

Streams of silver 2. city of sails

Countries



" Well, there she is, lad, the City of Sails," Bruenor said to Wulfgar as the two looked down upon Luskan from a small knoll a few miles north of the city.

Wulfgar took in the view with a profound sigh of admiration. Luskan housed more than fifteen thousand - small compared to the huge cities in the south and to its nearest neighbor, Waterdeep, a few hundred miles farther down the coast. But to the young barbarian, who had spent all of his eighteen years among nomadic tribes and the small villages of Ten-Towns, the fortified seaport seemed grand indeed.

A wall encompassed Luskan, with guard towers strategically spaced at varying intervals. Even from this distance, Wulfgar could make out the dark forms of many soldiers pacing the parapets, their spear tips shining in the new light of the day.

" Not a promising invitation," Wulfgar noted.

" Luskan does not readily welcome visitors," said Drizzt, who had come up behind his two friends. " They may open their gates for merchants, but ordinary travelers are usually turned away."

" Our first contact is there," growled Bruenor. " And I mean to get in!"

Drizzt nodded and did not press the argument. He had given Luskan a wide berth on his original journey to Ten-Towns. The city's inhabitants, primarily human, looked upon other races with disdain. Even surface elves and dwarves were often refused entry. Drizzt suspected that the guards would do more to a drow elf than simply put him out.

" Get the breakfast fire burning," Bruenor continued, his angry tones reflecting his determination that nothing would turn him from his course. " We're to break camp early, an' make the gates 'fore noon. Where's that blasted Rumblebelly?"

Drizzt looked back over his shoulder in the direction of the camp. " Asleep," he answered, though Bruenor's question was wholly rhetorical. Regis had been the first to bed and the last to awaken (and never without help) every day since the companions had set out from Ten-Towns.

" Well, give him a kick!" Bruenor ordered. He turned back to the camp, but Drizzt put a hand on his arm to stay him.

" Let the halfling sleep," the drow suggested. " Perhaps it would be better if we came to Luskan's gate in the less-revealing light of dusk."

Drizzt's request confused Bruenor for just a moment - until he looked more closely at the drow's sullen visage and recognized the trepidation in his eyes. The two had become so close in their years of friendship that Bruenor often forgot that Drizzt was an outcast. The farther they traveled from Ten-Towns, where Drizzt was known, the more he would be judged by the color of his skin and the reputation of his people.

" Aye, let 'im sleep," Bruenor conceded. " Maybe I could use a bit more, meself!"

They broke camp late that morning and set a leisurely pace, only to discover later that they had misjudged the distance to the city. It was well past sunset

and into the early hours of darkness when they finally arrived at the city's north gate.

The structure was as unwelcoming as Luskan's reputation: a single iron-bound door set into the stone wall between two short, squared towers was tightly shut before them. A dozen fur-capped heads poked out from the parapet above the gate and the companions sensed many more eyes, and probably bows, trained upon them from the darkness atop the towers.

"Who are you who come to the gates of Luskan?" came a voice from the wall.

"Travelers from the north," answered Bruenor. "A weary band come all the way from Ten-Towns in Icewind Dale!"

"The gate closed at sunset," replied the voice. "Go away!"

"Son of a hairless groll," grumbled Bruenor under his breath. He slapped his axe across his hands as though he meant to chop the door down.

Drizt put a calming hand on the dwarf's shoulder, his own sensitive ears recognizing the clear, distinctive click of a crossbow crank.

Then Regis unexpectedly took control of the situation. He straightened his pants, which had dropped below the bulge of his belly, and hooked his thumbs in his belt, trying to appear somewhat important. Throwing his shoulders back, he walked out in front of his companions.

"Your name, good sir?" he called to the soldier on the wall.

" I am the Nightkeeper of the North Gate. That is all you need to know!"

came the gruff reply. " And who - "

" Regis, First Citizen of Bryn Shander. No doubt you have heard my name or seen my carvings."

The companions heard whispers up above, then a pause. " We have viewed the scrimshaw of a halfling from Ten-Towns. Are you he?"

" Hero of the goblin war and master scrimshander," Regis declared, bowing low. " The spokesmen of Ten-Towns will not be pleased to learn that I was turned into the night at the gate of our favored trading partner."

