ensured that the blades could reverse their paths instantly to meet any challenge.

Now that she saw her way clear, Liriel triggered the trap one last time. The moment the circular blades met and crossed, she dove under their path and rolled through the portal to safety.

In Skullport and environs, however, “safety” was a relative term. As Liriel rose to her feet, she glimpsed a flicker of reflected light on the wall of the tunnel ahead. Something was approaching from a side passage. Instantly she summoned the innate drow magic of levitation and, still invisible, floated up to the tunnel ceiling some twelve feet off the floor. She flattened herself against the damp stone to wait and observe.

A wisp of luminous smoke rounded the sharp bend, then recoiled as if surprised to find itself in an empty corridor. After a moment’s pause the smoke came on, flowing around the corner until there was enough to form a small, glowing cloud. The luminous mass writhed and twisted, finally settling into a hideous, vaguely human shape. As Liriel watched, horror-struck, the wraithlike cloud solidified into decaying flesh. The undead thing looked this way and that, its red eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Liriel had never seen a ghoul, but she recognized the creature for what it was. Once human, it had been twisted into a mindless but cunning beast that fed on carrion. Somehow it

had sensed that the magical trap had been triggered, and it had come to feed. This would account for the clean-picked bones that littered the tunnel. It did not, however, explain the ghoul's ability to take on a wraithlike form.

The ghoul shuffled around the passage, sniffing audibly and pawing the air with filthy, clawed hands. Liriel noted that it narrowly skirted the magical trap, showing a perception that only a gifted wizard could have possessed. As she studied the creature's movements, the drow realized that it was retracing her steps. It was following the invisible path left by her innate dark-elven magic. But *how*?

She thought fast. Without doubt, the undead creature had once been a wizard, probably talented enough to have prepared for an afterlife as a lich. If his plans had been altered by attacking ghouls, he might somehow have managed to combine the two transformations. If that were so, it meant the ravenous creature below her was armed with a lich's magic and a ghoul's terrible cunning.

Her own command of magic was formidable, but Liriel knew better than to fight this mindless, undead thing. In a spell battle, strategy was as important as power. Accustomed as she was to the multilayered intrigues of her people, she could not outthink a being that acted solely on hunger and instinct.

At that moment the ghoul looked upward, turning its red eyes fully upon Liriel's face. A long, serpentine tongue flicked out in anticipation, rasping audibly as it passed over the creature's fangs. The drow shuddered, though she was certain the ghoul could not actually *see* her. Her invisibility granted her little comfort, though, when the lich-ghoul's clawed fingers began moving jerkily through the gestures of some long-unused spell.

Liriel seized the leather thong that hung around her neck and gave it a sharp tug. Up from its hiding place beneath her tunic flew a small obsidian disk engraved with the holy symbol of Lloth, the Spider Queen, the dark goddess of the drow.

The girl clutched the sacred device and quickly debated her next move. Even a minor priestess could turn aside an

attack by undead creatures, but Liriel had attended the clerical school for only a very short time and was accounted a rank novice. On the other hand, she was a princess of House Baenre—the most powerful clan in mighty Menzoberranzan—and she had left her homeland armed with the favor of Lloth and the captured magic of the Underdark. But Liriel had traveled far since then, in ways that could not be measured in miles alone. She found herself inexplicably hesitant to call upon the deity of her foremothers.

Then the lich-ghoul's lips began to move, spewing graveyard dust and foul spittle as it chanted soundless words of power. An unseen force closed around Liriel like a giant hand, pulling her down toward the waiting creature with a yank so sharp and sudden that her head was snapped painfully back and her arms thrown open wide. Her *piwafwi* flapped open, disclosing her to the undead creature. But Liriel managed to keep her grip on the sacred symbol, and with a drow's lightning-fast reflexes, she thrust it into the ghoul's upturned, slavering face.

"In the name of Lloth, I command you to leave," she said.

Crackling black energy burst from the symbol and sent the undead thing reeling back. For a moment the ghoul huddled against the far wall, cowering before the revealed power of the drow goddess. Then its hideous body dissolved into smoke, and the wisps scattered and fled like a flock of startled birds.

