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THE PIRATE KING

T R A N S I T I O N S



CHAPTER

F A I R W I N D S A N D F O L L O W I N G S E A S



Sails billowing, timbers creaking, water spraying high from her prow, *Thrice Lucky* leaped across the swells with the grace of a dancer. All the multitude of sounds blended together in a musical chorus, both invigorating and inspiring, and it occurred to young Captain Maimun that if he had hired a band of musicians to rouse his crew, their work would add little to the natural music all around them.

The chase was on, and every man and woman aboard felt it, and heard it.

Maimun stood forward and starboard, holding fast to a guide rope, his brown hair waving in the wind, his black shirt half unbuttoned and flapping refreshingly and noisily, bouncing out enough to show a tar-black scar across the left side of his chest.

“They are close,” came a woman’s voice from behind him, and Maimun half-turned to regard Overwizard Arabeth Raurym, Mistress of the South Tower.

“Your magic tells you so?”

“Can’t you feel it?” the woman answered, and gave a coy toss of her head so that her waist-length red hair caught the wind and flipped back behind her. Her blouse was as open as Maimun’s shirt, and the young man couldn’t help but look admiringly at the alluring creature.

He thought of the previous night, and the night before that, and before that as well—of the whole enjoyable journey. Arabeth had promised him a wonderful and exciting sail in addition to the rather large sum she’d offered for her passage, and Maimun couldn’t honestly say that she’d disappointed him. She was around his age, just past thirty, intelligent, attractive, sometimes brazen,

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sometimes coy, and just enough of each to keep Maimun and every other man around her off-balance and keenly interested in pursuing her. Arabeth knew her power well, and Maimun knew that she knew it, but still, he couldn't shake himself free of her.

Arabeth stepped up beside him and playfully brushed her fingers through his thick hair. He glanced around quickly, hoping none of the crew had seen, for the action only accentuated that he was quite young to be captaining a ship, and that he looked even younger. His build was slight, wiry yet strong, his features boyish and his eyes a delicate light blue. While his hands were calloused, like those of any honest seaman, his skin had not yet taken on the weathered, leathery look of a man too much under the sparkling sun.

Arabeth dared to run her hand under the open fold of his shirt, her fingers dancing across his smooth skin to the rougher place where skin and tar had melded together, and it occurred to Maimun that he typically kept his shirt open just a bit more for exactly the reason of revealing a hint of that scar, that badge of honor, that reminder to all around that he had spent most of his life with a blade in his hand.

"You are a paradox," Arabeth remarked, and Maimun merely smiled. "Gentle and strong, soft and rough, kind and merciless, an artist and a warrior. With your lute in hand, you sing with the voice of the sirens, and with your sword in hand, you fight with the tenacity of a drow weapons master."

"You find this off-putting?"

Arabeth laughed. "I would drag you to your cabin right now," she replied, "but they are close."

As if on cue—and Maimun was certain Arabeth had used some magic to confirm her prediction before she'd offered it—a crewman from the crow's nest shouted down, "Sails! Sails on the horizon!"

"Two ships," Arabeth said to Maimun.

"Two ships!" the man in the nest called down.

"*Sea Sprite* and *Quelch's Folly*," said Arabeth. "As I told you when we left Luskan."

Maimun could only chuckle helplessly at the manipulative wizard. He reminded himself of the pleasures of the journey, and of the hefty bag of gold awaiting its completion.

He thought, too, in terms bitter and sweet, of *Sea Sprite* and Deudermont, his old ship, his old captain.

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"Aye, Captain, that's Argus Retch or I'm the son of a barbarian king and an orc queen," Waillan Micanty said. He winced as he finished, reminding himself of the cultured man he served. He scanned Deudermont head to toe, from his neatly trimmed beard and hair to his tall and spotless black boots. The captain showed more gray in his hair, but still not much for a man of more than fifty years, and that only made him appear more regal and impressive.

