

Streams of silver 3. night life

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The Cutlass grew busier as the night wore on. Merchant sailors crowded in from their ships and the locals were quick into position to feed upon them. Regis and Wulfgar remained at the side table, the barbarian wide-eyed with curiosity at the sights around him, and the halfling intent on cautious observation.

Regis recognized trouble in the form of a woman sauntering toward them. Not a young woman, and with the haggard appearance all too familiar on the dockside, but her gown, quite revealing in every place that a lady's gown should not be, hid all her physical flaws behind a barrage of suggestions. The look on Wulfgar's face, his chin nearly level with the table, Regis thought, confirmed the halfling's fears.

" Well met, big man," the woman purred, slipping comfortably into the chair next to the barbarian.

Wulfgar looked at Regis and nearly laughed out loud in disbelief and embarrassment.

" You are not from Luskan," the woman went on. " Nor do you bear the appearance of any merchants now docked in port. Where are you from?"

" The north," Wulfgar stammered. " The dale... Icewind."

Regis hadn't seen such boldness in a woman since his years in Calimport, and he felt that he should intervene. There was something wicked about such women, a perversion of pleasure that was too extraordinary. Forbidden fruit made easy. Regis suddenly found himself homesick for Calimport. Wulfgar would be no match for the wiles of this creature.

" We are poor travelers," Regis explained, emphasizing the " poor" in an effort to protect his friend. " Not a coin left, but with many miles to go."

Wulfgar looked curiously at his companion, not quite understanding the motive behind the lie.

The woman scrutinized Wulfgar once again and smacked her lips. " A pity," she groaned, and then asked Regis, " Not a coin?"

Regis shrugged helplessly.

" A pity it is," the woman repeated, and she rose to leave.

Wulfgar's face blushed a deep red as he began to comprehend the true motives behind the meeting.

Something stirred in Regis, as well. A longing for the old days, running in Calimport's bowery, tugged at his heart beyond his strength to resist. As the woman started past him, he grabbed her elbow. " Not a coin," he explained to her inquiring face, " but this." He pulled the ruby pendant out from under his coat and set it dangling at the end of its chain. The sparkles caught the woman's greedy eye at once and the magical gemstone sucked her into its hypnotic entrancement. She sat down again, this time in the chair closest to Regis, her eyes never leaving the depths of the wondrous, spinning ruby.

Only confusion prevented Wulfgar from erupting in outrage at the betrayal, the blur of thoughts and emotions in his mind showing themselves as no more than a blank stare.

Regis caught the barbarian's look, but shrugged it away with his typical penchant for dismissing negative emotions, such as guilt. Let the morrow's dawn expose his ploy for what it was; the conclusion did not diminish his ability to enjoy this night. "Luskan's night bears a chill wind," he said to the woman.

She put a hand on his arm. "We'll find you a warm bed, have no fear."

The halfling's smile nearly took in his ears.

Wulfgar had to catch himself from falling off of his chair.

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Bruenor regained his composure quickly, not wanting to insult Whisper, or to let her know that his surprise in finding a woman gave her a bit of an advantage over him. She knew the truth, though, and her smile left Bruenor even more flustered. Selling information in a setting as dangerous as Luskan's dockside meant a constant dealing with murderers and thieves, and even within the structure of an intricate support network it was a job that demanded a hardened hide. Few who sought Whisper's services could hide their obvious surprise at finding a young and alluring woman practising such a trade.

Bruenor's respect for the informant did not diminish, though, despite his surprise, for the reputation Whisper had earned had come to him across hundreds of miles. She was still alive, and that fact alone told the dwarf that she was formidable.

Drizzt was considerably less taken aback by the discovery. In the dark cities of the drow elves, females normally held higher stations than males, and were often more deadly. Drizzt understood the advantage Whisper carried over male clients who tended to underestimate her in the male-dominated societies of the dangerous northland.

Anxious to get this business finished and get back on the road, the dwarf came straight to the purpose of the meeting. " I be needing a map," he said, " and been told that yerself was the one to get it."

" I possess many maps," the woman replied coolly.

" One of the north," Bruenor explained. " From the sea to the desert, and rightly naming the places in the ways o' what races live there!"

Whisper nodded. " The price shall be high, good dwarf," she said, her eyes glinting at the mere notion of gold.

Bruenor tossed her a small pouch of gems. " This should pay for yer trouble," he growled, never pleased to be relieved of money.