Again came the whispers, then a longer silence. Presently the four heard a grating sound behind the door, a portcullis being raised, knew Regis, and then the banging of the door's bolts being thrown. The halfling looked back over his shoulder at his surprised friends and smiled wryly.

" Diplomacy, my rough dwarven friend," he laughed.

The door opened just a crack and two men slipped out, unarmed but cautious. It was quite obvious that they were well protected from the wall. Grim-faced soldiers huddled along the parapets, monitoring every move the strangers made through the sights of crossbows.

" I am Jierdan," said the stockier of the two men, though it was difficult to judge his exact size because of the many layers of fur he wore.

" And I am the Nightkeeper," said the other. " Show me what you have brought to trade."

" Trade?" echoed Bruenor angrily. " Who said anything about trade?" He slapped his axe across his hands again, drawing nervous shufflings from above. " Does this look like the blade of a stinkin' merchant?"

Regis and Drizzt both moved to calm the dwarf, though Wulfgar, as tense as Bruenor, stayed off to the side, his huge arms crossed before him and his stern gaze boring into the impudent gatekeeper.

The two soldiers backed away defensively and the Nightkeeper spoke again, this time on the edge of fury. " First Citizen," he demanded of Regis, " why do you come to our door?"

Regis stepped in front of Bruenor and steadied himself squarely before the soldier. " Er... a preliminary scouting of the marketplace," he blurted out, trying to fabricate a story as he went along. " I have some especially fine carvings for market this season and I wanted to be certain that everything on this end, including the paying price for scrimshaw, shall be in place to handle the sale."

The two soldiers exchanged knowing smiles. " You have come a long way for such a purpose," the Nightkeeper whispered harshly. " Would you not have been better suited to simply come down with the caravan bearing the goods?"

Regis squirmed uncomfortably, realizing that these soldiers were far too experienced to fall for his ploy. Fighting his better judgement, he reached under his shirt for the ruby pendant, knowing that its hypnotic powers could convince the Nightkeeper to let them through, but dreading showing the

stone at all and further opening the trail for the assassin that he knew wasn't far behind.

Jierdan started suddenly, however, as he noticed the figure standing beside Bruenor. Drizzt Do'Urden's cloak had shifted slightly, revealing the black skin of his face.

As if on cue, the Nightkeeper tensed as well and, following his companion's lead, quickly discerned the cause of Jierdan's sudden reaction. Reluctantly, the four adventurers dropped their hands to their weapons, ready for a fight they didn't want.

But Jierdan ended the tension as quickly as he had begun it, by bringing his arm across the chest of the Nightkeeper and addressing the drow openly. "Drizzt Do'Urden?" he asked calmly, seeing confirmation of the identity he had already guessed.

The drow nodded, surprised at the recognition.

"Your name, too, has come down to Luskan with the tales from Icewind Dale," Jierdan explained. "Pardon our surprise." He bowed low. "We do not see many of your race at our gates."

Drizzt nodded again, but did not answer, uncomfortable with this unusual attention. Never before had a gatekeeper bothered to ask him his name or his business. And the drow had quickly come to understand the advantage of avoiding gates altogether, silently slipping over a city's wall in the darkness and seeking the seedier side, where he might at least have a chance of

standing unnoticed in the dark corners with the other rogues. Had his name and heroics brought him a measure of respect even this far from Ten-Towns?

Bruenor turned to Drizzt and winked, his own anger dissipated by the fact that his friend had finally been given his due from a stranger.

But Drizzt wasn't convinced. He didn't dare hope for such a thing - it left him too vulnerable to feelings that he had fought hard to hide. He preferred to keep his suspicions and his guard as close to him as the dark cowl of his cloak. He cocked a curious ear as the two soldiers backed away to hold a private conversation.

"I care not of his name," he heard the Nightkeeper whisper at Jierdan. "No dwarf elf shall pass my gate!"

"You err," Jierdan retorted. "These are the heroes of Ten-Towns. The halfling is truly First Citizen of Bryn Shander, the dwarf a ranger with a deadly, but undeniably honorable, reputation, and the dwarf - note the foaming mug standard on his shield - is Bruenor Battlehammer, leader of his clan in the dale."

"And what of the giant barbarian?" asked the Nightkeeper, using a sarcastic tone in an attempt to sound unimpressed, though he was obviously a bit nervous. "What rogue might he be?"

