

# Streams of silver 1. a dagger at their backs



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Book 1.

Searches

### 1. A Dagger at Their Backs

He kept his cloak pulled tightly about him, though little light seeped in through the curtained windows, for this was his existence, secretive and alone. The way of the assassin.

While other people went about their lives basking in the pleasures of the sunlight and the welcomed visibility of their neighbors, Artemis Entreri kept to the shadows, the dilated orbs of his eyes focused on the narrow path he must take to accomplish his latest mission.

He truly was a professional, possibly the finest in the entire realms at his dark craft, and when he sniffed out the trail of his prey, the victim never escaped. So the assassin was unbothered by the empty house that he found in Bryn Shander, the principal city of the ten settlements in the wasteland of Icewind Dale. Entreri had suspected that the halfling had slipped out of Ten-Towns. But no matter; if this was indeed the same halfling that he had sought all the way from Calimport, a thousand miles and more to the south, he had made better progress than he ever could have hoped. His mark had no more than a two-week head start and the trail would be fresh indeed.

Entreri moved through the house silently and calmly, seeking hints of the halfling's life here that would give him the edge in their inevitable confrontation. Clutter greeted him in every room - the halfling had left in a hurry, probably aware that the assassin was closing in. Entreri considered

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this a good sign, further heightening his suspicions that this halfling, Regis, was the same Regis who had served the Pasha Pook those years ago in the distant southern city.

The assassin smiled evilly at the thought that the halfling knew he was being stalked, adding to the challenge of the hunt as Entreri pitted his stalking prowess against his intended victim's hiding ability. But the end result was predictable, Entreri knew, for a frightened person invariably made a fatal mistake.

The assassin found what he was looking for in a desk drawer in the master bedroom. Fleeing in haste, Regis had neglected to take precautions to conceal his true identity. Entreri held the small ring up before his gleaming eyes, studying the inscription that clearly identified Regis as a member of Pasha Pook's thieves' guild in Calimport. Entreri closed his fist about the signet, the evil smile widening across his face.

" I have found you, little thief," he laughed into the emptiness of the room. " Your fate is sealed. There is nowhere for you to run!"

His expression changed abruptly to one of alertness as the sound of a key, in the palatial house's front door echoed up the hallway of the grand staircase. He dropped the ring into his belt pouch and slipped, as silent as death, to the shadows of the top posts of the stairway's heavy banister.

The large double doors swung open, and a man and a young woman stepped in from the porch ahead of two dwarves. Entreri knew the man, Cassius, the spokesman of Bryn Shander. This had been his home once, but he had

relinquished it several months earlier to Regis, after the halfling's heroic actions in the town's battle against the evil wizard, Akar Kessell, and his goblin minions.

Entreri had seen the other human before, as well, though he hadn't yet discovered her connection to Regis. Beautiful women were a rarity in this remote setting, and this young woman was indeed the exception. Shiny auburn locks danced gaily about her shoulders, the intense sparkle of her dark blue eyes enough to bind any man hopelessly within their depths.

Her name, the assassin had learned, was Catti-brie. She lived with the dwarves in their valley north of the city, particularly with the leader of the dwarven clan, Bruenor, who had adopted her as his own a dozen years before when a goblin raid had left her orphaned.

This could prove a valuable meeting, Entreri mused. He cocked an ear through the banister poles to hear the discussion below.

" He's been gone but a week!" Catti-brie argued.

" A week with no word," snapped Cassius, obviously upset. " With my beautiful house empty and unguarded. Why, the front door was unlocked when I came by a few days ago!"

" Ye gave the house to Regis," Catti-brie reminded the man.

" Loaned!" Cassius roared, though in truth the house had indeed been a gift. The spokesman had quickly regretted turning over to Regis the key to this palace, the grandest house north of Mirabar. In retrospect, Cassius

understood that he had been caught up in the fervor of that tremendous victory over the goblins, and he suspected that Regis had lifted his emotions even a step further by using the reputed hypnotic powers of the ruby pendant.

Like others who had been duped by the persuasive halfling, Cassius had come to a very different perspective on the events that had transpired, a perspective that painted Regis unfavorably.

" No matter the name ye call it," Catti-brie conceded, " ye should not be so hasty to decide that Regis has forsaken the house."

The spokesman's face reddened in fury. " Everything out today!" he demanded. " You have my list. I want all of the halfling's belongings out of my house! Any that remain when I return tomorrow shall become my own by the rights of possession! And I warn you, I shall be compensated dearly if any of my property is missing or damaged!" He turned on his heel and stormed out the doors.

" He's got his hair up about this one," chuckled Fender Mallot, one of the dwarves. " Never have I seen one whose friends swing from loyalty to hatred more than Regis!"

