

FORGOTTEN REALMS



CHAPTER ONE

*29 Kythorn, the Year of the Ageless One
(1479 DR)*

The Crane, the Coast of Chult

With his face squashed between a boot heel and the deck of his ship, Harp could see scores of grain seeds that had fallen into the tiny spaces between the planks. And it made him angry. In addition to being laid out under a filthy boot, there was evidence of what a negligent caretaker Harp had been. After a decade of humiliations, looking at the seeds germinating in his beloved ship made Harp wonder if he could sink any lower. Grabbing at the man's calf, he tried to push the boot off his face, but the foot didn't budge. The boot had a wooden heel, and as "Bootman" ground it into Harp's cheekbone, the pain was excruciating.

As he heard the sound of a man unsheathing his short sword above him, Harp had an image of the broken hull of his ship battered in the shallows

with a field of wheat sprouting from her boards.

Four years before, Harp and his friends had broken just about everything—their code, their pride, their backs—trying to get their hands on the *Crane*, a one-mast, rat-infested galley with warped planks and a heroic history, at least according to the fat man at the docks who owned her. The *Crane* would be their passage out of the dingy waterfront district where they had lived.

But after they'd signed the writ of sale on the ship, the currents of life had swept Harp along. Soon his dreams of freedom on the open water had been swallowed in a sea of debt. The *Crane* became nothing more than a run-down vessel hauling wheat and barley from port to port.

Harp owed her more than that.

The expedition to Chult was supposed to end the cycle of hand-to-mouth with a healthy payment of Tethyrian gold. When the shores of Calimshan had faded from sight—but before Harp could see the shadow of Chult on the horizon, or the unfettered notes that hung above the isle—and nothing but the rolling waves and the endless blue sky surrounded him, he felt something relax in his chest. For one carefree moment, Harp felt like the true captain of his ship, not some merchant for hire, or worse, a man simply biding time in the world.

The orders had been simple: check on some colonists who had gone to Chult to pursue a timber venture for Queen Anais of Tethyr. All correspondence with the colonists had ceased, and some members of Anais's court were concerned for the safety of the venture and its participants. Harp told his men that the colonists had most likely hopped the first boat out of the hazardous jungle.

The prospect of adventure had cheered the crew. The pay was enough to cover their debts, replace the *Crane's* rigging, and purchase a new golden sun-sail. The hull was glossed to a shine, and there were new bunks in the crew's

quarters. The *Crane* had never looked so good.

Harp hadn't lost her to his debtors. There was no way he was going to lose her, not to this Bootman and his sneaky little ship.

"Captain!" someone shouted from the bow of the ship. Both Bootman and Harp turned toward the noise. At least Harp would have done so if he had the capability of movement in his neck. With Bootman momentarily distracted, Harp felt around for a discarded weapon, specifically the dagger that had gone flying out of his hand. But Harp's straining earned him nothing but extra pressure from his vanquisher.

"Stay still, dog," the man said, shoving his foot against Harp's already throbbing ear. "The more you move, the more cuts it will take to remove your head from your neck."

Less than an hour ago, the *Crane* had glided through the narrow mouth of a picturesque cove. Sparkling blue water lapped onto a white sand beach with the edge of an emerald jungle beyond. Bootman's ship had been hidden behind an outcropping that curved out from the east end of the cove. A slightly larger ship than the *Crane*, with a narrower beam and lighter rails, the *Marigold* had easily overtaken Harp's vessel as his crew busied themselves with landing preparations. When the enemy boat cast its shadow on their deck, Harp and his men scurried frantically for weapons while the crew of the *Marigold* tossed gangplanks onto the *Crane's* newly polished railings.

Harp stretched his fingers out as far as he could and touched the cold metal ring that tethered the mast rope. The ring was securely fastened to the boards and was about as threatening as an old sock. But the ring told Harp his precise location on the deck. The mast was six paces away from his foot, and the steps to the cabins were eight paces from his right shoulder. . . .

"Are you looking for this?" Bootman laughed, dangling the dagger in front of Harp's nose. Not only had Bootman

put him down, but the man had Harp's favorite dagger in his hand, the one with the nice vine-and-flower etching that the pretty girl in Waterdeep had given him after a couple of lost days in her—

“Your ship's a disgrace. Still, she'll be worth something in Nyanzaru.”

“Keep your filthy . . .” Harp mumbled, but his lips were too squished to properly form the words.

“What's that?” Bootman asked. That the man was taking time to torment him made Harp worry that things weren't going well for his crew in general. He could hear the clash of swords and shouts all along the deck. And while Harp had faith that his crew would do their best, it had been quite a while since any of them had fought for anything more than a barstool.

