

PROLOGUE



He worked his scimitars in smooth, sure circular motions, bringing them through delicate and deceiving arcs. When the opportunity presented itself he stepped ahead and slashed down at a seemingly exposed shoulder with one blade. But the elf, bald head shining in the sunlight, was faster. The elf dropped a foot back and raised a long sword in a solid parry, then came forward in a straight rush, stabbing with a dirk, then stepping ahead again to thrust with the sword.

He danced in perfect harmony with the elf's fluid movements, twirling his twin scimitars defensively, each rolling down and over to ring against the thrusting sword. The elf stabbed again, mid-torso, then a third time, aiming low.

Over and down went the scimitars, the classic, double-block-low. Then up those twin weapons came as the agile, hairless elf tried to kick through the block.

The elf's kick was no more than a feint, and as the scimitars came up, the elf fell into a crouch and let fly the dagger. It sailed in before he could get the scimitars down

low enough to block, before he could set his feet and dodge aside.

A perfect throw for disembowelment, the devilish dagger caught him in the belly.

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“It’s Deudermont, to be sure,” the crewman called, tone growing frantic. “He’s caught sight of us again!”

“Bah, but he’s no way to know who we are,” another reminded.

“Just put us around the reef and past the jetties,” Sheila Kree instructed her pilot.

Tall and thick, with arms rock-hard from years of hard labor and green eyes that showed resentment for those years, the red-headed woman stared angrily at the pursuit. The three-masted schooner forced a turn from what would certainly have proven to be a most profitable pillaging of a lightly-armed merchant ship.

“Bring us a fog to block their watchin’,” the nasty pirate added, yelling at Bellany, *Bloody Keel’s* resident sorceress.

“A fog,” the sorceress huffed, shaking her head so that her raven-black hair bounced all about her shoulders.

The pirate, who more often spoke with her sword than with her tongue, simply did not understand. Bellany shrugged and began casting her strongest spell, a fireball. As she finished, she aimed the blast not at the distant, pursuing ship—which was long out of range, and which, if it was *Sea Sprite*, would have had no trouble repelling such an attack anyway—but at the water behind *Bloody Keel*.

The surf sizzled and spluttered in protest as the flames licked at it, bringing a thick steam up behind the fast-sailing ship. Sheila Kree smiled and nodded her approval. Her pilot, a heavysset woman with a big dimpled face and a yellow smile, knew the waters around the western tip of the Spine of the World better than anyone alive. She could navigate there on the darkest of nights, using no more than the sound of the currents splashing over the reefs.

Deudermont’s ship wouldn’t dare follow them through the dangerous waters ahead. Soon enough *Bloody Keel* would sail out beyond the third jetty, around the rocky bend, and into open waters if she chose, or turn even closer inland to a series of reefs and rocks—a place Sheila and her companions had come to call home.

“He’s no way to know ’twas us,” the crewman said again.

Sheila Kree nodded, and hoped the man was right—believed he probably was, for while *Sea Sprite*, a three-masted schooner, had such a unique signature of sails, *Bloody Keel* appeared to be just another small, unremarkable caravel. Like any other wise pirate along the Sword Coast, though, Sheila Kree had no desire to tangle with Deudermont’s legendary *Sea Sprite* or his skilled and dangerous crew, whoever he thought she was.

And she’d heard rumors that Deudermont was looking for her, though why the famous pirate-hunter might be singling her out, she could only guess. Reflexively, the powerful woman reached back over her shoulder to feel the mark she’d had branded upon herself, the symbol of her new-found power and ambition. As with all the women serving in Kree’s new sea and land group, Sheila wore the mark of the mighty warhammer she’d purchased from a fool in Luskan, the mark of Aegis-fang.

Was that, then, the source of Deudermont’s sudden interest? Sheila Kree had learned a bit of the warhammer’s history, had learned that its previous owner, a drunken brute named Wulfgar, was a known friend of Captain Deudermont. That was a connection, but the pirate woman couldn’t be certain. Hadn’t Wulfgar been tried in Luskan for attempting to murder Deudermont after all?

Sheila Kree shrugged it all away a short while later, as *Bloody Keel* worked dangerously through the myriad of rocks and reefs to the secret, sheltered Golden Cove. Despite the expert piloting, *Bloody Keel* connected more than once on a jagged shelf, and by the time they entered the bay, the caravel was listing to port.

No matter, though, for in this pirate cove, surrounded by towering walls of jagged rock, Sheila and her crew had the means to repair the ship. They took *Bloody Keel* into a large cave, the bottom of a system of tunnels and caverns that climbed through this easternmost point of the Spine of the World, natural tunnels now smoky from torches lining the walls, and rocky caverns made comfortable by the plunder of what was fast becoming the most successful pirate band anywhere along the northern reaches of the Sword Coast.

The small-framed, black-haired sorceress gave a sigh. She likely knew that with her magic she'd be doing most of the work on these latest repairs.

"Damn that Deudermont!" Bellany remarked.

"Damn our own cowardice, ye mean," one smelly sea dog remarked as he walked by.

Sheila Kree stepped in front of the grumbling man, sneered at him, and decked him with a right cross to the jaw.

"I didn't think he even saw us," the prone man protested, looking up at the red-haired pirate with an expression of sheer terror.

If one of the female crew of *Bloody Keel* crossed Sheila, they'd likely get a beating, but if one of the men stepped too far over the vicious pirate's line, he'd likely find out how the ship got its name. Keel-hauling was one of Sheila Kree's favorite games, after all.

Sheila Kree let the dog crawl away, her thoughts more focused on the latest appearance of Deudermont. She had to admit it was possible that *Sea Sprite* hadn't really even seen them, and likely, if Deudermont and his crew had spotted the distant sails of *Bloody Keel*, they didn't know the ship's true identity.

But Sheila Kree would remain cautious where Captain Deudermont was concerned. If the captain and his skilled crew were indeed determined to find her, then let it be here, at Golden Cove, the rocky fortress Sheila Kree and her crew shared with a formidable clan of ogres.

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The dagger struck him squarely—
—and bounced harmlessly to the floor.