Catti-brie nodded in agreement of Fender's observation. She knew that Regis played with magical charms, and she figured that his paradoxical relationships with those around him were an unfortunate side effect of his dabblings.

" Do ye suppose he's off with Drizzt and Bruenor?" Fender asked. Up the stairs, Entreri shifted anxiously.

" Not to doubt," Catti-brie answered. " All winter they've been asking him to join in the quest for Mithril Hall, an' to be sure, Wulfgar's joining added to the pressure."

" Then the little one's halfway to Luskan, or more," reasoned Fender. " And Cassius is right in wantin' his house back."

" Then let us get to packing," said Catti-brie. " Cassius has enough o' his own without adding to the hoard from Regis's goods."

Entreri leaned back against the banister. The name of Mithril Hall was unknown to him, but he knew the way to Luskan well enough. He grinned again, wondering if he might catch them before they ever reached the port city.

First, though, he knew that there still might be some valuable information to be garnered here. Catti-brie and the dwarves set about the task of collecting the halfling's belongings, and as they moved from room to room, the black shadow of Artemis Entreri, as silent as death, hovered about them. They never suspected his presence, never would have guessed that the gentle ripple in the drapes was anything more than a draft flowing in from the edges of the window, or that the shadow behind a chair was disproportionately long.

He managed to stay close enough to hear nearly all of their conversation, and Catti-brie and the dwarves spoke of little else than the four adventurers

and their journey to Mithril Hall. But Entreri learned little for his efforts. He already knew of the halfling's famed companions - everyone in Ten-Towns spoke of them often: of Drizzt Do'Urden, the renegade drow elf, who had forsaken his dark-skinned people in the bowels of the Realms and roamed the borders of Ten-Towns as a solitary guardian against the intrusions of the wilderness of Icewind Dale; of Bruenor Battlehammer, the rowdy leader of the dwarven clan that lived in the valley near Kelvin's Cairn; and most of all, of Wulfgar, the mighty barbarian, who was captured and raised to adulthood by Bruenor, returned with the savage tribes of the dale to defend Ten-Towns against the goblin army, then struck up a truce between all the peoples of Icewind Dale. A bargain that had salvaged, and promised to enrich, the lives of all involved.

" It seems that you have surrounded yourself with formidable allies, halfling," Entreri mused, leaning against the back of a large chair, as Catti-brie and the dwarves moved into an adjoining room. " Little help they will offer. You are mine!"

Catti-brie and the dwarves worked for about an hour, filling two large sacks, primarily with clothes. Catti-brie was astounded with the stock of possessions Regis had collected since his reputed heroics against Kessel and the goblins - mostly gifts from grateful citizens. Well aware of the halfling's love of comfort, she could not understand what had possessed him to run off down the road after the others. But what truly amazed her was that Regis hadn't hired porters to bring along at least a few of his belongings. And the more of his treasures that she discovered as she moved through the palace, the more this whole scenario of haste and impulse bothered her. It was too out

of character for Regis. There had to be another factor, some missing element, that she hadn't yet weighed.

" Well, we got more'n we can carry, and most o' the stuff anyway!" declared Fender, hoisting a sack over his sturdy shoulder. " Leave the rest for Cassius to sort, I say!"

" I would no' give Cassius the pleasure of claiming any of the things," Catti-brie retorted. " There may yet be valued items to be found. Two of ye take the sacks back your rooms at the inn. I'll be finishing the work up here."

" Ah, yer too good to Cassius," Fender grumbled. " Bruenor had him marked right as a man taking too much pleasure in counting what he owns!"

" Be fair, Fender Mallot," Catti-brie retorted, though her agreeing smile belied any harshness in her tone. " Cassius served the towns well in the war and has been a fine leader for the people of Bryn Shander. Ye've seen as well as meself that Regis has a talent for putting up a cat's fur!"

Fender chuckled in agreement. " For all his ways of gettin' what he wants, the little one has left a row or two of ruffled victims!" He patted the other dwarf on the shoulder and they headed for the main door.

" Don't ye be late, girl," Fender called back to Catti-brie. " We're to the mines again. Tomorrow, no later!"

" Ye fret too much, Fender Mallot!" Catti-brie said, laughing.

Entreri considered the last exchange and again a smile widened across his face. He knew well the wake of magical charms. The " ruffled victims" that



Fender had spoken of described exactly the people that Pasha Pook had duped back in Calimport. People charmed by the ruby pendant.

The double doors closed with a bang. Catti-brie was alone in the big house - or so she thought.