Whisper emptied the contents into her hand and scrutinized the rough stones. She nodded as she slipped them back into the pouch, aware of their considerable value.

" Hold!" Bruenor squawked as she began to tie the pouch to her belt. " Ye'll be taking none o' me stones till I be seeing the map!"

"Of course," the woman replied with a disarming smile. "Wait here. I shall return in a short while with the map you desire." She tossed the pouch back to Bruenor and spun about suddenly, her cloak snapping up and carrying a gust of the fog with it. In the flurry, there came a sudden flash, and the woman was gone.

Bruenor jumped back and grabbed at his axe handle. "What sorcerous treachery is this?" he cried.

Drizzt, unimpressed, put a hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Calm, mighty dwarf," he said. "A minor trick and no more, masking her escape in the fog and the flash." He pointed toward a small pile of boards. "Into that sewer drain."

Bruenor followed the line of the dwarf's arm and relaxed. The lip of an open hole was barely visible, its grate leaning against the warehouse wall a few feet farther down the alley.

"Ye know these kind better than meself, elf," the dwarf stated, flustered at his lack of experience in handling the rogues of a city street. "Does she mean to bargain fair, or do we sit here, set up for her thievin' dogs to plunder?"

"No to both," answered Drizzt. "Whisper would not be alive if she collared clients for thieves. But I would hardly expect any arrangement she might strike with us to be a fair bargain."

Bruenor took note that Drizzt had slipped one of his scimitars free of its sheath as he spoke. " Not a trap, eh?" the dwarf asked again, indicating the readied weapon.

" By her people, no," Drizzt replied. " But the shadows conceal many other eyes."

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More eyes than just Wulfgar's had fallen upon the halfling and the woman.

The hardy rogues of Luskan's dockside often took great sport in tormenting creatures of less physical stature, and halflings were among their favorite targets. This particular evening, a huge, overstuffed man with furry eyebrows and beard bristles that caught the foam from his ever-full mug dominated the conversation at the bar, boasting of impossible feats of strength and threatening everybody around him with a beating if the flow of ale slowed in the least.

All of the men gathered around him at the bar, men who knew him, or of him, nodded their heads in enthusiastic agreement with his every word, propping him up on a pedestal of compliments to dispel their own fears of him. But the fat man's ego needed further sport, a new victim to cow, and as his gaze floated around the perimeter of the tavern, it naturally fell upon Regis and his large, but obviously young friend. The spectacle of a halfling wooing the highest priced lady at the Cutlass presented an opportunity too tempting for the fat man to ignore.

" Here now, pretty lady," he slobbered, ale spouting with every word. " Think the likes of a half-a-man'll make the night for ye?" The crowd around the bar, anxious to keep in the fat man's high regard, exploded into overzealous laughter.

The woman had dealt with this man before and she had seen others fall painfully before him. She tossed him a concerned look, but remained firmly tied to the pull of the ruby pendant. Regis, though, immediately looked away from the fat man, turning his attention to where he suspected the trouble most likely would begin - to the other side of the table and Wulfgar.

He found his worries justified. The proud barbarian's knuckles whitened from the grasp he had on the table, and the seething look in his eye told Regis that he was on the verge of exploding.

" Let the taunts pass!" Regis insisted. " This is not worth a moment of your time!"

Wulfgar didn't relax a bit, his glare never releasing his adversary. He could brush away the fat man's insults, even those cutting at Regis and the woman. But Wulfgar understood the motivation behind those insults. Through exploitation of his less-able friends, Wulfgar was being challenged by the bully. How many others had fallen victim to this hulking slob? he wondered. Perhaps it was time for the fat man to learn some humility.

Recognizing some potential for excitement, the grotesque bully came a few steps closer.

" There, move a bit, half-a-man," he demanded, waving Regis aside.

Regis took a quick inventory of the tavern's patrons. Surely there were many, in here who might jump in for his cause against the fat man and his obnoxious cronies. There was even a member of the official city guard, a group held in high respect in every section of Luskan.

Regis interrupted his scan for a moment and looked at the soldier. How out of place the man seemed in a dog-infested spittoon like the Cutlass. More curious still, Regis knew the man as Jierdan, the soldier at the gate who had recognized Drizzt and had arranged for them to pass into the city just a couple of hours earlier.

The fat man came a step closer, and Regis didn't have time to ponder the implications.