"Drizzt Do'Urden would never have fallen for such a feint!" Le'lorinel, the bald-headed elf, grumbled in a high and melodic voice. The elf's eyes, blue flecked with gold, shone with dangerous intensity from behind the black mask that Le'lorinel always wore. With a snap of the wrist, the sword went back into its scabbard. "If he did, he would have been quick enough a'foot to avoid the throw, or quick enough a'hand to get a scimitar back down for a block," the elf finished with a huff.

"I am not Drizzt Do'Urden," the half-elf, Tunevec, said simply. He moved to the side of the roof and leaned heavily against a crenellation, trying to catch his breath.

"Mahskevic enchanted you with magical haste to compensate," the elf replied, retrieving the dagger and adjusting a sleeveless light brown tunic.

Tunevec snorted at his opponent. "You do not even know how Drizzt Do'Urden fights," he reminded. "Truly! Have you ever seen him in battle? Have you ever watched the movements—impossible movements, I say!—that you so readily attribute to him?"

If Le'lorinel was impressed by the reasoning, it did not show. "The tales of his fighting style and prowess are common in the northland."

"Common, and likely exaggerated," Tunevec reminded.

Le'lorinel's bald head was shaking before Tunevec finished the statement, for the elf had many times detailed the prowess of Drizzt to his half-elf sparring partner.

"I pay you well for your participation in these training sessions," Le'lorinel said. "You would do well to consider every word I have told you about Drizzt Do'Urden to be the truth and to emulate his fighting style to the best of your meager abilities."

Tunevec, who was naked to the waist, towed off his thin and muscular frame. He held the towel out to

Le'lorinel, who just looked at him with contempt, which was usual after such a failure. The elf walked past, right to the trapdoor that led down to the top floor of the tower.

"Your enchantment of stonewood is likely used up," the elf said with obvious disgust.

Alone on the roof, Tunevec gave a helpless chuckle and shook his head. He moved to retrieve his shirt but noted a shimmering in the air before he ever got there. The half-elf paused, watching as old Mahskevic the wizard materialized into view.

"Did you please him this day?" the gray-bearded old man asked in a voice that seemed pulled out of his tight throat. Mahskevic's somewhat mocking smile, full of yellow teeth, showed that he already knew the answer.

"Le'lorinel is obsessed with that one," Tunevec answered. "More so than I would ever have believed possible."

Mahskevic merely shrugged, as if that hardly mattered. "He has labored for me for more than five years, both to earn the use of my spells and to pay you well," the wizard reminded. "We searched for many months to even find you, one who seemed promising in being able to emulate the movements of this strange dark elf, Drizzt Do'Urden."

"Why waste the time, then?" the frustrated half-elf retorted. "Why do you not accompany Le'lorinel to find this wretched drow and be done with him once and for all. Far easier that would seem than this endless sparring."

Mahskevic chuckled, as if to tell Tunevec clearly that he was underestimating this rather unusual drow, whose exploits, as Le'lorinel and Mahskevic had uncovered them, were indeed remarkable. "Drizzt is known to be the friend of a dwarf named Bruenor Battlehammer," the wizard explained. "Do you know the name?"

Tunevec, putting on his gray shirt, looked to the old human and shook his head.

"King of Mithral Hall," Mahskevic explained. "Or at least, he was. I have little desire to turn a clan of wild dwarves against me—bane of all wizards, dwarves.

Making an enemy of Bruenor Battlehammer does not seem to me to be an opportunity for advancement of wealth or health.

"Beyond that, I have no grudge against this Drizzt Do'Urden," Mahskevic added. "Why would I seek to destroy him?"

"Because Le'lorinel is your friend."

"Le'lorinel," Mahskevic echoed, again with that chuckle. "I am fond of him, I admit, and in trying to hold my responsibilities of friendship, I often try to convince him that his course is self-destructive folly, and nothing more."

"He will hear none of that, I am sure," said Tunevec.

"None," agreed Mahskevic. "A stubborn one is Le'lorinel Tel'e'brenequette."

"If that is even his name," snorted Tunevec, who was in a rather foul mood, especially concerning his sparring partner. "I to you as you to me," he translated, for indeed Le'lorinel's name was nothing more than a variation on a fairly common Elvish saying.

"The philosophy of respect and friendship, is it not?" asked the old wizard.

"And of revenge," Tunevec replied grimly.

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Down on the tower's middle floor, alone in a small, private room, Le'lorinel pulled off the mask and slumped to sit on the bed, stewing in frustration and hatred for Drizzt Do'Urden.

"How many years will it take?" the elf asked, and finished with a small laugh, while fiddling with an onyx ring. "Centuries? It does not matter!"

Le'lorinel pulled off the ring and held it up before glittering eyes. It had taken two years of hard work to earn this item from Mahskevic. It was a magical ring, designed to hold enchantments. This one held four, the four spells Le'lorinel believed it would take to kill Drizzt Do'Urden.

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Of course, Le'lorinel knew that to use these spells in the manner planned would likely result in the deaths of both combatants.

It did not matter.

As long as Drizzt Do'Urden died, Le'lorinel could enter the netherworld contented.

Part 1

HINTS OF DARKNESS



t is good to be home. It is good to hear the wind of Icewind Dale, to feel its invigorating bite, like some reminder that I am alive.

That seems such a self-evident thing—that I, that we, are alive—and yet, too often, I fear, we easily forget the importance of that simple fact. It is so easy to forget that you are truly alive, or at least, to appreciate that you are truly alive, that every sunrise is yours to view and every sunset is yours to enjoy.

And all those hours in between, and all those hours after dusk, are yours to make of what you will.

It is easy to miss the possibility that every person who crosses your path can become an event and a memory, good or bad, to fill in the hours with experience instead of tedium, to break the monotony of the passing moments. Those wasted moments, those hours of sameness, of routine, are the enemy, I say, are little stretches of death within the moments of life.

Yes, it is good to be home, in the wild land of Icewind Dale, where monsters roam aplenty and rogues threaten the roads at every turn. I am more alive and more content than in many years. For too long, I struggled with the legacy of my dark past. For too long, I struggled with the reality of my longevity, that I would likely die long after Bruenor, Wulfgar, and Regis.