Liriel heaved a ragged sigh and floated the rest of the way down to the tunnel floor. But her relief was mixed with vague, nagging misgivings. She had reason to know that Lloth was capricious and cruel. Fortunately, the ghoul did not bother to inquire into the goddess's character. Power was power, and Liriel was alive because she had dared to wield it. There was a certain basic practicality to this reasoning that quieted the drow's uneasiness and sped her steps. She once again drew her *piwafwi* close about her and glided silently down the tunnel, making her way unerringly toward the dungeons.

The drow girl had explored Skullport for several days now and had learned many of the city's secrets. She had reveled in Skullport's lawless freedom, its endless chaotic possibilities.

But Liriel was young, and certain that her destiny lay across a vast sea on an island known as Ruathym. She was impatient to get on with it.

Her ears caught the echoes of a distant song, a rollicking tune sung with enormous gusto but little discernible talent. Liriel followed the voice, tracing the intricate path the sound took through winding passages and reverberating stone as effortlessly as a surface-dweller might follow a tree's shadow to its source.

Before long she came to a small, dank cave that in eons past had served as a crypt. Now a prison cell, the cave was secured by iron bars as thick as Liriel's wrist and a massive door that was chained and locked not once, but three times. The small stone chamber was cold, and lit by a single, sputtering torch that gave off more foul-smelling smoke than light. A few deep shelves, long emptied of bones and treasure, had been chiseled into one stone wall. On the opposite side of the cave was a plank bed, suspended from the wall by two rusted chains. And sprawled upon the bed was the singer, who kept time to his music by tossing bits of moldy bread to the creatures that scuttled about the floor of the cell.

The prisoner did not seem at all downcast by his grim surroundings. He was a giant of a man, deep-chested and broad of shoulder, with a face bronzed by the sun and wind, and bright blue eyes nearly lost in a maze of laugh lines. The man's braided hair, vast mustache, and long beard were all of the same sun-bleached hue, a color so pale that it almost hid the streaks of gray. This was Hrolf of Ruathym, better known as Hrolf the Unruly, a genial ship's captain with a taste for recreational mayhem. Liriel had learned that this rowdy pastime had gotten him barred from many civilized ports and had landed him—not for the first time—in Skullport's dungeons.

She reached into her pack and took out a statuette she'd purchased in a backstreet market: a roughly carved, rather comic rendition of a Northman skald with a horned helm, a bulbous nose, and a moon-shaped belly. It was not an impressive work of art, but some wizard with a sense of whimsy had imbued it with an especially powerful magic mouth spell, one

that would capture any song and play it back, over and over, for nearly an hour. Liriel figured that an hour should just about do it. As she triggered the statue's magic, the wooden bard stirred to life in her hands. His tiny, bewhiskered face screwed up into an expression of intense concentration as he absorbed the lustily sung ditty.

“When you meet with the lads of the *Elfmaid*, my friend,
You would rather face Umberlee's wrath.
Hand over a measure of all of your treasure,
Or swim in a saltwater bath!”

“Come ashore with the lads of the *Elfmaid*, my friend.
We're awash on an ocean of ale!
Some taverns to plunder, some guards to sunder,
And then, a short rest in the jail!”

Liriel winced. Dark elves did not include ballads among their numerous art forms, but since leaving Menzoberranzan she'd heard many good songs. This was not one of them.

Even so, her slender black fingers flew as she shaped the spell that would lock the music into the statue's memory. The cost of a magic mouth spell was a small thing compared to the worth of the man imprisoned within the crypt. Hrolf was reputed to be one of the finest captains to sail the Sword Coast. He was also the only captain Liriel could find who was willing to take on a drow passenger.

With the song safely stored inside the wooden skald, Liriel silently removed her *piwafwi* and stepped into the circle of torchlight. She cleared her throat to get the singer's attention.

Hrolf the Unruly looked up, startled into silence by the sudden interruption. Liriel propped her fists on her hips and tapped her foot in a pantomime of impatience.

“So. When do we set sail?” she demanded.

A broad grin split the man's face, lifting the corners of his mustache and giving him a boyish appearance that belied his graying beard and braids. “Well, chop me up and use me for squid bait! It's the black lass herself!” he roared happily.

“A little louder, please,” Liriel requested with acidic sarcasm as she cast quick glances up and down the corridors. “There might be two or three people up in Waterdeep who didn’t hear you.”

Hrolf hauled himself to his feet and walked stiff-legged over to the door of his cell. “It’s glad I am to see you again, lass, but you shouldn’t ha’ come,” he said in a softer tone. “Just a day or two more, and they’ll be setting me free.”