"A bottle of the finest wine for Dhomas Sheeringvale, then," Deudermont said in a light tone that put Micanty back at ease. "Against all of my doubts, the information you garnered from him was correct and we've finally got that filthy pirate before us." He clapped Micanty on the back and glanced back over his shoulder and up to *Sea Sprite*'s wizard, who sat on the edge of the poop deck, his skinny legs dangling under his heavy robes. "And soon in range of our catapult," Deudermont added loudly, catching the attention of the mage, Robillard, "if our resident wizard there can get the sails straining."

"Cheat to win," Robillard replied, and with a dramatic flourish he waggled his fingers, the ring that allowed him control over a fickle air elemental sending forth another mighty gust of wind that made *Sea Sprite*'s timbers creak.

"I grow weary of the chase," Deudermont retorted, his way of saying that he was eager to finally confront the beastly pirate he pursued.

"Less so than I," the wizard replied.

Deudermont didn't argue that point, and he knew that the benefit of Robillard's magic filling the sails was mitigated by the strong following winds. In calmer seas, *Sea Sprite* could still rush along, propelled by the wizard and his ring, while their quarry would typically flee at a crawl. The captain clapped Micanty on the shoulder and led him to the side, in view of *Sea Sprite*'s new and greatly improved catapult. Heavily banded in metal strapping, the dwarven weapon could heave a larger payload. The throwing arm and basket strained under the weight of many lengths of chain, laid out for maximum extension by gunners rich in experience.

"How long?" Deudermont asked the sighting officer, who stood beside the catapult, spyglass in hand.

"We could hit her now with a ball of pitch, mighten be, but getting the chains up high enough to shred her sails . . . That'll take another fifty yards closing."

"One yard for every gust," Deudermont said with a sigh of feigned resignation. "We need a stronger wizard."

"You'd be looking for Elminster himself, then," Robillard shot back. "And he'd probably burn your sails in some demented attempt at a colorful flourish. But please, hire him on. I would enjoy a holiday, and would enjoy more the sight of you swimming back to Luskan."

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This time Deudermont's sigh was real.

So was Robillard's grin.

Sea Sprite's timbers creaked again, forward-leaning masts driving the prow hard against the dark water.

Soon after, everyone on the deck, even the seemingly-dispassionate wizard, waited with breath held for the barked command, "Tack starboard!"

Sea Sprite bent over in a water-swirling hard turn, bending her masts out of the way for the aft catapult to let fly. And let fly she did, the dwarven siege engine screeching and creaking, hurling several hundred pounds of wrapped metal through the air. The chains burst open to near full length as they soared, and whipped in above the deck of *Quelch's Folly*, slashing her sails.

As the wounded pirate ship slowed, *Sea Sprite* tacked hard back to port. A flurry of activity on the pirate's deck showed her archers preparing for the fight, and *Sea Sprite*'s crack crew responded in kind, aligning themselves along the port rail, composite bows in hand.

But it was Robillard who, by design, struck first. In addition to constructing the necessary spells to defend against magical attacks, the wizard used an enchanted censer and brought forth a denizen from the Elemental Plane of Air. It appeared like a waterspout, but with hints of a human form, a roiling of air powerful enough to suck up and hold water within it to better define its dimensions. Loyal and obedient because of the ring Robillard wore, the cloudlike pet all but invisibly floated over the rail of *Sea Sprite* and glided toward *Quelch's Folly*.

Captain Deudermont lifted his hand high and looked to Robillard for guidance. "Alongside her fast and straight," he instructed the helmsman.

"Not to rake?" Waillan Micanty asked, echoing perfectly the sentiments of the helmsman, for normally *Sea Sprite* would cripple her opponent and come in broadside to the pirate's taffrail, giving *Sea Sprite*'s archers greater latitude and mobility.

Robillard had convinced Deudermont of a new plan for the ruffians of *Quelch's Folly*, a plan more straightforward and more devastating to a crew deserving of no quarter.

Sea Sprite closed—archers on both decks lifted their bows.