Hands on hips, the huge blob stared down at him. Regis felt his heart pumping, the blood coursing through his veins, as it always did in this type of on-the-edge confrontation that had marked his days in Calimport. And now, like then, he had every intention of finding a way to run away.

But his confidence dissipated when he remembered his companion.

Less experienced, and Regis would be quick to say, " less wise!" Wulfgar would not let the challenge go unanswered. One spring of his long legs easily carried him over the table and placed him squarely between the fat man and Regis. He returned the fat man's ominous glare with equal intensity.

The fat man glanced to his friends at the bar, fully aware that his proud young opponent's distorted sense of honor would prevent a first strike. "Well, look ye here," he laughed, his lips turned back in drooling anticipation, "seems the young one has a thing to say."

He started slowly to turn back on Wulfgar, then lunged suddenly for the barbarian's throat, expecting that his change in tempo would catch Wulfgar by surprise.

But although he was inexperienced in the ways of taverns, Wulfgar understood battle. He had trained with Drizzt Do'Urden, an ever-alert warrior, and had toned his muscles to their sharpest fighting edge. Before the fat man's hands ever came near his throat, Wulfgar had snapped one of his own huge paws over his opponent's face and had driven the other into the fat man's groin. His stunned opponent found himself rising into the air.

For a moment, onlookers were too amazed to react at all, except for Regis, who slapped a hand across his own disbelieving face and inconspicuously slid under the table.

The fat man outweighed three average men, but the barbarian brought him up easily over the top of his seven-foot frame, and even higher, to the full extension of his arms.

Howling in helpless rage, the fat man, ordered his supporters to attack. Wulfgar watched patiently for the first move against him.

The whole crowd seemed to jump at once. Keeping his calm, the trained warrior searched out the tightest concentration, three men, and launched the human missile, noting their horrified expressions just before the waves of blubber rolled over them, blasting them backward. Then their combined momentum smashed an entire section of the bar from its supports, knocking the unfortunate innkeeper away and sending him crashing into the racks holding his finest wines.

Wulfgar's amusement was short-lived, for other ruffians were quickly upon him. He dug his heels in where he was, determined to keep his footing, and lashed out with his great fists, swatting his enemies aside, one by one, and sending them sprawling into the far corners of the room. Fighting erupted all around the tavern. Men who could not have been spurred to action if a murder had been committed at their feet sprang upon each other with unbridled rage at the horrifying sight of spilled booze and a broken bar.

Few of the fat man's supporters were deterred by the general row, though. They rolled in on Wulfgar, wave after wave. He held his ground well, for none could delay him long enough for their reinforcements to get in. Still, the barbarian was being hit as often as he was connecting with his own blows. He took the punches stoically, blocking out the pain through sheer pride and his fighting tenacity that simply would not allow him to lose.

From his new seat under the table, Regis watched the action and sipped his drink. Even the barmaids were into it now, riding around on some unfortunate combatants' backs, using their nails to etch intricate designs into the men's faces. In fact, Regis soon discerned that the only other person

in the tavern who wasn't in the fight, other than those who were already unconscious, was Jierdan. The soldier sat quietly in his chair, unconcerned with the brawling beside him and interested only, it seemed, in watching and measuring Wulfgar's prowess.

This, too, disturbed the halfling, but once again he found that he didn't have time to contemplate the soldier's unusual actions. Regis had known from the start that he would have to pull his giant friend out of this, and now his alert eyes had caught the expected flash of steel. A rogue in the line directly behind Wulfgar's latest opponents had drawn a blade.

" Damn!" Regis muttered, setting down his drink and pulling his mace from a fold in his cloak. Such business always left a foul taste in his mouth.

Wulfgar threw his two opponents aside, opening a path for the man with the knife. He charged forward, his eyes up and staring into those of the tall barbarian. He didn't even notice Regis dart out from between Wulfgar's long legs, the little mace poised to strike. It slammed into the man's knee, shattering the kneecap, and sent him sprawling forward, blade exposed, toward Wulfgar.

Wulfgar side-stepped the lunge at the last moment and clasped his hand over the hand of his assailant. Rolling with the momentum, the barbarian knocked aside the table and slammed into the wall. One squeeze crushed the assailant's fingers on the knife hilt, while at the same time Wulfgar engulfed the man's face with his free hand and hoisted him from the ground. Crying out to Tempus, the god of battle, the barbarian, enraged at the

appearance of a weapon, slammed the man's head through the wooden planks of the wall and left him dangling, his feet fully a foot from the floor.