The drow sniffed derisively and bent down to examine the locks on the cell door. “Sure, if by freedom you mean a couple of years of enforced labor. It’ll take you at least that long to work off the damage done to that tavern.”

“Gull splat!” he said heartily, dismissing this dire prediction with a wave of one enormous hand. “The penalty for tavern brawls is never more than a few days’ stay in this sow’s bowels of a dungeon.”

“The Skulls decided to change the law in your honor,” Liriel responded, referring to the trio of disembodied skulls that appeared randomly in Skullport to pass sentence on miscreants. “The idea of waiting around for years doesn’t appeal to me. I’d rather fight our way from here to the docks and have done.”

“Not a bit of it,” Hrolf insisted. “Laws are all good and well—fighting’s better, of course—but *bribes*, now! That’s the way for a sensible man to do business! And no place better’n Skullport for it, so don’t you worry yourself. The *Elfmaid* came to port fully loaded. A bundle of ermine skins and a few bolts of fine Moonshae linen should serve.”

Liriel cocked an eyebrow. “Did I mention that your ship and cargo have been impounded?”

That was true, as far as it went, and as much truth as the drow wanted him to hear. Although it appeared Hrolf’s freedom was not for sale, Liriel had already managed to buy free the ship and the crew. She thought it better to let Hrolf think otherwise. By all accounts, the captain took his ship’s well-being more seriously than his own.

“Took the *Elfmaid*, did they?” The captain pondered this development, chewing his mustache reflectively. “Well then, that’s different. Fighting it is!”

The drow nodded her agreement. She quickly cast a cantrip, a minor spell that would reveal any magic placed upon the locks. When no telltale glow appeared, Liriel took a small bundle from her bag and carefully removed the wraps that padded a small glass vial. With infinite care she unstopped the vial and poured a single drop of black liquid onto each of the chains and locks.

A faint hiss filled the air, and the locks sagged and melted as the distilled venom of a black dragon ate through the metal. It was a pricey solution, but it was quick and quiet, and Liriel had no real need to practice thrift. Just days earlier, she had led a raid on a rival drow stronghold and claimed a share of the massive treasure hoard buried there. Her share would take her to Ruathym in style, with enough left over to hide a cache or two for future use. Yet there was a strange tightness in Liriel's throat as she remembered the battle and the friends who had fallen there. One of those friends, although gravely wounded, had survived and was awaiting her even now on Hrolf's ship. Just thinking of Fyodor, and his own great need to reach Ruathym, heightened her impatience.

Motioning for Hrolf to stand back, she kicked open the door, keeping a careful distance from the still-melting chains. Dragon venom could eat through boot leather—not to mention flesh and bone—as easily as it dissolved metal.

The captain watched, intrigued, as Liriel set the enspelled statue on the bed and triggered its song. His face lit up with pride as his own song poured forth from the little figure.

"That'll keep 'em away for a bit," he observed with a touch of wry humor. Obviously, Liriel concluded, the man held a realistic view of his musical talents.

Hrolf turned to regard the drow with obvious respect. "I was glad enough to offer you passage on the strength of your smile, but to be getting a ship's wizard in the bargain! With your magic, lass, we're as good as a-sail. May Umberlee take me if I'm not getting better at picking my friends!" he concluded happily.

Liriel cast a startled glance at the man's bluff, cheerful face. His easy claim of friendship struck her as odd. She'd met him only once, shortly before he'd begun the spectacular

brawl that landed him in this predicament. He seemed a companionable sort, and she was glad to have found passage with an able captain who could also fight like a bee-stung bear. But friendship was still new to her and not something to be taken lightly. For a moment she envied these short-lived humans, who seemed to come to it so easily.

“We’re still a long way from the ship,” Liriel reminded the man. She stripped off the extra swordbelt she carried and handed it to him. He buckled it on without a word and then drew the sword, regarding its keen edge with pleasure. After a few practice swings to get the feel of the blade and to awaken muscles stiff from disuse, he followed the drow out into the tunnel.

The way was lit by an occasional torch thrust into a wall bracket, so Hrolf was able to walk with assurance, if not silence. The drow set a slow, steady pace, trying to minimize the noise of Hrolf’s heavy footsteps. She could fight well when necessary, but she knew the wisdom of avoiding trouble. So far, despite the encounter with the magic-wielding ghoul, breaching the dungeon’s defenses had seemed almost too easy. But then, no one expected anyone to try to sneak *in*. Liriel suspected that getting out would be another matter entirely.