"Hold for me," Deudermont called along his line, his hand still high in the air.

More than one man on *Sea Sprite*'s deck rubbed his arm against his sweating face; more than one rolled eager fingers over his drawn bowstring. Deudermont was asking them to cede the initiative, to let the pirates shoot first.

Trained, seasoned, and trusting in their captain, they obliged.

And so Argus's crew let fly . . . right into the suddenly howling winds of Robillard's air elemental.

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The creature rose up above the dark water and began to spin with such suddenness and velocity that by the time the arrows of Argus's archers cleared their bows, they were soaring straight into a growing tornado, a water spout. Robillard willed the creature right to the side of *Quelch's Folly*, its winds so strong that they deterred any attempt to reload the bows.

Then, with only a few yards separating *Sea Sprite* from the pirate, the wizard nodded to Deudermont, who counted down from three—precisely the time Robillard needed to simply dismiss his elemental and the winds with it. Argus's crew, mistakenly thinking the wind to be as much a defense as a deterrent to their own attacks, had barely moved for cover when the volley crossed deck to deck.

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"They are good," Arabeth remarked to Maimun as the two stared into a scrying bowl she had empowered to give them a close-up view of the distant battle. Following the barrage of arrows, a second catapult shot sent hundreds of small stones raking the deck of *Quelch's Folly*. With brutal efficiency, *Sea Sprite* sidled up to the pirate ship, grapnels and boarding planks flying.

"It will be all but over before we get there," Maimun said.

"Before *you* get there, you mean," Arabeth said with a wink. She cast a quick spell and faded from sight. "Put up your proper pennant, else *Sea Sprite* sinks you beside her."

Maimun laughed at the disembodied voice of the invisible mage and started to respond, but a flash out on the water told him that Arabeth had already created a dimensional portal to rush away.

"Up Luskan's dock flag!" Maimun called to his crew.

Thrice Lucky was in a wonderful position, for she had no outstanding crimes or warrants against her. With a flag of Luskan's wharf above her, stating a clear intent to side with Deudermont, she would be well-received.

And of course Maimun would side with Deudermont against Argus Retch. Though Maimun, too, was considered a "pirate" of sorts, he was nothing akin to the wretched Retch—whose last name had been taken with pride, albeit misspelled. Retch was a murderer, and took great pleasure in torturing and killing even helpless civilians.

Maimun wouldn't abide that, and part of the reason he had agreed to take Arabeth out was to see, at long last, the downfall of the dreadful pirate. He realized he was leaning over the rail. His greatest pleasure would be crossing swords with Retch himself.

But Maimun knew Deudermont too well to believe that the battle would last that long.

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“Take up a song,” the young captain, who was also a renowned bard, commanded, and his crew did just that, singing rousing praises to *Thrice Lucky*, warning her enemies, “Beware or be swimming!”

Maimun shook his thick brown locks from his face, his light blue eyes—orbis that made him look much younger than his twenty-nine years—squinting as he measured the fast-closing distance.

Deudermont’s men were already on the deck.

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Robillard found himself quickly bored. He had expected better out of Argus Retch, though he’d wondered for a long time if the man’s impressive reputation had been exaggerated by the ruthlessness of his tactics. Robillard, formerly of the Hosttower of the Arcane, had known many such men, rather ordinary in terms of conventional intelligence or prowess, but seeming above that because they were unbounded by morality.

“Sails port and aft!” the man in the crow’s nest shouted down. Robillard waved his hand, casting a spell to enhance his vision, his gaze locking on the pennant climbing the new ship’s rigging.

“*Thrice Lucky*,” he muttered, noting young Captain Maimun standing mid-rail. “Go home, boy.”

With a disgusted sigh, Robillard dismissed Maimun and his boat and turned his attention to the fight at hand.