Jierdan shrugged. "His great size, his youth, and a measure of control beyond his years. It seems unlikely to me that he should be here, but he might be the young king of the tribes that the tale-tellers have spoken of. We should not turn these travelers away; the consequences may be grave."

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" What could Luskan possibly fear from the puny settlements in Icewind Dale?" the Nightkeeper barked.

" There are other trading ports," Jierdan retorted. " Not every battle is fought with a sword. The loss of Ten-Towns' scrimshaw would not be viewed favorably by our merchants, nor by the trading ships that put in each season."

The Nightkeeper scrutinized the four strangers again. He didn't trust them at all, despite his companion's grand claims, and he didn't want them in his city. But he knew, too, that if his suspicions were wrong and he did something to jeopardize the scrimshaw trade, his own future would be bleak. The soldiers of Luskan answered to the merchants, who were not quick to forgive errors that thinned their purses.

The Nightkeeper threw up his hands in defeat. " Go in, then," he told the companions. " Keep to the wall and make your way down to the docks. The last lane holds the Cutlass, and you'll be warm enough there!"

Drizzt studied the proud strides of his friends as they marched through the door, and he guessed that they had also overheard pieces of the conversation. Bruenor confirmed his suspicions when they had moved away from the guard towers, down the road along the wall.

" Here, elf," the dwarf snorted, nudging Drizzt and being obviously pleased. " So the word's gone beyond the dale and we're heard of even this far south. What have ye to say o' that?"

Drizzt shrugged again and Bruenor chuckled, assuming that his friend was merely embarrassed by the fame. Regis and Wulfgar, too, shared in Bruenor's mirth, the big man giving the dwarf a good-hearted slap on the back as he slipped to the lead of the troupe.

But Drizzt's discomfort stemmed from more than embarrassment. He had noted the grin on Jierdan's face as they had passed, a smile that went beyond admiration. And while he had no doubts that some tales of the battle with Akar Kessel's goblin army had reached the City of Sails, it struck Drizzt odd that a simple soldier knew so much about him and his friends, while the gatekeeper, solely responsible for determining who passed into the city, knew nothing.

Luskan's streets were tightly packed with two - and three-story buildings, a reflection of the desperation of the people there to huddle within the safety of the city's high wall, away from the ever-present dangers of the savage northland. An occasional tower, a guard post, perhaps, or a prominent citizen's or guild's way to show superiority, sprouted from the roofline. A wary city, Luskan survived, even flourished, in the dangerous frontier by holding fast to an attitude of alertness that often slipped over the line into paranoia. It was a city of shadows, and the four visitors this night keenly felt the curious and dangerous stares peeking out from every darkened hole as they made their way.

The docks harbored the roughest section of the city, where thieves, outlaws, and beggars abounded in their narrow alleys and shadowed crannies. A

perpetual ground fog wafted in from the sea, blurring the already dim avenues into even more mysterious pathways.

Such was the lane the four friends found themselves turning down, the last lane before the piers themselves, a particularly decrepit run called Half-Moon Street. Regis, Drizzt, and Bruenor knew immediately that they had entered a collecting ground for vagabonds and ruffians, and each put a hand to his weapon. Wulfgar walked openly and without fear, although he, too, sensed the threatening atmosphere. Not understanding that the area was atypically foul, he was determined to approach his first experience with civilization with an open mind.

" There's the place," said Bruenor, indicating a small group, probably thieves, congregating before the doorway of a tavern. The weatherbeaten sign above the door named the place the Cutlass.

Regis swallowed hard, a frightening mixture of emotions welling within him. In his early days as a thief in Calimport, he had frequented many places like this, but his familiarity with the environment only added to his apprehension. The forbidden allure of business done in the shadows of a dangerous tavern, he knew, could be as deadly as the hidden knives of the rogues at every table. " You truly want to go in there?" he asked his friends squeamishly.

" No arguing from ye!" Bruenor snapped back. " Ye knew the road ahead when ye joined us in the dale. Don't ye be whining now!"

" You are well guarded," Drizzt put in to comfort Regis.

Overly proud in his inexperience, Wulfgar pressed the statement even further. "What cause would they have to do us harm? Surely we have done no wrong," he demanded. Then he proclaimed loudly to challenge the shadows, "Fear not, little friend. My hammer shall sweep aside any who stand against us!"

"The pride o' youth," Bruenor grumbled as he, Regis, and Drizzt exchanged incredulous looks.