A faint sound caught her ear. From a nearby passage came the reverberating tread of many boots and the guttural speech of goblinkin. She pushed Hrolf into an alcove and shielded them both with her sheltering *piwafwi*. To her relief, Hrolf the Unruly did not protest this precaution or leap out roaring to engage the goblins in battle. The captain and the drow waited for many moments, then watched silently as the guards marched past in sharp formation.

They were squat, muscular creatures—goblin hybrids of some sort—broad as dwarves and haphazardly garbed in ill-fitting, cast-off leather armor. Obviously overfed and underpaid, the guards nevertheless carried a daunting assortment of well-honed weapons. All told, there were twelve of them, enough to give pause even to the dark-elven and the unruly.

The goblin patrol halted in the tunnel ahead, gibbering among themselves and shouldering off the packs they carried. Liriel muttered a curse.

“What’re they doing?” Hrolf asked, his voice just above a whisper.

“Taking a break,” she responded in kind. Whispering caused the voice to carry too far, and Liriel was frequently amazed that few humans seemed to realize this. Dark elves whispered when they *intended* to be heard—the audible equivalent of a knowing smile.

“They’re blocking the tunnel,” the drow added grimly, “and we don’t have time to wait them out.”

The captain pondered this for a moment, and then patted the short sword strapped to Liriel’s hip. “I’ve heard tell that a drow can take a dozen goblins, easy.”

The girl shrugged. She could handle a sword well enough and throw knives with deadly precision, but her skills were slanted more toward magic than mayhem. “Some drow can. I’m not one of them.”

“Ah, but do yonder goblins *know* that?”

The drow snapped a look back at the captain, surprised that a human had offered such a devious—yet simple—solution. They shared a quick, companionable grin, and she accepted his plan with a nod.

Hrolf patted her shoulder, then drew his sword. “Go, lass. If the ugly little bastards don’t spook, I’ll be right behind you.”

Against reason, despite the suspicious nature bred and ingrained in her by her treacherous kindred, Liriel believed him.

She pulled her sword and walked, silent and invisible, into the circle of goblins. Then, tossing back her *piwafwi*, she dropped into a menacing crouch and presented her blade.

“Hi, boys,” she purred in the goblin tongue. “Want to play?”

The sudden appearance of a battle-ready drow in their midst stole whatever courage the creatures possessed. The goblins squeaked in terror and fled, leaving their packs and many of their weapons behind in their panic.

Hrolf strode to the drow’s side, grinning broadly. “Well done! D’you think, though, that they’ll be back—bringing friends?”

“Not a chance,” Liriel said flatly. “They’re guards, and they ran. If they admit that, they’re as good as dead.” The drow

knelt and began to rifle through the abandoned packs, while Hrolf devoted himself to selecting a few promising weapons for his own use. Liriel's search yielded up several large, well-rusted keys. She smiled and brandished them at Hrolf.

The captain nodded happily, recognizing the significance of this find. He'd been dragged down to this dungeon through a succession of gates. The keys would speed their escape, though each gate was also guarded by magical traps and at least one species of ugly, well-armed creatures. Neither prospect worried Hrolf. Unlike most of his people, he held magic in high regard, and he'd seen enough of this elf maid's talents to entrust that aspect of the escape to her. As for the other—well, he had a sword now, didn't he?



Fyodor of Rashemen leaned against the rail of the ship, gazing out over the noise and confusion that was Skullport. Merchants, sailors, and dockhands milled about the rotting wooden docks, busying themselves with a dizzying variety of wares. Flocks of *wykeen*, a kind of sea bat indigenous to the underground port, wheeled and screeched overhead. The black water lapped at the ship with a restless rhythm that echoed the pulse of the far-distant seas, even though there was no moon to order the tides, no sky at all but a soaring vault of solid stone.

This teeming underground city, so different from the villages of his distant homeland, astounded Fyodor. Most amazing to him was the peace that existed between ancient enemies, all in the name of trade. Dwarves tossed crated cargo to orcs; humans hired themselves out to beholders; *svirfneblin* bartered with *illithids*. It was just as well, this unnatural harmony. A nearby fight—any fight—could set him off on a deadly battle frenzy.