He brought his pet air elemental back to him then used his ring to enact a spell of levitation. On his command, the elemental shoved him across the expanse toward *Quelch’s Folly*. He visually scoured the deck as he glided in, seeking her wizard. Deudermont and his crack crew weren’t to be outdone with swords, he well knew, and so the only potential damage would be wrought by magic.

He floated over the pirate’s rail, caught a rope to halt his drift, and calmly reached out to tap a nearby pirate, releasing a shock of electrical magic as he did. That man hopped weirdly once or twice, his long hair dancing crazily, then he fell over, twitching.

Robillard didn’t watch it. He glanced from battle to battle, and anywhere it seemed as though a pirate was getting the best of one of Deudermont’s men, he flicked his finger in that direction, sending forth a stream of magical missiles that laid the pirate low.

But where was her wizard? And where was Retch?

“Cowering in the hold, no doubt,” Robillard muttered to himself.

He released the levitation spell and began calmly striding across the deck.

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A pirate rushed at him from the side and slashed his saber hard against the wizard, but of course Robillard had well-prepared his defenses for any such crude attempts. The saber hit his skin and would have done no more against solid rock, a magical barrier blocking it fully.

Then the pirate went up into the air, caught by Robillard's elemental. He flew out over the rail, flailing insanely, to splash into the cold ocean waters.

A favor for an old friend? Came a magical whisper in Robillard's ear, and in a voice he surely recognized.

"Arabeth Raurym?" he mouthed in disbelief, and in sadness, for what might that promising young lass be doing at sea with the likes of Argus Retch?

Robillard sighed again, dropped another pair of pirates with a missile volley, loosed his air elemental on yet another group, and moved to the hatch. He glanced around then "removed" the hatch with a mighty gust of wind. Using his ring again to buoy him, for he didn't want to bother with a ladder, the wizard floated down belowdecks.

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What little fight remained in Argus Retch's crew dissipated at the approach of the second ship, for *Thrice Lucky* had declared her allegiance with Deudermont. With expert handling, Maimun's crew brought their vessel up alongside *Quelch's Folly*, opposite *Sea Sprite*, and quickly set their boarding planks.

Maimun led the way, but he didn't get two steps from his own deck before Deudermont himself appeared at the other end of the plank, staring at him with what seemed a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

"Sail past," *Sea Sprite*'s captain said.

"We fly Luskan's banner," Maimun replied.

Deudermont didn't blink.

"Have we come to this, then, my captain?" Maimun asked.

"The choice was yours."

"The choice,'" Maimun echoed. "Was it to be made only with your approval?" He kept approaching as he spoke, and dared hop down to the deck beside Deudermont. He looked back at his hesitant crew, and waved them forward.

"Come now, my old captain," Maimun said, "there is no reason we cannot share an ocean so large, a coast so long."

"And yet, in such a large ocean, you somehow find your way to my side."

"For old times' sake," Maimun said with a disarming chuckle, and despite himself, Deudermont couldn't suppress his smile.

"Have you killed the wretched Retch?" Maimun asked.

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“We will have him soon enough.”

“You and I, perhaps, if we’re clever,” Maimun offered, and when Deudermont looked at him curiously, he added a knowing wink.

Maimun motioned Deudermont to follow and led him toward the captain’s quarters, though the door had already been ripped open and the anteroom appeared empty.

“Retch is rumored to always have a means of escape,” Maimun explained as they crossed the threshold into the private room, exactly as Arabeth had instructed Maimun to do.

“All pirates do,” Deudermont replied. “Where is yours?”

Maimun stopped and regarded Deudermont out of the corner of his eye for a few moments, but otherwise let the jab pass.

“Or are you implying that you have an idea where Retch’s escape might be found?” Deudermont asked when his joke flattened.

Maimun led the captain through a secret door and into Retch’s private quarters. The room was gaudily adorned with booty from a variety of places and with a variety of designs, rarely complimentary. Glass mixed with metal-work, fancy-edge and block, and a rainbow of colors left onlookers more dizzy than impressed. Of course, anyone who knew Captain Argus Retch, with his red-and-white striped shirt, wide green sash, and bright blue pants, would have thought the room perfectly within the wide parameters of the man’s curious sensibilities.

