

PART ONE



THE REBORN HERO

So many times have I pondered the long road I have led, and likely will still walk. I hear Innovindil's words often, her warning that a long-lived elf must learn to live her life to accommodate the mortality of those she may come to know and love. And so, when a human passes on, but the elven lover remains, it is time to move on, time to break emotionally and completely and begin anew.

I have found this a difficult proposition, indeed, and something I cannot easily resolve. In my head, Innovindil's words ring with truth. In my heart . . .

I do not know.

As unconvinced as I am about this unending cycle, it occurs to me that measuring the lifespan of a human as a guideline is also a fool's errand, for indeed, don't these shorter-lived races live their lives in bursts, in fits and starts, abrupt endings and moments of renewal? Childhood friends, parted for mere months, may reunite only to discover that their bonds have frayed. Perhaps one has entered young adulthood, while the other remains in the thrall of childhood joys. I witnessed this many times in Ten-Towns (though it was less frequent among the more regimented kin of Bruenor in Mithral Hall), where a pair of boys, the best of friends, would turn corners away from each other, one pursuing a young lady who intrigued him in ways he could not have previously imagined, the other holding fast to childish games and less complicated joys.

On many occasions, this parting proved more than a temporary split, for never again would the two see each other in the previous light of friendship. Never again.

Nor is this limited to the transition of childhood to young adulthood. Far from it! It is a reality we all rarely seem to anticipate. Friends find different roads, vowing to meet again, and many times—nay, most times!—is that vow unrealized. When Wulfgar left us in Mithral Hall, Bruenor swore to visit him in Icewind Dale, and yet, alas, such a reunion never came to pass.

And when Regis and I ventured north of the Spine of the World to visit Wulfgar, we found for our efforts a night, a single night, of reminiscing. One night where we three sat around a fire in a cave Wulfgar had taken as his home, speaking of our respective roads and recalling adventures we had long ago shared.

I have heard that such reunions can prove quite unpleasant and full of awkward silence, and fortunately, that was not the case that night in Icewind Dale. We laughed and resolved that our friendship would never end. We prodded Wulfgar to open his heart to us, and he did, recounting the tale of his journey back to the north from Mithral Hall, when he had returned his adopted daughter to her true mother. Indeed, in that case, the years we had spent apart seemed to melt away, and we were three friends uninterrupted, breaking bread and sharing tales of great adventure.

And still, it was but one single night, and when I awoke in the morn, to find that Wulfgar prepared a breakfast, we two knew that our time together had come to an end. There was no more to say, no stories left that hadn't been told. He had his life now, in Icewind Dale, while the road for Regis and I led back to Luskan, and to Mithral Hall beyond that. For all the love between us, for all the shared experiences, for all the vows that we would meet again, we had reached the end of our lives together. And so we parted, and in that last embrace. Wulfgar had promised Regis that he would find him on the banks of Maer Dualdon one day, and would even sneak up and bait the hook of his fishing pole!

But of course, that never happened, because while Innovindil advised me, as a long-lived elf, to break my life into the shorter life spans of those humans I would know, so too do humans live their lives in segments. Best friends today vow to be best friends when they meet again in five years, but alas, in five years, they are often strangers. In a few years, which seems not a long stretch of time, they have often made for themselves new lives with new friends, and perhaps even new families.

This is the way of things, though few can accurately anticipate it and fewer still will admit it.

The Companions of the Hall, the four dear friends I came to know in Icewind Dale, sometimes told me of their lives before we'd met. Wulfgar and Catti-brie were barely adults when I came into their lives, but Bruenor was an old dwarf even then, with adventures that had spanned centuries and half the world, and Regis had lived for decades in exotic southern cities, with as many wild adventures behind him as those yet to come.

Bruenor spoke to me often about his clan and Mithral Hall, as dwarves are wont to do, while Regis, with more to hide, likely, remained cryptic about his earlier days (days that had set Artemis Entreri on his trail, after all). But even with the exhaustive stories Bruenor told me, of his father and grandfather, of the adventures he had known in the tunnels around Mithral Hall, of the founding of Clan Battlehammer in Icewind Dale, it rarely occurred to me that he had once known friends as important to him as I had become.

Or had he? Isn't that the mystery and the crux of Innovindil's claims, when all is stripped bare? Can I know another friend to match the bond I shared with Bruenor? Can I know another love to match that which I found in Catti-brie's arms?

What of Catti-brie's life before I met her on the windswept slope on Kelvin's Cairn, or before she had come to be adopted by Bruenor? How well had she known her parents, truly? How deeply had she loved them? She spoke of them only rarely, but that was because she simply could not remember. She had been but a child, after all . . .

And so I find myself in another of the side valleys running alongside Innovindil's proposed road: that of memory. A child's feelings for her mother or father cannot be questioned. To look at the child's eyes as she stares at one of her parents is to see true and deep love. Catti-brie's eyes shone like that for her parents, no doubt.

Yet she could not tell me of her birth parents, for she could not remember!

She and I spoke of having children of our own, and oh, how I wish that had come to pass! For Catti-brie, though, there hovered around her the black wings of a great fear, that she would die before her child, our child, was old enough to remember her, that her child's life would

parallel her own in that one, terrible way. For though she rarely spoke of it, and though she had known a good life under the watchful gaze of benevolent and beneficent Bruenor, the loss of her parents—even parents she could not remember—forever weighed heavily upon Catti-brie. She felt as if a part of her life had been stolen from her, and cursed her inability to remember in greater detail more profoundly than the joy she found in recalling the smallest bits of that life lost.

Deep are those valleys beside Innovindil's road.

Given these truths, given that Catti-brie could not even remember two she had loved so instinctively and wholly, given the satisfied face of Wulfgar when Regis and I found him upon the tundra of Icewind Dale, given the broken promises of finding old friends once more or the awkward conversations that typically rule such reunions, why, then, am I so resistant to the advice of my lost elf friend?

I do not know.

Perhaps it is because I found something so far beyond the normal joining one might know, a true love, a partner in heart and soul, in thought and desire.

Perhaps I have not yet found another to meet that standard, and so I fear it cannot ever be so again.

Perhaps I am simply fooling myself—whether wrought of guilt or sadness or frustrated rage, I amplify and elevate in my memory that which I had to a pedestal that no other can begin to scale.

It is the last of these possibilities that terrifies me, for such a deception would unravel the very truths upon which I stand. I have felt this sensation of love so keenly—to learn that there were no gods or goddesses, no greater design to all that is beyond what I already know, no life after death, even, would pain me less, I believe, than to learn that there is no lasting love.

And thus I deny the clear truth of Innovindil's advice, because in this one instance, I choose to let that which is in my heart overrule that which is in my head.

I have come to know that to do otherwise, for Drizzt Do'Urden, would be to walk a barren road.

—Drizzt Do'Urden