Fyodor was a berserker, one of the famed warriors of Rashemen, a champion among the protectors of his homeland. Unlike his brothers, however, he could not control the rages or bring them on at will. When the Witches who ruled his land had come to fear that his wild battle-rages might

endanger those about him, they sent him on a quest to recover a stolen artifact, an amulet known as the Windwalker. Its magic was ancient and mysterious, but the Witches thought it might be used to contain the young warrior's magical curse. Thus Fyodor's only hope for controlling his battle rages, and ending his exile from his homeland, lay in the amulet—and in the magic of the drow girl who carried it.

His search for the Windwalker had taken him from snow-swept Rashemen into the depths of the Underdark, where he'd met the beautiful young wizard. Liriel had been first an enemy, then a rival, and finally a partner and friend. Fyodor had followed the drow across half of Faerûn and would gladly travel with her to Ruathym—and not just for the magic she wielded.

The young man's eyes, blue as a winter sky, anxiously scanned the crowded streets. Liriel had arranged passage on this ship for them both and had promised to meet him here. She was late. He could imagine far too many things that might have detained her.

"Troubles?"

The laconic question jarred Fyodor from his grim thoughts. He turned to face the ship's mate, a ruddy, red-bearded man much his own size and build. Nearly six feet tall and heavily muscled, the sailor had the look of a Rashemi. Fair-skinned and blue-eyed, he had a certain familiar directness of gaze and an open countenance defined by broad planes and strong features. The sailor's resemblance to Fyodor's own kin did not surprise the young man, for they no doubt had ancestors in common. The ancient Northmen who'd settled the island of Ruathym had also traveled far east to Fyodor's Rashemen.

"Just wondering when we'd be off, Master . . ."

"Ibn," the first mate supplied. "Just Ibn. We sail with the captain."

Fyodor waited, hoping the man would elaborate. But Ibn merely pulled a pipe from his sash and pressed some aromatic leaves into the bowl. A passing sailor supplied flint and stone, and soon Ibn was puffing away with stolid contentment.

The young warrior sighed and then subsided. Clearly, he could do nothing but wait. Except for his concern over Liriel's delay, the waiting had not been unpleasant. The sights beyond the dock could have occupied him for hours, and the ship itself was well worth contemplating. The *Elf-maid* was an odd combination of old and new: her long, graceful form was reminiscent of the ancient dragonships, and she was clinker-built of strong, light wood. Yet the hull was deep enough to provide an area belowdecks for storage of goods and some cramped sleeping quarters. Castles—small, raised platforms—had been added both fore and aft, and both were hung about with the brightly painted shields of the warrior-bred crew. With its enormous square sail and row of oars, the ship promised to be both fast and maneuverable in any number of situations. Its most remarkable feature, however, was the figurehead that rose proudly over the lancelike bowsprit: a carved, ten-foot image of an elf maid. More lavishly endowed and garishly painted than any elf who'd ever drawn breath, the figurehead gave the ship her name as well as a playful, rakish air that Fyodor found rather appealing.

The young man also felt at home among the crew. They seemed to accept him as one of their own, even while showing him immense deference. Fyodor thought he knew the reason for that. He had heard that in Ruathym, warriors were afforded great honor and high rank. It would not be unlike Liriel to mention his berserker talents in an attempt to gain passage on a Ruathen ship. Fyodor did not object to this; it was better that the crew was forewarned. Since the Time of the Walking Gods, when magic had gone awry and his battle frenzies became as capricious as the wind, he had taken every precaution he could to avoid bringing harm to those around him.

The first mate took his pipe from his mouth and pointed with it. "Captain's coming," he observed. "Got company, as usual."

Fyodor looked in the direction Ibn had indicated. A huge, fair-haired man sprinted toward the ship, swinging a beefy fist back and forth before him like a scythe as he cleared a path

through the crowd. Despite his size and his short, bandy legs, the captain set an incredibly fast pace. Behind him was Liriel, running full out, her slender limbs pumping and her white hair streaming back. Behind *her* roiled a swarm of knife-wielding kobolds.

“Step lively, my lads!” roared the captain as he swatted a bemused mongrelman out of his way.

His crew took this development stoically, going about their business with an ease and speed that bespoke frequent practice. Ibn cut the ropes securing the ship to the dock and then seized the rudder; the other men took their places at the oars. To Fyodor’s surprise, the *Elfmaid* shot away from the dock, well beyond the reach of the captain and his drow companion.