And Catti-brie.

What a fool I am to rue the end of her days without enjoying the days that she, that we, now have! What a fool I am to let the present slip into the past, while lamenting a potential—and only potential—future!

We are all dying, every moment that passes of every day. That is the inescapable truth of this existence. It is a truth that can paralyze us with fear, or one that can energize us with impatience, with the desire to explore and experience, with the hope—nay, the iron will!—to find a memory in every action. To be alive, under sunshine or under starlight, in weather fair or stormy. To dance every step, be they through gardens of bright flowers or through deep snows.

The young know this truth so many of the old, or even middle-aged, have forgotten. Such is the source of the anger, the jealousy, that so many exhibit toward the young. So many times have I heard the common lament, “If only I could go back to that age, knowing what I now know!” Those words amuse me profoundly, for in truth, the lament should be, “If only I could reclaim the lust and the joy I knew then!”

That is the meaning of life, I have come at last to understand, and in that understanding, I have indeed found that lust and that joy. A life of twenty years where that lust and joy, where that truth is understood might be more full than a life of centuries with head bowed and shoulders slumped.

I remember my first battle beside Wulfgar, when I led him in, against tremendous odds and mighty giants, with a huge grin and a lust for life. How strange that as I gained more to lose, I allowed that lust to diminish!

It took me this long, through some bitter losses, to recognize the folly of that reasoning. It took me this long, returned to Icewind Dale after unwittingly surrendering the Crystal Shard to Jarlaxle and completing at last (and forever, I pray) my relationship with Artemis Entreri, to wake up to the life that is mine, to appreciate the beauty around me, to seek out and not shy away from the excitement that is there to be lived.

There remain worries and fears, of course. Wulfgar is gone from us—I know not where—and I fear for his head, his heart, and his body. But I have accepted that his path

was his own to choose, and that he, for the sake of all three—head, heart, and body—had to step away from us. I pray that our paths will cross again, that he will find his way home. I pray that some news of him will come to us, either calming our fears or setting us into action to recover him.

But I can be patient and convince myself of the best. For to brood upon my fears for him, I am defeating the entire purpose of my own life.

That I will not do.

There is too much beauty.

There are too many monsters and too many rogues.

There is too much fun.

—Drizzt Do’Urden

Chapter 1

BACK TO BACK



is long white hair rolled down Catti-brie's shoulder, tickling the front of her bare arm, and her own thick auburn hair cascaded down Drizzt's arm and chest.

The two sat back to back on the banks of Maer Dualdon, the largest lake in Icewind Dale, staring up at the hazy summer sky. Lazy white clouds drifted slowly overhead, their white fluffy lines sometimes cut in sharp contrast as one of many huge schinlook vultures coasted underneath. It was the clouds, not the many birds that were out this day, that held the attention of the couple.

"A knucklehead trout on the gaff," Catti-brie said of one unusual cloud formation, a curving oblong before a trailing, thin line of white.

"How do you see that?" the dark elf protested with a laugh.

Catti-brie turned her head to regard her black-skinned, violet-eyed companion. "How do ye not?" she asked. "It's as plain as the white line o' yer own eyebrows."

Drizzt laughed again, but not so much at what the woman was saying, but rather, at how she was saying it.

She was living with Bruenor's clan again in the dwarven mines just outside of Ten-Towns, and the mannerisms and accent of the rough-and-tumble dwarves were obviously again wearing off on her.

Drizt turned his head a bit toward the woman, as well, his right eye barely a couple of inches from Catti-brie's. He saw the sparkle there—it was unmistakable—a look of contentment and happiness only now returning in the months since Wulfgar had left them, a look that seemed, in fact, even more intense than ever before.

Drizt laughed and looked back up at the sky. "Your fish got away," he announced, for the wind had blown the thin line away from the larger shape.

"It is a fish," Catti-brie insisted petulantly—or at least, the woman made it sound as if she was being petulant.

Smiling, Drizt didn't pursue the argument.

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"Ye durn fool little one!" Bruenor Battlehammer grumbled and growled, spittle flying as his frustration increased. The dwarf stopped and stamped his hard boot ferociously on the ground, then smacked his one-horned helmet onto his head, his thick orange hair flying wildly from beneath the brim of the battered helm. "I'm here thinkin' I got a friend on the council, and there ye go, lettin' Kemp o' Targos go and spout the price without even a fight!"

Regis the halfling, thinner than he had been in years and favoring one arm from a ghastly wound he'd received on his last adventure with his friends, just shrugged and replied, "Kemp of Targos speaks only of the price of the ore for the fishermen."

"And the fishermen buy a considerable portion of the ore!" Bruenor roared. "Why'd I put ye back on the council, Rumblebelly, if ye ain't to be making me life any easier?"

Regis gave a little smile at the tirade. He thought to remind Bruenor that the dwarf hadn't put him back on

the council, that the folk of Lonelywood, needing a new representative since the last one had wound up in the belly of a yeti, had begged him to go, but he wisely kept the notion to himself.

"Fishermen," the dwarf said, and he spat on the ground in front of Regis's hairy, unshod feet.

Again, the halfling merely smiled and sidestepped the mark. He knew Bruenor was more bellow than bite, and knew, too, that the dwarf would let this matter drop soon enough—as soon as the next crisis rolled down the road. Ever had Bruenor Battlehammer been an excitable one.

The dwarf was still grumbling when the pair rounded a bend in the path to come in full view of Drizt and Catti-brie, still sitting on the mossy bank, lost in their cloud-dreams and just enjoying each other's company. Regis sucked in his breath, thinking Bruenor might explode at the sight of his beloved adopted daughter in so intimate a position with Drizt—or with anyone, for that matter—but Bruenor just shook his hairy head and stormed off the other way.

"Durned fool elf," he was saying when Regis caught up to him. "Will ye just kiss the girl and be done with it?"

Regis's smile nearly took in his ears. "How do you know that he has not?" he remarked, for no better reason than to see the dwarf's cheeks turn as fiery red as his hair and beard.

And of course, Regis was quick to skitter far out of Bruenor's deadly grasp.