An impressive move, but it cost Wulfgar time. When he turned back toward the bar, he was buried under a flurry of fists and kicks from several attackers.

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" Here she comes," Bruenor whispered to Drizzt when he saw Whisper returning, though the dwarf's heightened senses had told him of her coming long before the dwarf was aware of it. Whisper had only been gone a half-hour or so, but it seemed much longer to the two friends in the alley, dangerously open to the sights of the crossbowmen and other thugs they knew were nearby.

Whisper sauntered confidently up to them. " Here is the map you desire," she said to Bruenor, holding up a rolled parchment.

" A look, then," the dwarf demanded, starting forward.

The woman recoiled and dropped the parchment to her side. " The price is higher," she stated flatly. " Ten times what you have already offered."

Bruenor's dangerous glare did not deter her. " No choice is left to you," she hissed. " You shall find no other who can deliver this unto you. Pay the price and be done with it!"

" A moment," Bruenor said with sudden calm. " My friend has a say in this." He and Drizzt moved a step away.

" She has discovered who we are," the drow explained, though Bruenor had already come to the same conclusion. " And how much we can pay."

" Be it the map?" Bruenor asked.

Drizzt nodded. " She would have no reason to believe that she is in any danger, not down here. Have you the money?"

" Aye," said the dwarf, " but our road is long yet, and I fear we'll be needing what I've got and more."

" It is settled then," Drizzt replied. Bruenor recognized the fiery gleam that flared up in the drow's lavender eyes. " When first we met this woman, we struck a fair deal," he went on. " A deal we shall honor."

Bruenor understood and approved. He felt the tingle of anticipation start in his blood. He turned back on the woman and noticed at once that she now held a dagger at her side instead of the parchment. Apparently she understood the nature of the two adventurers she was dealing with.

Drizzt, also noticing the metallic glint, stepped back from Bruenor, trying to appear unmenacing to Whisper, though in reality, he wanted to get a better angle on some suspicious cracks that he had noticed in the wall - cracks that might be the edgings of a secret door.

Bruenor approached the woman with his empty arms outstretched. " If that be the price," he grumbled, " then we have no choice but to pay. But I'll be seein' the map first!"

Confident that she could put her dagger into the dwarf's eye before either of his hands could get back to his belt for a weapon, Whisper relaxed and moved her empty hand to the parchment under her cloak.

But she underestimated her opponent.

Bruenor's stubby legs twitched, launching him up high enough to slam his helmet into the woman's face, splattering her nose and knocking her head into the wall. He went for the map, dropping the original purse of gems onto Whisper's limp form and muttering, " As we agreed."

Drizzt, too, had sprung into motion. As soon as the dwarf flinched, he had called upon the innate magic of his heritage to conjure a globe of darkness in front of the window harboring the crossbowmen. No bolts came through, but the angered shouts of the two archers echoed throughout the alley.

Then the cracks in the wall split open, as Drizzt had anticipated, and Whisper's second line of defense came rushing through. The dwarf was prepared, scimitars already in his hands. The blades flashed, blunt sides only, but with enough precision to disarm the burly rogue that stepped out. Then they came in again, slapping the man's face, and in the same fluidity of motion, Drizzt reversed the angle, slamming one pommel, and then the other, into the man's temples. By the time Bruenor had turned around with the map, the way was clear before them.

Bruenor examined the drow's handiwork with true admiration.

Then a crossbow quarrel ticked into the wall just an inch from his head.

" Time to go," Drizzt observed.

" The end'll be blocked, or I'm a bearded gnome," Bruenor said as they neared the exit to the alley. A growling roar in the building beside them, followed by terrified screams, brought them some comfort.

" Guenhwyvar," Drizzt stated, as two cloaked men burst out into the street before them and fled without looking back.

" Sure that I'd forgotten all about that cat!" cried Bruenor.

" Be glad that Guenhwyvar's memory is greater than your own," laughed Drizzt, and Bruenor, despite his feelings for the cat, laughed with him. They halted at the end of the alley and scouted the street. There were no signs of any trouble, though the heavy fog provided good cover for a possible ambush.

" Take it slow," Bruenor offered. " We'll draw less attention."