Before Fyodor could react to this apparent desertion, the captain skidded to a halt. As Liriel ran past, the enormous man seized the back of her swordbelt with one hand, jerking her to an abrupt stop. With his free hand he gathered up a handful of her tangled hair and chain mail vest. Lifting the drow easily off her feet, the captain hauled her back for the toss. As Fyodor watched, slack-mouthed, the man heaved Liriel up and toward the ship.

The captain’s strength, combined with Liriel’s dark-elven powers of levitation, sent the drow into impromptu flight. Hands outstretched before her, she hurtled toward the *Elfmaid* like a dark arrow, her eyes wide with wild delight.

Fyodor caught the drow’s wrists and immediately began swinging her around to defuse the force of their collision and to help slow her flight. With each circle, the drow lost a bit of momentum but none of her obvious enjoyment. The moment her boots touched the deck, however, Liriel tore free of Fyodor and ran over to clutch the railing.

“Hroff!” she called out, her face twisted with dismay.

She gazed at the dock where the captain had last stood. In his place a swarm of angry kobolds danced and hooted, growing rapidly smaller as the ship pulled away.

Wishing to ease her distress, Fyodor strode to Liriel’s side and pointed down into the dark water. Below them, swimming for the ship with strong, steady strokes, was the captain. “He dove in right after he set you aflight,” he explained.

Liriel nodded, and her lips curved in a smile of relief. Then, in one of the abrupt changes of mood that Fyodor had come to know so well, she lifted her chin to an imperious angle and turned a lance-sharp glare upon the first mate.

“What do you mean by this delay? Get the captain aboard at once!”

Ibn recoiled as if he'd been stabbed, but he was accustomed to following orders, and the drow female gave them with the force and conviction of a war chieftain. Before the mate realized what he was about, he'd already set the rudder and tossed a coiled rope over the rail.

The coil unfurled as it flew, and Ibn's aim was true. Hrolf seized the knotted end and began to pull himself hand over hand toward the ship. In moments he scrambled over the rail to stand, dripping and triumphant, on his own deck.

“Good lad, Ibn,” he said heartily, slapping the mate on the back with a force that nearly sent the man sprawling. “The water gates lie ahead; be ready to raise her.”

But the mate had other things on his mind. “What do we want with *her*?” he said bluntly, tossing a dark glare and a curt nod at the drow.

Hrolf flung back one dripping braid and faced down the red-bearded sailor. “This is Liriel, a princess in her own land and a wizard worth any ten I've seen this mooncycle!” he announced in a voice loud enough to reach every man on the ship. “She's also a paying passenger. See to it you treat her with proper respect, or answer to me. And know this: the man who lays a hand on her loses it.”

A moment of stunned silence met the captain's words.

“But she's an elf,” protested one of the men, voicing a typical Northman's distrust of the fey folk.

“She's a drow!” added another fearfully, for the dark elves' vile reputation was known in a hundred lands.

“She's a *she*.”

This last observation, voiced in dire tones, apparently summed up the crew's protests. The men nodded and muttered among themselves, many of them forming signs of warding.

“Oh, stow your nonsense with the rest of the cargo!” Hrolf roared, suddenly out of patience. “All my days I've heard that

a female aboard meant ill luck, but never have I seen a sign of it! Has yon lass caused us a moment's trouble?" he demanded, pointing to the enormous figurehead.

"Not a bit of it; the elf maid brings good fortune," one of the crew ventured thoughtfully.

"That she does," the captain stated, and his voice rang out, as powerful and persuasive as that of a master thespian. "Never has a storm taken us unaware; never have creatures of the sea decided to make of us a midday meal! And what of the men who claimed the elf maid would bring us to grief? How many of those men sleep in Umberlee's arms, and our time not yet come?"

The uniformly angry expressions on the Northmen's faces wavered, fading to puzzlement or indecision. Hrolf, who apparently knew his men well, waited for the planted idea to take root. "I say it's high time the *Elfmaid* was honored by one of her own," he stated. "Besides, who but the black lass has the magic needed to take us up through the gates? With half of Skullport on my heels, d'you suppose the Keepers will send us through without question and blow us kisses to speed our way?"