The dwarf just put his head down, muttering curses and stomping along. Regis could hardly believe that boots could make such thunder on a soft, mossy dirt path.

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The clamor in Brynn Shander's Council Hall was less of a surprise to Regis. He tried—he really did—to stay attentive to the proceedings, as Elderman Cassius, the highest-ranking leader in all of Ten-Towns, led the discussion

through mostly procedural matters. Always before had the ten towns been ruled independently, or through a council comprised of one representative of each town, but so great had Cassius's service been to the region that he was no longer the representative of any single community, even that of Brynn Shander, the largest town by far and Cassius's home. Of course, that didn't sit well with Kemp of Targos, leader of the second city of Ten-Towns. He and Cassius had often been at odds, and with the elevation of Cassius and the appointment of a new councilor from Brynn Shander, Kemp felt outnumbered.

But Cassius had continued to rise above it all, and over the last few months even stubborn Kemp had grudgingly come to admit that the man was acting in a generally fair and impartial manner.

To the councilor from Lonelywood, though, the level of peace and community within the council hall in Brynn Shander only added to the tedium. The halfling loved a good debate and a good argument, especially when he was not a principal but could, rather, snipe in from the edges, fanning the emotions and the intensity.

Alas for the good old days!

Regis tried to stay awake—he really did—when the discussion became a matter of apportioning sections of the Maer Dualdon deepwaters to specific fishing vessels, to keep the lines untangled and keep the tempers out on the lake from flaring.

That rhetoric had been going on in Ten-Towns for decades, and Regis knew no rules would ever keep the boats apart out there on the cold waters of the large lake. Where the knucklehead were found, so the boats would go, whatever the rules. Knucklehead trout, perfect for scrimshaw and good eating besides, were the staple of the towns' economy, the lure that brought so many ruffians to Ten-Towns in search of fortune.

The rules established in this room so far from the banks of the three great lakes of Icewind Dale were no more than tools councilors could use to bolster subsequent

tirades, when the rules had all been ignored.

By the time the halfling councilor from Lonelywood woke up, the discussion had shifted (thankfully) to more concrete matters, one that concerned Regis directly. In fact, the halfling only realized a moment later, the catalyst for opening his eyes had been Cassius's call to him.

"Pardon me for disturbing your sleep," the Elderman of Ten-Towns quietly said to Regis.

"I-I have been, um, working many days and nights in preparation for, uh, coming here," the halfling stammered, embarrassed. "And Brynn Shander is a long walk."

Cassius, smiling, held his hand up to quiet Regis before the halfling embarrassed himself even more. Regis didn't need to make excuses to this group, in any case. They understood his shortcomings and his value—a value that depended upon, to no small extent, the powerful friends he kept.

"Can you take care of this issue for us, then?" Kemp of Targos, who among the councilors was the least enamored of Regis, asked gruffly.

"Issue?" Regis asked.

Kemp put his head down and cursed quietly.

"The issue of the highwaymen," Cassius explained. "Since this newly sighted band is across the Shaengarne and south of Bremen, we know it would be a long ride for your friends, but we would certainly appreciate the effort if once again you and your companions could secure the roads into the region."

Regis sat back, crossed his hands over his still ample (if not as obviously as before) belly, and assumed a rather elevated expression. So that was it, he mused. Another opportunity for him and his friends to serve as heroes to the folk of Ten-Towns. This was where Regis was fully in his element, even though he had to admit he was usually only a minor player in the heroics of his more powerful friends. But in the council sessions, these were the moments when Regis could shine, when he could stand as tall as powerful Kemp. He considered the task Cassius had put to him.

Bremen was the westernmost of the towns, across the Shaengarne River, which would be low now that it was late summer.

"I expect we can be there within the tenday, securing the road," Regis said after the appropriate pause.

He knew his friends would agree, after all. How many times in the last couple of months had they gone after monsters and highwaymen? It was a role Drizzt and Catti-brie, in particular, relished, and one that Bruenor, despite his constant complaining over it, did not truly mind at all.

As he sat there, thinking it over, Regis realized that he, too, wasn't upset to learn that he and his friends would have to be out on the adventurous road again. Something had happened to the halfling's sensibilities on the last long road, when he'd felt the piercing agony of a goblin spear through his shoulder—when he'd nearly died. Regis hadn't recognized the change back then. At that time, all the wounded halfling wanted was to be back in his comfortable little home in Lonelywood, carving knucklehead bones into beautiful scrimshaw and fishing absently from the banks of Maer Dualdon. Upon arriving at the comfy Lonelywood home, though, Regis had discovered a greater thrill than expected in showing off his scar.

So, yes, when Drizzt and the others headed out to defeat this newest threat, Regis would happily go along to play whatever role he might.

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The end of the first tenday on the road south of Bremen seemed to be shaping up as another dreary day. Gnats and mosquitoes buzzed the air in ravenous swarms. The mud, freed of the nine-month lock of the Icewind Dale cold season, grabbed hard at the wheels of the small wagon and at Drizzt's worn boots as the drow shadowed the movements of his companions.

Catti-brie drove the one-horse wagon. She wore a long,

dirty woolen dress, shoulder to toe, with her hair tied up tight. Regis, wearing the guise of a young boy, sat beside her, his face all ruddy from hours and hours under the summer sun.

Most uncomfortable of all was Bruenor, though, and by his own design. He had constructed a riding box for himself, to keep him well-hidden, nailing it underneath the center portion of the wagon. In there he rode, day after day.

Drizzt picked his path carefully about the mud-pocked landscape, spending his days walking, always on the alert. There were far greater dangers out in the open tundra of Icewind Dale than the highwayman band the group had come to catch. While most of the tundra yetis were likely farther to the south now, following the caribou herd to the foothills of the Spine of the World, some might still be around. Giants and goblins often came down from the distant mountains in this season, seeking easy prey and easy riches. And on many occasions, crossing areas of rocks and bogs, Drizzt had to quick-step past the deadly, gray-furred snakes, some measuring twenty feet or more and with a poisonous bite that could fell a giant.