Drizzt would have agreed, but then a second quarrel, launched from somewhere down the alley, knocked into a wooden beam between them.

" Time to go!" Drizzt stated more decisively, though Bruenor needed no further encouragement, his little legs already pumping wildly as he sped off into the fog.

They made their way through the twists and turns of Luskan's rat maze, Drizzt gracefully gliding over any rubble barriers and Bruenor simply crashing through them. Presently, they grew confident that there was no pursuit, and they changed their pace to an easy glide.

The white of a smile showed through the dwarf's red beard as he kept a satisfied eye cocked over his shoulder. But when he turned back to view the road before him, he suddenly dove down to the side, scrambling to find his axe.

He had come face up with the magical cat.

Drizzt couldn't contain his laughter.

" Put the thing away!" Bruenor demanded.

" Manners, good dwarf," the drow shot back. " Remember that, Guenhwyvar cleared our escape trail."

" Put it away!" Bruenor declared again, his axe swinging at the ready.

Drizzt stroked the powerful cat's muscled neck. " Do not heed his words, friend," he said to the cat. " He is a dwarf, and cannot appreciate the finer magics!"

" Bah!" Bruenor snarled, though he breathed a bit easier as Drizzt dismissed the cat and replaced the onyx statue in his pouch.

The two came upon Half-Moon Street a short while later, stopping in a final alley to look for any signs of ambush. They knew at once that there had been

trouble, for several injured men stumbled, or were carried, past the alley's entrance.

Then they saw the Cutlass, and two familiar forms sitting on the street out in front.

" What're ye doin' out here?" Bruenor asked as they approached.

" Seems our big friend answers insults with punches," said Regis, who hadn't been touched in the fray. Wulfgar's face, though, was puffy and bruised, and he could barely open one eye. Dried blood, some of it his own, caked his fists and clothes.

Drizzt and Bruenor looked at each other, not too surprised.

" And our rooms?" Bruenor grumbled.

Regis shook his head. " I doubt it."

" And my coins?"

Again the halfling shook his head.

" Bah!" snorted Bruenor, and he stamped off toward the door of the Cutlass.

" I wouldn't..." Regis started, but then he shrugged and decided to let Bruenor find out for himself.

Bruenor's shock was complete when he opened the tavern door. Tables, glass, and unconscious patrons lay broken all about the floor. The innkeeper slumped over one part of the shattered bar, a barmaid wrapping his bloodied

head in bandages. The man Wulfgar had implanted into the wall still hung limply by the back of his head, groaning softly, and Bruenor couldn't help but chuckle at the handiwork of the mighty barbarian. Every now and then, one of the barmaids, passing by the man as she cleaned, gave him a little push, taking amusement at his swaying.

" Good coins wasted," Bruenor surmised, and he walked back out the door before the innkeeper noticed him and set the barmaids upon him.

" Hell of a row!" he told Drizzt when he returned to his companions. " Everyone in on it?"

" All but one," Regis answered. " A soldier."

" A soldier of Luskan, down here?" asked Drizzt, surprised by the obvious inconsistency.

Regis nodded. " And even more curious," he continued, " it was the same guard, Jierdan, that let us into the city." Drizzt and Bruenor exchanged concerned looks.

" We've killers at our backs, a busted inn before us, and a soldier paying us more mind than he should," said Bruenor.

" Time to go," Drizzt responded for the third time.

Wulfgar looked at him incredulously. " How many men did you down tonight?" Drizzt asked him, putting the logical assumption of danger right out

before him. " And how many of them would drool at the opportunity to put a blade in your back?"

" Besides," added Regis before Wulfgar could answer, " I've no desire to share a bed in an alley with a host of rats!"

" Then to the gate," said Bruenor.

Drizzt shook his head. " Not with a guard so interested in us. Over the wall, and let none know of our passing."

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An hour later, they were trotting easily across the open grass, feeling the wind again beyond the break of Luskan's wall.

Regis summed up their thoughts, saying, " Our first night in our first city, and we've betrayed killers, fought down a host of ruffians, and caught the attention of the city guard. An auspicious beginning to our journey!"

" Aye, but we've got this!" cried Bruenor, fairly bursting with anticipation of finding his homeland now that the first obstacle, the map, had been overcome.

Little did he or his friends know, however, that the map he clutched so dearly detailed several deadly regions, one in particular that would test the four friends to their limits - and beyond.