There was no arguing with Hrolf's logic, and the crew knew it. The Keepers were hired mages who raised ships through magical locks leading from the underground port to the Sea Caves—an impassable and rock-strewn inlet south of Waterdeep—and from there to the open seas. These magical portals had been established centuries earlier by Halaster, a mighty wizard who'd left his insane stamp on nearly every corridor of the Undermountain, and to this day the gates were the only way to move ships to and from Skullport. Without the permission of the Keepers—or the aid of a powerful wizard—the *Elfmaid* would never sail beyond this subterranean bay. The crew could like it or not, but the drow female offered them their only chance of escape.

Liriel, however, was concerned with a more immediate problem. Three small ships, loaded with fighters, were being rowed with deadly determination for the *Elfmaid*. They gained steadily on the larger ship; battle seemed inevitable.

Fear, an emotion so new to Liriel that she had no name to

give it, rose like bile in her throat. She was never one to recoil from a fight, but she knew that if Fyodor joined this battle, the dark waters would soon be warmed with blood. The drow could not permit this.

She spun to face Hrolf. The rowdy captain had already taken note of the approaching threat, and his eyes glinted with anticipation. “Show me a place belowdecks where I might go,” she demanded. “Fyodor will come with me and stand guard, for I cannot be interrupted while spellcasting.”

Hrolf’s eyes dropped to Fyodor’s dark sword, and a flicker of disappointment crossed his bewhiskered face.

“Do as we discussed, and all will be well!” Liriel added in a tone that did not invite or allow discussion.

Hrolf yielded with a sigh and a shrug. “Well then, lad, here are your orders: Let no man through the hatch until our wizard gives you leave.”

Fyodor nodded, hearing what the captain said, and what he implied. Hrolf was in command of this ship, and under ordinary circumstances a berserker would follow a commander’s orders to the death. The captain knew this and had phrased his words accordingly. Fyodor hoped, as he followed Liriel down a short ladder into the darkness of the hold, that he would be able to do as Hrolf commanded.

The captain paused before dropping the hatch. “Good luck to you, lass. And you, lad—see that you take good care of her.” He gave Fyodor a shrewd once-over and then a wink. “But then, I don’t have to be telling you *that*, now do I?”

Hrolf dropped the hatch with a thud, and then came the grating sound of something heavy being dragged over to obscure the opening. Angry voices drew nearer, and Liriel and Fyodor heard the sharp *ping!* of loosed arrows. Above all rang Hrolf’s voice, shouting gleeful battle instructions to his men.

“I can’t concentrate with all that going on,” Liriel grumbled. “Come closer—sit down here beside me. I’m going to cast a sphere of silence. You don’t need to hear the battle—just watch the hatch and kill anything that tries to get close to me.”

Fyodor smothered a smile as he settled down on the

wooden floor beside his friend. The drow's brusque manner did not fool him for a moment. If pressed, she'd claim she was merely being practical; her pride in her dark-elven ways was too strong for her to admit to sentiment. Practical, she certainly was. Fyodor did not yet know the crew well enough to discern defender from invader, and in the throes of battle frenzy he would fight until he died, or until no one stood to oppose him. Still, he could not resist the temptation to let Liriel know he saw her well-meaning sham for what it was.

"If I am to keep watch, I would do better with a light," Fyodor said mildly.

Instantly the soft glow of faerie fire lit the room. Liriel cast him a sidelong, suspicious look, but if she perceived his gentle teasing she gave no indication. Getting down to business, she opened a small spellbook and then took from her spell bag the items she would need for the casting.

It was a difficult spell, one of the most advanced in the book of gate spells given her by her father, the mighty archmage of Menzoberranzan. It was also one of the most unusual, allowing a person or entity to journey piggyback through an established gate along with the rightful traveler. Liriel only hoped that a ship and its entire crew could be considered an entity.

She began the deep concentration that such powerful magic demanded. Her body began to sway, and her gesturing hands pulled power from the weave of magic and bound it to her will. Yet she remained intensely aware of the battle above—for despite her words, the magical silence she cast encompassed only Fyodor—and she listened for Hrolf's signal. When the spell was cast, she sat immobile, her hands cupped around a sphere of summoned power as she waited for the precise moment to set it free. Finally the signal came: the quick pattern of stomps and pauses that she and Hrolf had prearranged. Another ship had entered the magic locks; it was time for the *Elfmaid* to join it.

The young wizard flung her hands high, releasing the contained magic. All at once the world shifted weirdly.

