

Streams of silver 23. the broken helm



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Air rolled across its black wings like the continuous rumble of distant thunder as the dragon swept out of the passageway and into Garumn's Gorge, using the same exit that Drizzt and Entreri had passed just a few moments before. The two, a few dozen yards higher on the wall, held perfectly still, not even daring to breathe. They knew that the dark lord of Mithril Hall had come.

The black cloud that was Shimmergloom rushed by them, unnoticed, and soared down the length of the chasm. Drizzt, in the lead, scrambled up the side of the gorge, clawing at the stone to find whatever holds he could and trusting to them fully in his desperation. He had heard the sounds of battle far above him when he first entered the chasm, and knew that even if his friends had been victorious thus far, they would soon be met by a foe mightier than anything they had ever faced.

Drizzt was determined to stand beside them.

Entreri matched the dwarf's pace, wanting to keep close to him, though he hadn't yet formulated his exact plan of action.

Wulfgar and Catti-brie supported each other as they walked. Regis kept beside Bruenor, concerned for the dwarf's wounds, even if the dwarf was not. "Keep yer worries for yer own hide, Rumblebelly," he kept snapping at the halfling, though Regis could see that the depth of Bruenor's gruffness had diminished. The dwarf seemed somewhat embarrassed for the way he had acted earlier. "Me wounds'll heal; don't ye be thinking ye've gotten rid of me so easy! There'll be time for looking to them once we've put this place behind us."

Regis had stopped walking, a puzzled expression on his face. Bruenor looked back at him, confused, too, and wondered if he had somehow offended the halfling again. Wulfgar and Catti-brie stopped behind Regis and waited for some indication of the trouble, not knowing what had been said between him and the dwarf.

"What's yer grief?" Bruenor demanded.

Regis was not bothered by anything Bruenor had said, nor with the dwarf at all at that moment. It was Shimmergloom that he had sensed, a sudden coldness that had entered the cavern, a foulness that insulted the companions' caring bond with its mere presence.

Bruenor was about to speak again, when he, too, felt the coming of the dragon of darkness. He looked to the gorge just as the tip of the black cloud broke the chasm's rim, far down to the left beyond the bridge, but speeding toward them.

Catti-brie steered Wulfgar to the side, then he was pulling her with all his speed. Regis scurried back toward the anteroom.

Bruenor remembered.

The dragon of darkness, the ultimately foul monster that had decimated his kin and sent them fleeing for the smaller corridors of the upper level. His mithril axe raised, his feet frozen to the stone below them, he waited.

The blackness dipped under the arch of the stone bridge, then rose to the ledge. Spearlike talons gripped the rim of the gorge, and Shimmergloom

reared up before Bruenor in all its horrid splendor, the usurping worm facing the rightful King of Mithril Hall.

" Bruenor!" Regis cried, drawing his little mace and turning back to the cavern, knowing that the best he could do would be to die beside his doomed friend.

Wulfgar threw Catti-brie behind him and spun back on the dragon.

The worm, eyes locked with the dwarf's unyielding stare, did not even notice Aegis-fang spinning toward it, nor the fearless charge of the huge barbarian.

The mighty warhammer struck home against the raven black scales, but was harmlessly turned away. Infuriated that someone had interrupted the moment of its victory, Shimmergloom snapped its glare at Wulfgar.

And it breathed.

Absolute blackness enveloped Wulfgar and sapped the strength from his bones. He felt himself falling, forever falling, though there seemed to be no stone to catch him.

Catti-brie screamed and rushed to him, oblivious to her own danger as she plunged into the black cloud of Shimmergloom's breath.

Bruenor trembled in outrage, for his long-dead kin and for his friend. " Get yerself from me home!" he roared at Shimmergloom, then charged head-on and dove into the dragon, his axe flailing wildly, trying to drive the beast over the edge. The mithril weapon's razored edge had more effect on the scales than the warhammer, but the dragon fought back.

A heavy foot knocked Bruenor back to the ground, and before he could rise, the whiplike neck snapped down upon him and he was lifted in the dragon's maw.

Regis fell back again, shaking with fear. " Bruenor!" he cried again, this time his words coming out as no more than a whisper.

The black cloud dissipated around Catti-brie and Wulfgar, but the barbarian had taken the full force of Shimmergloom's insidious venom. He wanted to flee, even if the only route of escape meant plunging headlong over the side of the gorge. The shadow hounds' baying, though it was still many minutes behind them, closed in upon him. All of his wounds, the crushing of the golem, the nicks the gray dwarves had put into him, hurt him vividly, making him flinch with every step, though his adrenaline of battle had many times before dismissed far more serious and painful injuries.

The dragon seemed ten times mightier to Wulfgar, and he couldn't even have brought himself to raise a weapon against it, for he believed in his heart that Shimmergloom could not be defeated.

Despair had stopped him where fire and steel had not. He stumbled back with Catti-brie toward another room, having no strength to resist her pull.