With all of that on his mind, the drow still had to keep the wagon in sight out of one corner of his eye, and keep his gaze scanning all about, in every direction. He had to see the highwaymen before they saw him if this was to be an easy catch.

Easier, anyway, the drow mused. They had a fairly good description of the band, and it didn't seem overwhelming in numbers or in skill. Drizzt reminded himself almost constantly, though, not to let preconceptions garner overconfidence. A single lucky bow shot could reduce his band to three.

So the bugs were swarming despite the wind, the sun was stinging his eyes, every mud puddle before him might conceal a gray-furred snake ready to make of him a meal or a tundra yeti hiding low in waiting, and a band of dangerous bandits was reputedly in the area, threatening him and his friends.

Drizzt Do'Urden was in a splendid mood!

He quick-stepped across a small stream, then slid to a stop, noting a line of curious puddles, foot-sized and spaced appropriately for a man walking swiftly. The drow went to the closest and knelt to inspect it. Tracks didn't last long out there, he knew, so this one was fresh. Drizzt's finger went under water to the second knuckle before his fingertip hit the ground beneath—again, the depth consistent with these being the tracks of an adult man.

The drow stood, hands going to the hilts of his scimitars under the folds of his camouflaging cloak. Twinkle waited on his right hip, Icingdeath on his left, ready to flash out and cut down any threats.

Drizzt squinted his violet eyes, lifting one hand to further shield them from the sunlight. The tracks went out toward the road, to a place where the wagon would soon cross.

There lay the man, muddy and lying flat out on the ground, in wait.

Drizzt didn't head toward him but stayed low and circled back, meaning to cross over the road behind the rolling wagon to look for similar ambush spots on the other side. He pulled the cowl of his gray cloak lower, making sure it concealed his white hair, then came up into a full run, his black fingers rubbing against his palms with every eager stride.

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Regis gave a yawn and a stretch, then leaned over against Catti-brie, nestling against her side and closing his big brown eyes.

"A fine time to be napping," the woman whispered.

"A fine time to be making any observers think that I'm napping," Regis corrected. "Did you see them back there, off to the side?"

"Aye," said Catti-brie. "A dirty pair."

As she spoke, the woman dropped one hand from the

reins and slid it under the front lip of the wagon seat. Regis watched her fingers close on the item, and he knew she was taking comfort that Taulmaril the Heartseeker, her devastating bow, was in place and ready for her.

In truth, the halfling took more than a little comfort from that fact as well.

Regis reached one hand over the back of the driver's bench and slapped it absently, but hard, against the wooden planking inside the wagon bed, the signal to Bruenor to be alert and ready.

"Here we go," Catti-brie whispered to him a moment later.

Regis kept his eyes closed, kept his hand tap-tapping, at a quicker pace now. He did peek out of his left eye just a bit, to see a trio of scruffy-looking rogues walking down the road.

Catti-brie brought the wagon to a halt. "Oh, good sirs!" she cried. "Can ye be helpin' me and me boy, if ye please? My man done got hisself killed back at the mountain pass, and I'm thinking we're a bit o' the lost. Been days going back and forth, and not knowing which way's best for the Ten-Towns."

"Very clever," Regis whispered, covering his words by smacking his lips and shifting in his seat, seeming very much asleep.

Indeed, the halfling was impressed by the way Catti-brie had covered their movements, back and forth along the road, over the last few days. If the band had been watching, they'd be less suspicious now.

"But I don't know what I'm to do!" Catti-brie pleaded, her voice taking on a shrill, fearful edge. "Me and me boy here, all alone and lost!"

"We'll be helping ye," said the skinny man in the center, red-headed and with a beard that reached nearly to his belt.

"But fer a price," explained the rogue to his left, the largest of the three, holding a huge battle-axe across his shoulders.

“A price?” Catti-brie asked.

“The price of your wagon,” said the third, seeming the most refined of the group, in accent and in appearance. He wore a colorful vest and tunic, yellow on red, and had a fine-looking rapier set in his belt on his left hip.

Regis and Catti-brie exchanged glances, hardly surprised.

Behind them they heard a bump, and Regis bit his lip, hoping Bruenor wouldn't crash out and ruin everything. Their plans had been carefully laid, their initial movements choreographed to the last step.

Another bump came from behind, but the halfling had already draped his arm over the bench and banged his fist on the backboard of the seat to cover the sound.

He looked to Catti-brie, at the intensity of her blue eyes, and knew it would be his turn to move very, very soon.

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He'll be the most formidable, Catti-brie told herself, looking to the rogue on the right, the most refined of the trio. She did glance to the other end of their line, though, at the huge man. She didn't doubt for a moment that he could cut her in two with that monstrous axe of his.

“And a bit o' the womanflesh,” the rogue on the left remarked, showing an eager, gap-toothed smile. The man in the middle smiled evilly, as well, but the one on the right glanced at the other two with disdain.

“Bah, but she's lost her husband, so she's said!” the burly one argued. “She could be using a good ride, I'd be guessing.”

The image of Khazid-hea, her razor-sharp sword, prodding the buffoon's groin, crossed Catti-brie's mind, but she did well to hide her smile.

“Your wagon will, perhaps, suffice,” the refined highwayman explained, and Catti-brie noted that he hadn't ruled out a few games with her completely.

Yes, she understood this one well enough. He'd try to take with his charms what the burly one would grab with his muscles. It would be more fun for him if she played along, after all.

“And all that's in it, of course,” the refined highwayman went on. “A pity we must accept this donation of your goods, but I fear that we, too, must survive out here, patrolling the roads.”

“Is that what ye're doing, then?” Catti-brie asked. “I'd've marked ye out as a bunch o' worthless thieves, meself.”

That opened their eyes!

“Two to the right and three to the left,” Catti-brie whispered to Regis. “The dogs in front are mine.”

“Of course they are,” Regis replied, and Catti-brie glanced over at him in surprise.

That surprise lasted only a moment, though, only the time it took for Catti-brie to remind herself that Regis understood her so very well, and had likely followed her emotions through the discussion with the highwayman as clearly as she had recognized them herself.

She turned back to the halfling, smiling wryly, and gave a slight motion, then turned back to the highwaymen.