Liriel was swept up in the rush and roar of falling water

and the whirling colors of a rainbow gone mad. Her physical form seemed to melt away as her mind took on the chaos and complexity of a crowded room. The drow felt, individually and all at once, the thoughts and fears of every person on this ship and on the other ship as well. At that moment she knew every person's name and could have said what each was doing. The multifaceted clarity lasted but a heartbeat before the many minds united in a single emotion: terror. This melting of barriers, this sudden and unfathomable sharing, was beyond anything that most of them had imagined possible.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the spell was over. Liriel opened her eyes and was relieved to find herself and her surroundings whole—not joined board and sinew with the other ship and its crew. That was the risk in such a spell, even if there was but one wizard following another. Her father had warned her with stories of wizards who had been permanently conjoined by this spell, only to go mad in the attempt to share one body between two minds.

Liriel reached out a single finger to break the sphere of silence that protected her friend, much as a child might pop a soap bubble. "It's over," she said, and a quick, eager smile lit her face. "Let's go see the stars!"

Fyodor returned her smile with a heartfelt one of his own. He, too, had missed that sight during their sojourn in the tunnels surrounding Skullport. Still feeling somewhat dazed by the magical transport, he shouldered open the trapdoor and crawled up onto the deck.

Beneath a brilliant night sky, the men of the *Elfmaid* stood staring at the equally stunned faces of the crew of the ship that floated beside them, its rail near enough to touch.

Hrolf was the first to shake off the spell, bellowing at his crew to drop weapons and man the oars. Fyodor took his place at an oar, and soon the ship had pulled well away from its host. When it became clear that the other ship had no inclination to pursue, Hrolf set the sail and released the oarsmen to their rest.

Fyodor strode across the deck toward the place where Liriel stood alone in rapt contemplation of the stars. He found it oddly reassuring that someone who had spent nearly her

entire life below ground could have a soul-deep love for the sky and its many lights and colors. In moments like this, Fyodor could believe that he and the beautiful drow were not so very different after all.

Not far from Liriel stood the captain and mate, deep in discussion. Fyodor did not intend to listen, but Hrolf's voice carried in the still night air like the call of a hunting horn.

"Well then, that's one more port that won't be glad of us for some time to come! Looks like we'll be adding Skullport to the list," said Hrolf.

"Looks like," the mate agreed.

"But it was a stay to remember and a good fight to end it with!"

"That it was. Lost the cargo, though."

The captain winked. "Never you mind. We'll make up the difference on the way home, and more besides!"

Fyodor stopped in his tracks, stunned and enlightened. He quickly recovered his wits and hurried over to Liriel. Seizing her by the arm, he drew her well away from the scheming sailors.

"There's something you must know," he said in a low, urgent voice. "I fear that this is a pirate ship!"

The drow stared up at him, her amber eyes full of genuine puzzlement. "Yes," she said slowly.

He fell back a step, incredulous. Liriel already *knew*, and it mattered not! Though why he should be surprised, he did not know. The drow girl was not lacking in character. She had proven to be a fiercely loyal friend and possessed a fledgling sense of honor. Yet she was utterly practical, as amoral as a wild snowcat. There was little in her experience that equipped her to fathom Fyodor's stricter code of honor.

"Liriel, these men are thieves!" he said, trying to make her understand.

The drow huffed, then threw up her hands in exasperation. "Well, what in the Nine Hells did you expect? Just for a moment, Fyodor, *think*. Don't you suppose it might be a little difficult for a drow to book passage with a shipload of paladins? Out of Skullport, no less?"

Fyodor was silent for a long moment, absorbing the truth

of his friend's words and struggling to find a balance between honor and necessity.

"Well?" Liriel demanded, her fists on her hips and one snowy eyebrow lifted in challenge.

The young warrior smiled, but ruefully. "It would seem, little raven, that this sea voyage will be more interesting than I'd expected," he said, deliberately using his pet name for her to help defuse her ready temper.

Liriel relaxed at once and slipped one arm through his. "That's the problem with humans," she said as they strolled companionably across the starlit deck. "You never expect half the things you should expect. One step, two steps ahead, and you think you're done!"

"And the problem with drow," Fyodor teased her in return, "is that you can never stop thinking. With you it is always the head, and never the heart."

But the girl shook her head, and her golden eyes were bright as they looked up into the endless, starlit sky. "There are those who think, and those who dream," she said softly, repeating one of Fyodor's favorite maxims. "But I, for one, refuse to choose between the two!"