The atmosphere inside the Cutlass was in accord with the decay and rabble that marked the place outside. The tavern portion of the building was a single open room, with a long bar defensively positioned in the corner of the rear wall, directly across from the door. A staircase rose up from the side of the bar to the structure's second level, a staircase more often used by painted, overperfumed women and their latest companions than by guests of the inn. Indeed, merchant sailors who put into Luskan usually came ashore only for brief periods of excitement and entertainment, returning to the safety of their vessels if they could manage it before the inevitable drunken sleep left them vulnerable.

More than anything else, though, the tavern at the Cutlass was a room of the senses, with myriad sounds and sights and smells. The aroma of alcohol, from strong ale and cheap wine to rarer and more powerful beverages, permeated every corner. A haze of smoke from exotic pipe-weeds, like the mist outside, blurred the harsh reality of the images into softer, dreamlike sensations.

Drizzt led the way to an empty table tucked beside the door, while Bruenor approached the bar to make arrangements for their stay. Wulfgar started after the dwarf, but Drizzt stopped him. " To the table," he explained. " You are too excited for such business; Bruenor can take care of it."

Wulfgar started to protest, but was cut short.

" Come on," Regis offered. " Sit with Drizzt and me. No one will bother a tough old dwarf, but a tiny halfling and a skinny elf might look like good sport to the brutes in here. We need your size and strength to deter such unwanted attention."

Wulfgar's chin firmed up at the compliment and he strode boldly toward the table. Regis shot Drizzt a knowing wink and turned to follow.

" Many lessons you will learn on this journey, young friend," Drizzt mumbled to Wulfgar, too softly for the barbarian to hear. " So far from your home."

Bruenor came back from the bar bearing four flagons of mead and grumbling under his breath. " We're to get our business finished soon," he said to Drizzt, " and get back on the road. The cost of a room in this orc-hole is open thievery!"

" The rooms were not meant to be taken for a whole night," Regis snickered.

But Bruenor's scowl remained. " Drink up," he told the dwarf. " Rat Alley is but a short walk, by the tellin's of the barmaid, and it might be that we can make contact yet this night."

Drizzt nodded and sipped the mead, not really wanting any of it, but hoping that a shared drink might relax the dwarf. The drow, too, was anxious to be gone from Luskan, fearful that his own identity - he kept his cowl pulled even tighter in the tavern's flickering torchlight - might bring them more trouble. He worried further for Wulfgar, young and proud, and out of his element. The barbarians of Icewind Dale, though merciless in battle, were undeniably honorable, basing their society's structure entirely on strict and unbending codes. Drizzt feared that Wulfgar would fall easy prey to the false images and treachery of the city. On the road in the wild lands Wulfgar's hammer would keep him safe enough, but here he was likely to find himself in deceptive situations involving disguised blades, where his mighty weapon and battle-prowess offered little help.

Wulfgar downed his flagon in a single gulp, wiped his lips with zeal, and stood. " Let us be going," he said to Bruenor. " Who is it that we seek?"

" Sit yerself back down and shut yer mouth, boy," Bruenor scolded, glancing around to see if any unwanted attention had fallen upon them. " This night's work is for me and the drow. No place for a too-big fighter like yerself! Ye stay here with Rumblebelly an' keep yer mouth shut and yer back to the wall!"

Wulfgar slumped back in humiliation, but Drizzt was glad that Bruenor seemed to have come to similar conclusions about the young warrior. Once again, Regis saved a measure of Wulfgar's pride.

" You are not leaving with them!" he snapped at the barbarian. " I have no desire to go, but I would not dare to remain here alone. Let Drizzt and

Bruenor have their fun in some cold, smelly alley. We'll stay here and enjoy a well-deserved evening of high entertainment!"

Drizzt slapped Regis's knee under the table in thanks and rose to leave.

Bruenor quaffed his flagon and leaped from his chair.

" Let's be going, then," he said to the drow. And then to Wulfgar, " Keep care of the halfling, and beware the women! They're mean as starved rats, and the only thing they aim to bite at is your purse!"

* * *

Bruenor and Drizzt turned at the first empty alleyway beyond the Cutlass, the dwarf standing nervous guard at its entrance while Drizzt moved down a few steps into the darkness. Convinced that he was safely alone, Drizzt removed from his pouch a small onyx statuette, meticulously carved into the likeness of a hunting cat, and placed it on the ground before him.