“You're taking too long,” Harp said, trying to enunciate. If their positions were reversed, Bootman would be in two bloody pieces and Harp would be killing the next filthy cur that had boarded his ship uninvited.

“I'm taking too long? I didn't know you were in such a hurry to die.”

“It's just . . .” With his fingertips, Harp traced the edge of the planks until he found the one he wanted, two boards to the left of the ring. Contorting his body to reach the board made it feel like his neck was going to break, but as he felt the distinctive knot in the oak plank, he smiled. Or he would have if his face weren't folded in half.

“You're giving me time to . . .”

“Your pitiful crew should never have left Tethyr.”

“ . . . find the right plank,” Harp finished, slamming his fist into the deck. Because of his prone position, he missed seeing the loose board swing up and clock Bootman in the face, but he heard the satisfying thunk and felt the pressure lift off his head. Harp leaped to his feet while Bootman stumbled backward from the impact, clutching his face and—oh, even

better—dropping his short sword. Harp grabbed it before the blood started gushing from Bootman's nose.

“Kill quickly,” Harp said as he adjusted his neck, wincing as pain shot down his back. His head felt like it was sitting on his spine wrong. “Or you'll lose the chance.”

Still holding Harp's dagger, Bootman backed away, his eyes darting around for another weapon. Harp quickly took a head count of his five-man crew. His men were all on their feet, and several of Bootman's men were dead on the boards, two of them with crossbolts in their throats. Harp saw the old warrior Cenhar swing his battle-axe and slice a man from shoulder to sternum as the man crept toward Verran. Verran, who had been pushed back against the railing, looked up at Cenhar with relief as his sword trembled in his hands.

“Stay with Cenhar,” Harp called to Verran just as one of the sailors charged down the steps toward the his two men. Another of Harp's crew, Kitto, leaped down from the rigging into the man's path. Casting a quick look over his shoulder, Harp saw Kitto stab his opponent in the abdomen and vault over the man as he fell to his knees clutching his belly. Satisfied that the boy could handle himself, Harp looked for his last two crew members.

The rigging partially obscured his view of Llywellan, an older man who handled a sword adequately if not particularly well. Llywellan was more of a thinker than a fighter, but he was on his feet and forcing back a prune-faced sailor swinging a rusty blade. Harp didn't see Boulton anywhere, but the dwarf would manage to take care of himself and find some way to be particularly annoying while he did it.

Harp turned back to his opponent, an unremarkable man of indeterminate age with black hair and pockmarked skin. No longer the self-assured vanquisher, Bootman looked like a run-of-the-mill fellow, someone to have a drink with in a tavern. But as Harp had learned, every man had it in him

to inflict pain on the weak and, more often than not, enjoy himself in the process.

“Was there something you wanted?” Harp demanded as he backed Bootman against the wall of the cabin. “Something you felt you couldn’t just ask for?”

Unable to find a better weapon, Bootman made a half-hearted swipe with the dagger. Harp knocked it out of his hand. Ramming his forearm against Bootman’s throat, Harp shoved the man into the wall. Suddenly, hot anger filled Harp’s chest. Why did people insist on taking things that weren’t theirs as if power gave them justification to possess whatever they wanted? And why did they always do it with that smug look of triumph on their face?

“Why us?” Harp demanded. “Why go after us?”

“You’re dead already,” Bootman growled.

Before Harp could respond, Bootman’s eyes rolled back in his head and his skin turned ashen. Startled by the rapid shift in the man’s coloring, Harp jerked his arm away and took a step back. Bootman clawed at his own throat as if he were being choked. Thinking the man was faking, Harp kicked Bootman in the stomach. His body clattered against the wall like a rag doll.

“What the . . .” Harp said as the man’s skin turned from gray to a sickly yellow. As his fingers went slack and the dagger fell to the deck, Bootman opened his mouth to speak. But whatever words he was about to say were lost in burbles of blood as a crossbow bolt lodged itself in Bootman’s throat. The man slumped to the ground, dead.

“Boult!” Harp yelled, turning in the direction that the crossbolt had come from. He saw the dwarf perched in the rigging above his head. Harp reached down and yanked the bolt out of Bootman’s neck, freeing a stream of thick blood. “Is that your bolt?”

“Who else’s would it be?” the dwarf replied, sliding down a shroud line and landing in front of Harp. Boult was the

leanest dwarf Harp had ever met, and the only one he had known who shaved off all his facial hair, including his eyebrows, which accentuated the webbing of lines around his wise eyes. Not a natural sailor, he was sinewy and fast, and easily the best fighter on the crew. He had the long, muscular arms and short, powerful legs of a dwarf, but because he was beardless, his own race shunned him, and many others stared at him, unable to figure out what sort of creature he was.