She was still pondering Regis's uncharacteristic disappearance. Her continued suspicions that something was wrong, that some piece of the puzzle was missing, began to foster within her the sense that something was wrong here in the house, as well.

Catti-brie suddenly became aware of every noise and shadow around her. The "click-click" of a pendulum clock. The rustle of papers on a desk in front of an open window. The swish of drapes. The scutterings of a mouse within the wooden walls.

Her eyes darted back to the drapes, still trembling slightly from their last movement. It could have been a draft through a crack in the window, but the alert woman suspected differently. Reflexively dropping to a crouch and reaching for the dagger on her hip, she started toward the open doorway a few feet to the side of the drapes.

Entreri had moved quickly. Suspecting that more could yet be learned from Catti-brie, and not willing to pass up the opportunity offered by the dwarves' departure, he had slipped into the most favorable position for an attack and now waited patiently atop the narrow perch of the open door, balanced as easily as a cat on a window sill. He listened for her approach, his dagger turning over casually in his hand.

Catti-brie sensed the danger as soon as she reached the doorway and saw the black form dropping to her side. But as quick as her reactions were, her own dagger was not halfway from its sheath before the thin fingers of a cool hand had clamped over her mouth, stifling a cry, and the razored edge of a jeweled dagger had creased a light line on her throat.

She was stunned and appalled. Never had she seen a man move so quickly, and the deadly precision of Entreri's strike unnerved her. A sudden tenseness in his muscles assured her that if she persisted in drawing her weapon, she would be dead long before she could use it. Releasing the hilt, she made no further move to resist.

The assassin's strength also surprised her as he easily lifted her to a chair. He was a small man, slender as an elf and barely as tall as she, but every muscle on his compact frame was toned to its finest fighting edge. His very presence exuded an aura of strength and an unshakable confidence. This, too, unnerved Catti-brie, because it wasn't the brash cockiness of an exuberant youngster, but the cool air of superiority of one who had seen a thousand fights and had never been bested.

Catti-brie's eyes never turned from Entreri's face as he quickly tied her to the chair. His angular features, striking cheekbones and a strong jaw line, were only sharpened by the straight cut of his raven black hair. The shadow of beard that darkened his face appeared as if no amount of shaving could ever lighten it. Far from unkempt, though, everything about the man spoke of control. Catti-brie might even have considered him handsome, except for his eyes.

Their gray showed no sparkle. Lifeless, devoid of any hint of compassion or humanity, they marked this man as an instrument of death and nothing more.

" What do ye want o' me?" Catti-brie asked when she mustered the nerve.

Entreri answered with a stinging slap across her face. " The ruby pendant!" he demanded suddenly. " Does the halfling still wear the ruby pendant?"

Catti-brie fought to stifle the tears welling in her eyes. She was disoriented and off guard and could not respond immediately to the man's question.

The jeweled dagger flashed before her eyes and slowly traced the circumference of her face.

" I have not much time," Entreri declared flatly. " You will tell me what I need to know. The longer it takes you to answer, the more pain you will feel."

His words were calm and spoken with honesty.

Catti-brie, toughened under Bruenor's own tutelage, found herself unnerved. She had faced and defeated goblins before, even a horrid troll once, but this collected killer terrified her. She tried to respond, but her trembling jaw would allow no words.

The dagger flashed again.

" Regis wears it!" Catti-brie shrieked, a tear tracing a solitary line down each of her cheeks.

Entreri nodded and smiled slightly. " He is with the dark elf, the dwarf, and the barbarian," he said matter-of-factly. " And they are on the road to Luskan. And from there, to a place called Mithril Hall. Tell me of Mithril Hall, dear girl." He scraped the blade on his own cheek, its fine edge poignantly clearing a small patch of beard. " Where does it lie?"

Catti-brie realized that her inability to answer would probably spell her end. " I-I know not," she stammered boldly, regaining a measure of the discipline that Bruenor had taught her, though her eyes never left the glint of the deadly blade.

" A pity," Entreri replied. " Such a pretty face..."

" Please," Catti-brie said as calmly as she could with the dagger moving toward her. " Not a one knows! Not even Bruenor! To find it is his quest."

The blade stopped suddenly and Entreri turned his head to the side, eyes narrowed and all of his muscles taut and alert.

Catti-brie hadn't heard the turn of the door handle, but the deep voice of Fender Mallot echoing down the hallway explained the assassin's actions.

"Ere, where are ye, girl?"

Catti-brie tried to yell, " Run!" and her own life be damned, but Entreri's quick backhand dazed her and drove the word out as an indecipherable grunt.

Her head lolling to the side, she just managed to focus her vision as Fender and Grollo, battle-axes in hand, burst into the room. Entreri stood ready to meet them, jeweled dagger in one hand and a saber in the other.