" Guenhwyvar," he called softly. " Come, my shadow."

His beckon reached out across the planes, to the astral home of the entity of the panther. The great cat stirred from its sleep. Many months had passed since its master had called, and the cat was anxious to serve.

Guenhwyvar leaped out across the fabric of the planes, following a flicker of light that could only be the calling of the drow. Then the cat was in the alley with Drizzt, alert at once in the unfamiliar surroundings.

" We walk into a dangerous web, I fear," Drizzt explained. " I need eyes where my own cannot go."

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Without delay and without a sound, Guenhwyvar sprang to a pile of rubble, to a broken porch landing, and up to the rooftops. Satisfied, and feeling much more secure now, Drizzt slipped back to the street where Bruenor waited.

" Well, where's that blasted cat?" Bruenor asked, a hint of relief in his voice that Guenhwyvar was actually not with the drow. Most dwarves are suspicious of magic, other than the magical enchantments placed upon weapons, and Bruenor had no love for the panther.

" Where we need him most," was the drow's answer.

He started off down Half-Moon Street. " Fear not, mighty Bruenor, Guenhwyvar's eyes are upon us, even if ours cannot return their protective gaze!"

The dwarf glanced all around nervously, beads of sweat visible at the base of his horned helm. He had known Drizzt for several years, but had never gotten comfortable around the magical cat.

Drizzt hid his smile under his cowl.

Each lane, filled with piles of rubble and refuse, appeared the same, as they made their way along the docks. Bruenor eyed each shadowed niche with alert suspicion. His eyes were not as keen in the night as those of the drow, and if he had seen into the darkness as clearly as Drizzt, he might have clutched his axe handle even more tightly.

But the dwarf and drow weren't overly concerned. They were far from typical of the drunkards that usually stumbled into these parts at night, and not easy prey for thieves. The many notches on Bruenor's axe and the sway of the two scimitars on the drow's belt would serve as ample deterrent to most ruffians.

In the maze of streets and alleyways, it took them a long while to find Rat Alley. Just off the piers, it ran parallel to the sea, seemingly impassable through the thick fog. Long, low warehouses lined both its sides, and broken crates and boxes cluttered the alley, reducing the already narrow passage in many places to single-file breadth.

" Nice place to be walkin' down on a gloomy night," Bruenor stated flatly.

" Are you certain that this is the lane?" Drizzt asked, equally unenthused about the area before them.

" By the words o' the merchant in Ten-Towns, if one's alive that can get me the map, the one be Whisper. An' the place to find Whisper is Rat Alley - always Rat Alley."

" Then on with it," said Drizzt. " Foul business is best finished quickly."

Bruenor slowly led the way into the alley. The two had barely gone ten feet when the dwarf thought he heard the click of a crossbow. He stopped short and looked back at Drizzt. " They're on us," he whispered.

" In the boarded window above and to the right of us," Drizzt explained, his exceptional night vision and hearing having already discerned the sound's

source. " A precaution, I hope. Perhaps a good sign that your contact is close."

" Never called a crossbow aimed at me head a good sign!" argued the dwarf.

" But on, then, and keep yerself at the ready. This place reeks of danger!" He started again through the rubble.

A shuffle to their left told them that eyes were upon them from that way as well. But still they continued, understanding that they couldn't have expected any different a scenario when they had started out from the Cutlass. Rounding a final mound of broken planks, they saw a slender figure leaning against one of the alleyway's walls, cloak pulled tightly against the chill of the evening mist.

Drizzt leaned over Bruenor's shoulder. " May that be the one?" he whispered.

The dwarf shrugged, and said, " Who else?" He took one more step forward, planted his feet firmly, wide apart, and addressed the figure. " I be looking for a man named Whisper," he called. " Might that be yerself?"

" Yes, and no," came the reply. The figure turned toward them, though the low-pulled cloak revealed little.

" What games do ye play?" Bruenor shot back.

" Whisper I am," replied the figure, letting the cloak slip back a little. " But for sure no man!"

They could see clearly now that the figure addressing them was indeed a woman, a dark and mysterious figure with long black hair and deeply set, <https://assignbuster.com/streams-of-silver-2-city-of-sails/>

darting eyes that showed experience and a profound understanding of survival on the street.