“Damn it all, he was about to talk.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Boulton said, loading another bolt and firing a shot into the back of the last of the boarding party from the *Marigold* who was fleeing across the gangplank. The sailor grunted as the bolt hit him between the shoulder blades, and he fell into the water with a splash. They heard thrashing for a moment, followed by nothing but water lapping against the hulls of the boats.

“Everyone all right?” Harp asked as he crouched down beside Bootman’s corpse. The man’s yellowy flesh hung on his frame loosely, as if it had been partially melted. Harp checked the captain’s pockets, noting that the man’s sweat-stained shirt had been grubby before it was bloodstained.

“Everyone who isn’t him,” Cenhar said, dropping his axe unceremoniously and inspecting a deep gash across his own bare chest.

“Or his crew,” Boulton added.

“So everyone who matters,” Llewellyn said.

“What happened to him?” Harp asked.

“It must have been a spell,” Cenhar said, looking down at the body with distaste. Cenhar had been with Harp since their days sailing on the *Marderward*, and the graying warrior was uninterested in anything he couldn’t touch or hack in half.

“Who cast a spell?” Harp asked to no one particular. A

shadow fell across the body. Verran was standing behind him looking down at Bootman.

“Maybe there’s someone still on the other ship?” Verran said.

“But why kill their own captain?” Harp asked.

“Maybe they’re not a crewman? Maybe a captive did it?” Verran said, blushing.

“Whoever did it, they did us a favor,” Boulton said. “And they’re keeping to themselves now.”

“We’ll search the ship,” Harp said, “but not until we take care of the *Crane*. Drag the bodies to the mast. Verran, get started cleaning up some of the wreck.”

Harp looked across the waves at the *Marigold*. Her dirty white sail snapped in the wind, and an empty jar rolled aimlessly up and down the boards. There was no sign of life.

He and Boulton helped the rest of the crew clean up the *Crane* and search the bodies, none of which had anything more interesting than pipe weed. As they tied ballast stone onto the corpses and prepared to throw them overboard, Harp saw Boulton taking a particular interest in Bootman’s body.

“They were waiting for us,” Harp said. “Someone told them we were coming.”

“Did you just work that out?” Boulton said sarcastically, lighting some of the dead captain’s tobacco in his griffon-head pipe.

“Well, you can’t expect me to be smarter than you,” Harp said amicably.

“Yes, but I can expect you to be smarter than a loaf of bread,” Boulton retorted. “Why are we here, Harp?”

“In the spiritual sense?” Harp asked. “Or here in the jungle?”

“I want some answers,” Boulton demanded. “I know who hired us for the job.”

“Of course you do. I told you,” Harp replied. “Avalor.”

“But do I really know why Avalor sent us to Chult?”

Boult prodded. "Or have you just shown me the tip of the arrow?"

"I told you why," Harp said evasively. "He wants us to check on the colony."

"Shouldn't the missing colonists be an official Tethyrian investigation, not some personal request from the only elf on the queen's privy council?"

"Avalor is a personal friend—"

"No, he's not," Boult said. "He's the father of a personal friend."

"Liel is *not* a personal friend," Harp said.

"Right, she's a damn sight more," Boult snapped. "It's time to confess, Harp."

Under the unwavering glare of his friend, Harp tried to sort out his jumbled thoughts. He didn't want to lie to Boult, but he had promised Avalor he would keep some things secret, at least for a while. The *Marigold* and her waiting captain only proved Avalor's fears: there were people who didn't want answers about the lost colony. An ill-considered comment could find any number of ears in a crowded tavern, no matter how dearly Harp trusted his crew. But Boult had traveled with Harp for years. After they had got out of prison, they had weathered hurricanes, gambling debts, and every manner of drunken idiots in pubs from the northern edge of Waterdeep to the southern border of Tethyr.

Still, the *Marigold's* attack had raised questions that Harp wasn't sure Boult would like the answers to.

"You know what the *Crane* means to me," Harp finally said.

"She's a fine ship, all right," Boult said. "And she's survived some seriously stupid moves on the part of her captain."

"Trust me for the moment, all right?" Harp said. "You know I would do anything for the *Crane*."

"Give me something, and I'll let it lie," Boult said.

"So much for trust," Harp said, and he smiled faintly. "I

told you that the colonists vanished, Boulton. Maybe they got eaten by beasties in the night, or maybe there's something more sinister happening in the jungle."

"Like what?" Boulton demanded.

"Things that were set in motion a long time before the colonists arrived," Harp told him. "Avalor didn't give me all the details. But I trust his instincts. He isn't the kind of elf to mistake storm clouds for evil spirits. We can trust him."

"Really?" Boulton said, giving the *Marigold* a significant look. "Who else knew to look for a ship in this cove?"