“Ye've no call or right to be taking anything,” she said to the thieves, putting just enough of a tremor in her voice to make them think her bold front was just that, a front hiding sheer terror.

Regis yawned and stretched, then popped wide his eyes, feigning surprise and terror. He gave a yelp and leaped off the right side of the wagon, running out into the mud.

Catti-brie took the cue, standing tall, and in a single tug pulling off her phony woolen dress, tossing it aside and revealing herself as the warrior she was. Out came Khazid-hea, the deadly Cutter, and the woman reached under the lip of the wagon seat, pulling forth her bow. She leaped ahead, one stride along the hitch and to the ground beside the horse, pulling the beast forward in a sudden

rush, using its bulk to separate the big man from his two partners.

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The three thugs to the left hand side of the wagon saw the movement and leaped up from the mud, drawing swords and howling as they charged forward.

A lithe and quick-moving form rose up from a crouch behind a small banking to the side of them, silent as a ghost, and seeming almost to float, so quick were its feet moving, across the sloppy ground.

Shining twin scimitars came out from under the folds of a gray cloak; a white smile and violet eyes greeting the charging trio.

“Ere, get him!” one thug cried and all three went at the drow. Their movements, two stabbing thrusts and a wild slash, were uncoordinated and awkward.

Drizzt’s right arm went straight out to the side, presenting Icingdeath at a perfect angle to deflect the side-long slash way up high, while his left hand worked over and in, driving the concave side of Twinkle down across both stabbing blades. Down came Icingdeath as Twinkle retracted, to slam against the extended swords, and down and across came Twinkle, to hit them both again. A subtle dip and duck backward had the drow’s head clear of the outraged thug’s backhand slash, and Drizzt snapped Icingdeath up quickly enough to stick the man in the hand as the sword whistled past.

The thug howled and let go, his sword flying free.

But not far, for the drow was already in motion with his left hand. He brought Twinkle across to hook the blade as it spun free. What followed was a dance that mesmerized the three thugs. A swift movement of the twin scimitars had the sword spinning in the air, over, under, and about, with the drow playing a song, it seemed, on the weapon’s sides.

Drizzt finished with an over and about movement of

Icingdeath that perfectly presented the sword back to its original owner.

“Surely you can do better than that,” the smiling drow offered as the hilt of the sword landed perfectly in the hand of the stunned thug.

The man screamed and dropped his weapon to the ground, turning around and running off.

“It’s the Drizzit!” another of them shouted, similarly following.

The third, though, out of fear or anger or stupidity, came on instead. His sword worked furiously, forward in a thrust then back, then forward higher and in a round-about turn back down.

Or at least, it started down.

Up came the drow’s scimitars, hitting it alternately, twice each. Then over went Twinkle, forcing the sword low, and the drow went into a furious attack, his blades smashing hard, side to side against the overmatched thug’s sword, hitting it so fast and with such fury that the song sounded as one long note.

The man surely felt his arm going numb, but he tried to take advantage of his opponent’s furious movements by rushing forward suddenly, an obvious attempt to get in close and tie up the drow’s lightning-fast hands.

He found himself without his weapon, though he did not know how. The thug lunged forward, arms wide to capture his foe in a bear hug, to catch only air.

He must have felt a painful sting between his legs as the drow, somehow behind him, slapped the back side of a scimitar up between his legs, bringing him up to tip-toe.

Drizzt retracted the scimitar quickly, and the man had to leap up, then stumble forward, nearly falling.

Then Drizzt had a foot on the thug’s back, between his shoulder-blades, and the dark elf stomped him facedown into the muck.

“You would do well to stay right there until I ask you to get up,” Drizzt said. After a look at the wagons to ensure

that his friends were all right, the drow headed off at a leisurely pace to follow the trail of the fleeing duo.

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Regis did a fine impression of a frightened child as he scrambled across the muck, arms waving frantically, and yelling, "Help! Help!" all the way.

The two men Catti-brie had warned him of stood up to block his path. He gave a cry and scrambled out to the side, stumbling and falling to his knees.

"Oh, don't ye kill me, please misters!" Regis wailed pitifully as the two stalked in, wicked grins on their faces, nasty weapons in their hand.

"Oh, please!" said Regis. "Here, I'll give ye me dad's necklace, I will!"

Regis reached under the front of his shirt, pulled forth a ruby pendant, and held it up by a short length of chain, just enough to send it swaying and spinning.

The thugs approached, their grins melting into expressions of curiosity as they regarded the spinning gemstones, the thousand, thousand sparkles and the tantalizing way it seemed to catch and hold the light.

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Catti-brie let go of the trotting horse, dropped her bow and quiver to the side of the road, and skipped out to the side to avoid the passing wagon and to square up against the large rogue and his huge axe.

He came at her aggressively and clumsily, sweeping the axe across in front of him, then back across, then up and over with a tremendous downward chop.

Nimble Catti-brie had little trouble avoiding the three swipes. The miss on the third, the axe diving into the soft ground, left her the perfect opportunity to score a quick kill and move on. She heard the more refined rogue's voice urging the horse on and saw the wagon rumble

past, the other two highwaymen sitting on the driver's bench.

They were Bruenor's problem now.

She decided to take her time. She hadn't appreciated this one's lewd remarks.

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"Durn latch!" Bruenor grumbled, for the catch on his makeshift compartment, too full of mud from the wheels, would not budge.

The wagon was moving faster now, exaggerating each bump, bouncing the dwarf about wildly.

Finally, Bruenor managed to get one foot under him, then the other, steadying himself in a tight, tight crouch. He gave a roar that would make a red dragon proud, and snapped up with all his might, blasting his head right through the floorboards of the wagon.

"Ye think ye might be slowin' it down?" he asked the finely dressed highwayman driver and the red-headed thug sitting beside him. Both turned back, their expressions quite entertaining.

That is, until the red-headed thug drew out a dagger and spun about, leaping over the seat in a wild dive at Bruenor, who only then realized he wasn't in a very good defensive posture there, with his arms pinned to his sides by splintered boards.