The moment of quiet distraction also brought a revelation to the two—one that Maimun had expected. A conversation from below drifted through a small grate in the corner of the room, and the sound of a cultured woman’s voice fully captured Deudermont’s attention.

“I care nothing for the likes of Argus Retch,” the woman said. “He is an ugly and ill-tempered dog, who should be put down.”

“Yet you are here,” a man’s voice—Robillard’s voice—answered.

“Because I fear Arklem Greeth more than I fear *Sea Sprite*, or any of the other pretend pirate hunters sailing the Sword Coast.”

“Pretend? Is this not a pirate? Is it not caught?”

“You know *Sea Sprite* is a show,” the woman argued. “You are a facade offered by the high captains so the peasants believe they’re being protected.”

“So the high captains approve of piracy?” asked an obviously doubting Robillard.

The woman laughed. “The Arcane Brotherhood operates the pirate trade, to great profit. Whether the high captains approve or disapprove is not important, because they don’t dare oppose Arklem Greeth. Feign not your ignorance of this, Brother Robillard. You served at the Hosttower for years.”

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“It was a different time.”

“Indeed,” the woman agreed. “But now is as now is, and now is the time of Arklem Greeth.”

“You fear him?”

“I’m terrified of him, and horrified of what he is,” the woman answered without the slightest hesitation. “And I pray that someone will rise up and rid the Hosttower of him and his many minions. But I’m not that person. I take pride in my prowess as an overwizard and in my heritage as daughter of the marchion of Mirabar.”

“Arabeth Raurym,” Deudermont mouthed in recognition.

“But I wouldn’t involve my father in this, for he is already entangled with the brotherhood’s designs on the Silver Marches. Luskan would be well-served by being rid of Arklem Greeth—even Prisoner’s Carnival might then be brought back under lawful and orderly control. But he will outlive my children’s children—or out-exist them, I mean, since he long ago stopped drawing breath.”

“Lich,” Robillard said quietly. “It’s true, then.”

“I am gone,” Arabeth answered. “Do you intend to stop me?”

“I would be well within my province to arrest you here and now.”

“But will you?”

Robillard sighed, and up above, Deudermont and Maimun heard a quick chant and the sizzle of magical release as Arabeth spirited away.

The implications of her revelations—rumors made true before Deudermont’s very ears—hung silently in the air between Deudermont and Maimun.

“I don’t serve Arklem Greeth, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Maimun said. “But then, I am no pirate.”

“Indeed,” replied an obviously unconvinced Deudermont.

“As a soldier is no murderer,” said Maimun.

“Soldiers can be murderers,” Deudermont deadpanned.

“So can lords and ladies, high captains and archmages, pirates and pirate hunters alike.”

“You forgot peasants,” said Deudermont. “And chickens. Chickens can kill, I’ve been told.”

Maimun tipped his fingers against his forehead in salute and surrender.

“Retch’s escape?” Deudermont asked, and Maimun moved to the back of the cabin. He fumbled about a small set of shelves there, moving trinkets and statues and books alike, until finally he smiled and tugged a hidden lever.

The wall pulled open, revealing an empty shaft.

“An escape boat,” Maimun reasoned, and Deudermont started for the door.

“If he knew it was *Sea Sprite* pursuing him, he is long gone,” Maimun said,

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and Deudermont stopped. “Retch is no fool, nor is he loyal enough to follow his ship and crew to the depths. He no doubt recognized that it was *Sea Sprite* chasing him, and relieved himself of his command quietly and quickly. These escape boats are clever things; some submerge for many hours and are possessed of magical propulsion that can return them to a designed point of recall. You can take pride, though, for the escape boats are often referred to as ‘Deuderboats.’”

Deudermont’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s something, at least,” Maimun offered.

Deudermont’s handsome face soured and he headed through the door.