For an instant, Catti-brie was filled with elation. The dwarves of Ten-Towns were an iron-fisted battalion of hardened warriors, with Fender's prowess in battle among the clan second only to Bruenor's.

Then she remembered who they faced, and despite their apparent advantage, her hopes were washed away by a wave of undeniable conclusions. She had witnessed the blur of the assassin's movements, the uncanny precision of his cuts.

Revulsion welling in her throat, she couldn't even gasp for the dwarves to flee.

Even had they known the depths of the horror in the man standing before them, Fender and Grollo would not have turned away. Outrage blinds a dwarven fighter from any regard for personal safety, and when these two saw their beloved Catti-brie bound to the chair, their charge at Entreri came by instinct.

Fueled by unbridled rage, their first attacks roared in with every ounce of strength they could call upon. Conversely, Entreri started slowly, finding a rhythm and allowing the sheer fluidity of his motions to build his momentum. At times he seemed barely able to parry or dodge the ferocious swipes. Some missed their mark by barely an inch, and the near hits spurred Fender and Grollo on even further.

But even with her friends pressing the attack, Catti-brie understood that they were in trouble. Entreri's hands seemed to talk to each other, so perfect was the complement of their movements as they positioned the jeweled dagger and saber. The synchronous shufflings of his feet kept him in complete balance throughout the melee. His was a dance of dodges, parries, and counterslashes.

His was a dance of death.

Catti-brie had seen this before, the telltale methods of the finest swordsman in all of Icewind Dale. The comparison to Drizzt Do'Urden was inescapable; their grace and movements were so alike, with every part of their bodies working in harmony.

But they remained strikingly different, a polarity of morals that subtly altered the aura of the dance.

The drow ranger in battle was an instrument of beauty to behold, a perfect athlete pursuing his chosen course of righteousness with unsurpassed fervor. But Entreri was merely horrifying, a passionless murderer callously disposing of obstacles in his path.

The initial momentum of the dwarves' attack began to diminish now, and both Fender and Grollo wore a look of amazement that the floor was not yet red with their opponent's blood. But while their attacks were slowing, Entreri's momentum continued to build. His blades were a blur, each thrust followed by two others that left the dwarves rocking back on their heels.

Effortless, his movements. Endless, his energy.

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Fender and Grollo maintained a solely defensive posture, but even with all of their efforts devoted to blocking, everyone in the room knew that it was only a matter of time before a killing blade slipped through.

Catti-brie didn't see the fatal cut, but she saw vividly the bright line of blood that appeared across Grollo's throat. The dwarf continued fighting for a few moments, oblivious to the cause of his inability to find his breath. Then, startled, Grollo dropped to his knees, grasping his throat, and gurgled into the blackness of death.

Fury spurred Fender beyond his exhaustion. His axe chopped and cut wildly, screaming for revenge.

Entreri toyed with him, actually carrying the charade so, far as to slap him on the side of the head with the flat of the saber.

Outraged, insulted, and fully aware that he was overmatched, Fender launched himself into a final, suicidal, charge, hoping to bring the assassin down with him.

Entreri sidestepped the desperate lunge with an amused laugh, and ended the fight, driving the jeweled dagger deep into Fender's chest, and following through with a skull-splitting slash of the saber as the dwarf stumbled by.

Too horrified to cry, too horrified to scream, Catti-brie watched blankly as Entreri retrieved the dagger from Fender's chest. Certain of her own impending death, she closed her eyes as the dagger came toward her, felt its metal, hot from the dwarf's blood, flat on her throat.

And then the teasing scrape of its edge against her soft, vulnerable skin as Entreri slowly turned the blade over in his hand.

Tantalizing. The promise, the dance of death.

Then it was gone. Catti-brie opened her eyes just as the small blade went back into its scabbard on the assassin's hip. He had taken a step back from her.

" You see," he offered in simple explanation of his mercy, " I kill only those who stand to oppose me. Perhaps, then, three of your friends on the road to Luskan shall escape the blade. I want only the halfling."

Catti-brie refused to yield to the terror he evoked. She held her voice steady and promised coldly, " You underestimate them. They will fight you."

With calm confidence, Entreri replied, " Then they, too, shall die."

Catti-brie couldn't win in a contest of nerves with the dispassionate killer. Her only answer to him was her defiance. She spat at him, unafraid of the consequences.

He retorted with a single stinging backhand. Her eyes blurred in pain and welling tears, and Catti-brie slumped into blackness. But as she fell unconscious, she heard a few seconds longer, the cruel, passionless laughter fading away as the assassin moved from the house.

Tantalizing. The promise of death.