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One of the rogues seemed quite content to stand there stupidly watching the spinning gemstone. The other, though, watched for only a few moments, then stood up straight and shook his head roughly, his lips flapping.

"'Ere now, ye little trickster!" he bellowed.

Regis hopped to his feet and snapped the ruby pendant up into his plump little hand.

"Don't let him hurt me!" he cried to the entranced man

as the other came forward, reaching for Regis's throat with both hands.

Regis was quicker than he looked, though, and he skittered backward. Still, the taller man had the advantage and would easily catch up to him.

Except that the other rogue, who knew beyond any doubt that this little guy here was a friend, a dear friend, slammed against his companion's side and drove him down to the ground. In a moment, the two rolled and thrashed, trading punches and oaths.

"Ye're a fool, and he's a trickster!" the enemy yelled and put his fist in the other one's eye.

"Ye're a brute, and he's a friendly little fellow!" the other countered, and countered, too, with a punch to the nose.

Regis gave a sigh and turned about to regard the battle scene. He had played out his role perfectly, as he had in all the recent exploits of the Companions of the Hall. But still, he thought of how Drizt would have handled these two, scimitars flashing brilliantly in the sunlight, and he wished he could do that.

He thought of how Catti-brie would have handled them, a combination, no doubt, of a quick and deadly slice of Cutter, followed by a well-aimed, devastating lightning arrow from that marvelous bow of hers. And again, the halfling wished he could do it like that.

He thought of how Bruenor would have handled the thugs, taking a smash in the face and handing out one, catching a smash on the side that might have felled a giant, but rolling along until the pair had been squashed into the muck, and he wished he could do it like that.

"Nah," Regis said. He rubbed his shoulder out of sympathy for Bruenor. Each had their own way, he decided, and he turned his attention to the combatants rolling about the muck before him.

His new pet was losing.

Regis took out his own weapon, a little mace Bruenor had crafted for him, and, as the pair rolled about, gave a

couple of well-placed *bonks* to get things moving in the right direction.

Soon his pet had the upper hand, and Regis was well on his way to success.

To each his own.

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She came ahead with a thrust, and the thug tore his axe free and set it into a blocking position before him, snapping it this way and that to intercept, or at least deflect, the stabbing sword.

Catti-brie strode forward powerfully, presenting herself too far forward, she knew, at least in the eyes of the thug.

For she knew that this one would underestimate her. His remarks when first he'd seen her told her pretty much the way this one viewed women.

Taking the bait, the thug shoved out with his axe, turning it head-out toward the woman and trying to slam her with it.

A planted foot and a turn brought her right by the awkward weapon, and while she could have pierced the man's chest with Khazid-hea, she used her foot instead, kicking him hard in the crotch.

She skittered back, and the man, with a groan, set himself again.

Catti-brie waited, allowing him to take the offensive again. Predictably, he worked his way around to launch another of those mighty—and useless—horizontal slashes. This time Catti-brie backed away only enough so the flying blade barely missed her. She turned as she came forward past the man's extended reach, pivoting on her left foot and back-kicking with her right, again slamming the man in the crotch.

She didn't really know why, but she just felt like doing that.

Again, the woman was out of harm's way before the thug could begin to react, before he had even recovered

from the sickening pain that was likely rolling up from his loins.

He did manage to straighten, barely, and he brought his axe up high and roared, rushing forward—the attack of a desperate opponent. Khazid-hea's hungry tip dived in at the man's belly, stopping him short. A flick of Catti-brie's wrist sent the deadly blade snapping down, and a quick step had the woman right up against the man, face to face.

"Bet it hurts," she whispered, and up came her knee, hard.

Catti-brie jumped back then leaped forward in a spin, her sword cutting across inside the angle of the downward-chopping axe, the fine blade shearing through the axe handle as easily as if it was made of candle wax. Catti-brie rushed back out again, but not before one last, well-placed kick.

The thug, his eyes fully crossed, his face locked in a grimace of absolute pain, tried to pursue, but the down cut of Khazid-hea had taken off his belt and all other supporting ties of his pants, dropping them to the man's ankles.

One shortened step, and another, and the man tripped up and tumbled headlong into the muck. Mud-covered, waves of pain obviously rolling through his body, he scrambled to his knees and swiped at the woman as she stalked in. Only then did he seem to realize he was holding no more than half an axe handle. The swing fell way short and brought the man too far out to the left. Catti-brie stepped in behind it, braced her foot on the brute's right shoulder, and pushed him back down in the muck.

He got up to his knees again, blinded by mud and swinging wildly.

She was behind him.

She kicked him to the muck again.

"Stay down," the woman warned.

Sputtering curses, mud, and brown water, the stubborn, stunned ruffian rose again.

"Stay down," Catti-brie said, knowing he would focus in on her voice.

He threw one leg out to the side for balance and shifted around, launching a desperate swing.

Catti-brie hopped over both the club and the leg, landing before the man and shifting her momentum into one more great kick to the crotch.

This time, as the man curled in the fetal position in the muck, making little mewling sounds and clutching at his groin, the woman knew he wouldn't be getting back up.

With a look over at Regis and a wide grin, Catti-brie started back for her bow.

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Desperation drove Bruenor's arm and leg forward, hand pushing and knee coming up to support it. A plank cracked apart, coming up as a shield against the charging dagger, and Bruenor somehow managed to free his hand enough to angle the plank to knock the dagger free of the red-haired man's hand.

Or, the dwarf realized, maybe the thug had just decided to let it go.

The man's fist came around the board and slugged him good in the face. There came a following left, and another right, and Bruenor had no way to defend, so he didn't. He just let the man pound on him while he wriggled and forced both of his hands free, and finally he managed to come forward while offering some defense. He caught the man's slugging left by the wrist with his right and launched his own left that seemed as if it would tear the thug's head right off.

But the ruffian managed to catch that arm, as Bruenor had caught his, and so the two found a stand-off, struggling in the back of the rolling and bouncing wagon.

"C'mere, Kenda!" the red-headed man cried. "Oh, we got him!" He looked back to Bruenor, his ugly face barely an inch from the dwarf's. "What're ye gonna do now, dwarfie?"