“You won’t catch him,” Maimun called after him. The young man—bard, pirate, captain—sighed and chuckled helplessly, knowing full well that Retch was likely already back in Luskan, and knowing the ways of Kensidan, his employer, he wondered if the notorious pirate wasn’t already being compensated for sacrificing his ship.

Arabeth had come out there for a reason, to have that conversation with Robillard within earshot of Captain Deudermont. It all started to come together for clever Maimun. Kensidan was soon to be a high captain, and the ambitious warlord was working hard to change the very definition of that title.

Despite his deep resentment, Maimun found himself glancing at the door through which Deudermont had exited. Despite his falling out with his former captain, he felt uneasy about the prospect of this too-noble man being used as a pawn.

And Arabeth Raurym had just seen to that.

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“She was a good ship—best I ever had,” Argus Retch protested.

“Best of a bad lot, then,” Kensidan replied. He sat—he was always sitting, it seemed—before the blustering, gaudy pirate, his dark and somber clothing so in contrast to Argus Retch’s display of mismatched colors.

“Salt in your throat, ye damned Crow!” Retch cursed. “And lost me a good crew, too!”

“Most of your crew never left Luskan. You used a band of wharf-rats and a few of your own you wished to be rid of. Captain Retch, don’t play me for a fool.”

“W-well . . . well,” Retch stammered. “Well, good enough, then! But still a crew, and still workin’ for me. And I lost *Folly!* Don’t you forget that.”

“Why would I forget that which I ordered? And why would I forget that for which you were compensated?”

“Compensated?” the pirate blustered.

Kensidan looked at Retch’s hip, where the bag of gold hung.

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"Gold's all well and fine," Retch said, "but I need a ship, and I'm not for finding one with any ease. Who'd sell to Argus Retch, knowing that Deudermont got his last and is after him?"

"In good time," said Kensidan. "Spend your gold on delicacies. Patience. Patience."

"I'm a man of the sea!"

Kensidan shifted in his seat, planting one elbow on the arm of the chair, forearm up. He pointed his index finger and rested his temple against it, staring at Retch pensively, and with obvious annoyance. "I can put you back to sea this very day."

"Good!"

"I doubt you'll think so."

The deadpan clued Retch in to Kensidan's true meaning. Rumors had been filtering around Luskan that several of Kensidan's enemies had been dropped into the deep waters outside the harbor.

"Well, I can be a bit patient, no doubt."

"No doubt," Kensidan echoed. "And it will be well worth your time, I assure you."

"You'll get me a good ship?"

Kensidan gave a little chuckle. "Would *Sea Sprite* suffice?"

Argus Retch's bloodshot eyes popped open wide and the man seemed to simply freeze in place. He stayed like that for a very long time—so long that Kensidan simply looked past him to several of Rethnor's lieutenants who stood against the walls of the room.

"I'm sure it will," Kensidan said, and the men laughed. To Retch, he added, "Go and play," and he waved the man away.

As Retch exited through one door, Suljack came in through another.

"Do you think that wise?" the high captain asked.

The Crow shrugged and smirked as if it hardly mattered.

"You intend to give him *Sea Sprite*?"

"We're a long way from having *Sea Sprite*."

"Agreed," said Suljack. "But you just promised . . ."

"Nothing at all," said Kensidan. "I asked if he thought *Sea Sprite* would suffice, nothing more."

"Not to his ears."

Kensidan chuckled as he reached over the side of his seat to retrieve his glass of whiskey, along with a bag of potent leaves and shoots. He downed the drink in one gulp and brought the leaves up below his nose, inhaling deeply of their powerful aroma.

"He'll brag," Suljack warned.

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“With Deudermont looking for him? He’ll hide.”

Suljack’s shake of his head revealed his doubts, but Kensidan brought his herbs up beneath his nose again and seemed not to care.

Seemed not to care because he didn’t. His plans were flowing exactly as he had predicted.

“Nyphithys is in the east?”

Kensidan merely chuckled.