

The halfling's gem prelude



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The wizard looked down upon the young woman with uncertainty. Her back was to him; he could see the thick mane of her auburn locks flowing around her shoulders, rich and vibrant. But the wizard knew, too, the sadness that was in her eyes. So young she was, barely more than a child, and so beautifully innocent.

Yet this beautiful child had put a sword through the heart of his beloved Sydney.

Harkle Harpell brushed away the unwanted memories of his dead love and started down the hill. "A fine day," he said cheerily when he reached the young woman.

"Do ye think they've made the tower?" Catti-brie asked him, her gaze never leaving the southern horizon.

Harkle shrugged. "Soon, if not yet." He studied Catti-brie and could find no anger against her for her actions. She had killed Sydney, it was true, but Harkle knew just by looking at her that necessity, not malice, had guided her sword arm. And now he could only pity her.

"How are you?" Harkle stammered, amazed at the courage she had shown in light of the terrible events that had befallen her and her friends.

Catti-brie nodded and turned to the wizard. Surely there was sorrow edging her deep blue eyes, but mostly they burned with a stubborn resolve that chased away any hints of weakness. She had lost Bruenor, the dwarf who had adopted her and had reared her as his own since the earliest days of

her childhood. And Catti-brie's other friends even now were caught in the middle of a desperate chase with an assassin across the southland.

" How quickly things have changed," Harkle whispered under his breath, feeling sympathy for the young woman. He remembered a time, just a few weeks earlier, when Bruenor Battlehammer and his small company had come through Longsaddle in their quest to find Mithril Hall, the dwarf's lost homeland. That had been a jovial meeting of tales exchanged and promises of future friendships with the Harpell clan. None of them could have known that a second party, led by an evil assassin, and by Harkle's own Sydney, held Catti-brie hostage and was gathering to pursue the company. Bruenor had found Mithril Hall, and had fallen there.

And Sydney, the female mage that Harkle had so dearly loved, had played a part in the dwarf's death.

Harkle took a deep breath to steady himself. " Bruenor will be avenged," he said with a grimace.

Catti-brie kissed him on the cheek and started back up the hill toward the Ivy Mansion. She understood the wizard's sincere pain, and she truly admired his decision to help her fulfill her vow to return to Mithril Hall and reclaim it for Clan Battlehammer.

But for Harkle, there had been no other choice. The Sydney that he had loved was a facade, a sugar coating to a power-crazed, unfeeling monster. And he himself had played a part in the disaster, unwittingly revealing to Sydney the whereabouts of Bruenor's party.

Harkle watched Catti-brie go, the weight of troubles slowing her stride. He could harbor no resentment toward her - Sydney had brought about the circumstances of her own death, and Catti-brie had no choice but to play them out. The wizard turned his gaze southward. He, too, wondered and worried for the drow elf and the huge barbarian lad. They had slumped back into Longsaddle just three days before, a sorrow-filled and weary band in desperate need of rest.

There could be no rest, though, not now, for the wicked assassin had escaped with the last of their group, Regis the halfling, in tow.

So much had happened in those few weeks; Harkle's entire world had been turned upside down by an odd mixture of heroes from a distant, forlorn land called Icewind Dale, and by a beautiful young woman who could not be blamed.

And by the lie that was his deepest love.

Harkle fell back on the grass and watched the puffy clouds of late summer meander across the sky.

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Beyond the clouds, where the stars shone eternally, Guenhwyvar, the entity of the panther, paced excitedly. Many days had passed since the cat's master, the drow elf named Drizzt Do'Urden, had summoned it to the material plane. Guenhwyvar was sensitive to the onyx figurine that served as a link to its master and that other world; the panther could sense the tingle from that far-off place even when its master merely touched the statuette.

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But Guenhwyvar hadn't felt that link to Drizzt in some time, and the cat was nervous now, somehow understanding in its otherworldly intelligence that the drow no longer possessed the figurine. Guenhwyvar remembered the time before Drizzt, when another drow, an evil drow, had been its master. Though in essence an animal, Guenhwyvar possessed dignity, a quality that its original master had stolen away.

Guenhwyvar remembered those times when it had been forced to perform cruel, cowardly acts against helpless foes for the sake of its master's pleasure.

But things had been very different since Drizzt Do'Urden came to possess the figurine. Here was a being of conscience and integrity, and an honest bond of love had developed between Guenhwyvar and Drizzt.

The cat slumped against a star-trimmed tree and issued a low growl that observers to this astral spectacle might have taken as a resigned sigh.

Deeper still would the cat's sigh have been if it knew that Artemis Entreri, the killer, now possessed the figurine.