“Anyone ever tell ye that ye spit when ye talk?” the disgusted Bruenor asked.

In response, the man grinned stupidly and snorted and hocked, filling his mouth with a great wad to launch at the dwarf.

Bruenor’s entire body tightened, and like a singular giant muscle, like the body of a great serpent, perhaps, the dwarf struck. He smashed his forehead into the ugly rogue’s face, snapping the man’s head back so that he was staring up at the sky, so that, when he spit—and somehow, he still managed to do that—the wad went straight up and fell back upon him.

Bruenor tugged his hand free, let go of the man’s arm, and clamped one hand on the rogue’s throat, the other grabbing him by the belt. Up he went, over the dwarf’s head, and flying off the side of the speeding wagon.

Bruenor saw the composure on the face of the remaining ruffian as the man set down the reins and calmly turned and drew out his fine rapier. Calmly, too, went Bruenor, pulling himself fully from the compartment and reaching back in to pick up his many-notched axe.

The dwarf slapped the axe over his right shoulder, assuming a casual stance, feet wide apart to brace him against the bouncing.

“Ye’d be smart to just put it down and stop the stupid wagon,” he said to his opponent, the man waving his rapier out before him.

“It is you who should surrender,” the highwayman remarked, “foolish dwarf!” As he finished, he lunged forward, and Bruenor, with enough experience to understand the full measure of his reach and balance, didn’t blink.

The dwarf had underestimated just a bit, though, and the rapier tip did jab in against his mithral chest-piece, finding enough of a seam to poke the dwarf hard.

“Ouch,” Bruenor said, seeming less than impressed.

The highwayman retracted, ready to spring again. “Your clumsy weapon is no match for my speed and agility!” he proclaimed, and he started forward. “Hah!”

A flick of Bruenor’s strong wrist sent his axe flying forward, a single spin before embedding in the thrusting highwayman’s chest, blasting him backward to fall against the back of the driver’s seat.

“That so?” the dwarf asked. He stomped one foot on the highwayman’s breast and yanked his weapon free.

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Catti-brie lowered her bow, seeing that Bruenor had the wagon under control. She had the rapier-wielding highwayman in her sights and would have shot him dead if necessary.

Not that she believed for a moment that Bruenor Battlehammer would need her help against the likes of those two.

She turned to regard Regis, approaching from the right. Behind him came his obedient pet, carrying the captive across his shoulders.

“Ye got some bandages for the one Bruenor dropped?” Catti-brie asked, though she wasn’t very confident that the man was even alive.

Regis started to nod, but then shouted, “Left!” with alarm.

Catti-brie spun, Taulmaril coming up, and noted the target. The man Drizt had dropped to the mud was starting to rise.

She put an arrow that streaked and sparked like a bolt of lightning into the ground right beneath his rising head. The man froze in place, and seemed to be whimpering.

“Ye would do well to lie back down,” Catti-brie called from the road.

He did.

* * * * *

More than two hours later, the two escaping rogues crashed through the brush, the one break through the

ring of boulders that concealed their encampment. Still stumbling, still frantic, they pushed past the horses and moved around the stolen wagon, to find Jule Pepper, their leader, the strategist of the outfit and also the cook, stirring a huge caldron.

"Nothing today?" the tall black-haired woman asked, her brown eyes scrutinizing them. Her tone and her posture revealed the truth, though neither of the rogues were smart enough to catch on. Jule understood that something had happened, and likely, nothing good.

"The Drizzit," one of the rogues spurted, gasping for breath with every word. "The Drizzit and 'is friends got us."

"Drizzt?" Jules asked.

"Drizzit Dudden, the damned drow elf," said the other. "We was takin' a wagon—just a woman and her kid—and there he was, behind the three of us. Poor Walken got him in the fight, head up."

"Poor Walken," the other said.

Jule closed her eyes and shook her head, seeing something that the others apparently had not. "And this woman," she asked, "she merely surrendered the wagon?"

"She was puttin' up a fight when we runned off," said the first of the dirty pair. "We didn't get to see much."

"She?" Jule asked. "You mean Catti-brie? The daughter of Bruenor Battlehammer? You were baited, you fools!"

The pair looked at each other in confusion. "And we're payin' with the loss of a few, don't ye doubt," one finally said, mustering the courage to look back at the imposing woman. "Could'a been worse."

"Could it?" Jule asked doubtfully. "Tell me, then, did this dark elf's panther companion make an appearance?"

Again the two looked at each other.

As if in response, a low growl reverberated through the encampment, resonating as if it was coming from the ground itself, running into the bodies of the three rogues. The horses at the side of the camp neighed and stomped and tossed their heads nervously.

"I would guess that it did," Jule answered her own question, and she gave a great sigh.

A movement to the side, a flash of flying blackness, caught their attention, turning all three heads to regard the new arrival. It was a huge black cat, ten feet long at least, and with muscled shoulders as high as a tall man's chest.

"Drow elf's cat?" one of the dirty rogues asked.

"They say her name is Guenhwyvar," Jule confirmed.

The other rogue was already backing away, staring at the cat all the while. He bumped into a wagon then edged around it, moving right before the nervous and sweating horses.

"And so you ran right back to me," Jule said to the other with obvious contempt. "You could not understand that the drow *allowed* you to escape?"

"No, he was busy!" the remaining rogue protested.

Jule just shook her head. She wasn't really surprised it had ended like this, after all. She supposed that she deserved it for taking up with a band of fools.

Guenhwyvar roared and sprang into the middle of the camp, landing right between the pair. Jule, wiser than to even think of giving a fight against the mighty beast, just threw up her hands. She was about to instruct her companions to do the same when she heard one of them hit the ground. He'd fainted dead away.

The remaining dirty rogue didn't even see Guenhwyvar's spring. He spun around and rushed through the break in the boulder ring, crashing through the brush, thinking to leave his friends behind to fight while he made his escape, as he had done back on the road. He came through, squinting against the slapping branches, and did notice a dark form standing to the side and did notice a pair of intense violet eyes regarding him—just an instant before the hilt of a scimitar rushed up and slammed him in the face, laying him low.