Bruenor felt his breath blasted out, as the terrible maw crunched into him. He stubbornly held onto the axe, and even managed a swing or two.

Catti-brie pushed Wulfgar through the doorway and into the shelter of the small room, then turned back to the fight in the cavern. " Ye bastard son of a demon lizard!" she spat, as she set Taulmaril into motion. Silver-streaking

arrows blasted holes into Shimmergloom's black armor. When Catti-brie understood the measure of the effectiveness of her weapon, she grasped at a desperate plan. Aiming her next shots at the monster's feet, she sought to drive it from the ledge.

Shimmergloom hopped in pain and confusion as the stinging bolts whistled in. The seething hatred of the dragon's narrowed eyes bore down upon the brave young woman. It spat Bruenor's broken form across the floor and roared, " Know fear, foolish girl! Taste of my breath and know you are doomed!" The black lungs expanded, perverting the intaken air into the foul cloud of despair.

Then the stone at the edge of the gorge broke away.

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Little joy came to Regis when the dragon fell. He managed to drag Bruenor back into the anteroom, but had no idea of what to do next. Behind him, the relentless pursuit of the shadow hounds drew closer, he was separated from Wulfgar and Catti-brie, and he didn't dare cross the cavern without knowing if the dragon was truly gone. He looked down at the battered and blood-covered form of his oldest friend, having not the slightest notion of how he might begin to help him, or even if Bruenor was still alive.

Only surprise delayed Regis's immediate squeals of joy when Bruenor opened his gray eyes and winked.

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Drizzt and Entreri flattened themselves against the wall as the rockslide from the broken ledge tumbled dangerously close. It was over in a moment and Drizzt started up at once, desperate to get to his friends.

He had to stop again, though, and wait nervously as the black form of the dragon dropped past him, then recovered quickly and moved back up toward the rim.

" How?" Regis asked, gawking at the dwarf.

Bruenor shifted uncomfortably and struggled to his feet. The mithril mail had held against the dragon's bite, though Bruenor had been squeezed terribly and bore rows of deep bruises, and probably a host of broken ribs, for the experience. The tough dwarf was still very much alive and alert, though, dismissing his considerable pain for the more important matter before him - the safety of his friends.

" Where's the boy, and Catti-brie?" he pressed immediately, the background howls of the shadow hounds accentuating the desperation of his tone.

" Another room," Regis answered, indicating the area to the right beyond the door to the cavern.

" Cat!" Bruenor shouted. " How do ye fare?"

After a stunned pause, for Catti-brie, too, had not expected to hear Bruenor's voice again, she called back, " Wulfgar's gone for the fight, I fear! A dragon's spell, for all I can make it! But for meself, I'm for leaving! The dogs'll be here sooner than I like!"

" Aye!" agreed Bruenor, clutching at a twinge of pain in his side when he yelled. " But have ye seen the worm?"

" No, nor heard the beast!" came the uncertain reply.

Bruenor looked to Regis.

" It fell, and has been gone since," the halfling answered the questioning stare, equally unconvinced that Shimmergloom had been defeated so easily.

" Not a choice to us, then!" Bruenor called out. " We're to make the bridge! Can ye bring the boy?"

" It's his heart for fightin' that's been bruised, no more!" replied Catti-brie. " We'll be along!"

Bruenor clasped Regis's shoulder, lending support to his nervous friend. " Let's be going, then!" he roared in his familiar voice of confidence.

Regis smiled in spite of his dread at the sight of the old Bruenor again. Without further coaxing, he walked beside the dwarf out of the room.

Even as they took the first step toward the gorge, the black cloud that was Shimmergloom again crested the rim.

" Ye see it?" cried Catti-brie.

Bruenor fell back into the room, viewing the dragon all too clearly. Doom closed in all around him, insistent and inescapable. Despair denied his determination, not for himself, for he knew that he had followed the logical course of his fate in coming back to Mithril Hall - a destiny that had been

engraved upon the fabric of his very being from the day his kin had been slaughtered - but his friends should not perish this way. Not the halfling, who always before could find an escape from every trap. Not the boy, with so many glorious adventures left before him upon his road.

And not his girl, Catti-brie, his own beloved daughter. The only light that had truly shone in the mines of Clan Battlehammer in Icewind Dale.

The fall of the drow alone, willing companion and dearest friend, had been too high a price for his selfish daring. The loss that faced him now was simply too much for him to bear.

His eyes darted around the small room. There had to be an option. If ever he had been faithful to the gods of the dwarves, he asked them now to grant him this one thing. Give him an option.

There was a small curtain against one of the room's walls. Bruenor looked curiously at Regis.

The halfling shrugged. " A storage area," he said. " Nothing of value. Not even a weapon."

Bruenor wouldn't accept the answer. He dashed through the curtain and started tearing through the crates and sacks that lay within. Driedfood.

Pieces of wood. An extra cloak. A skin of water.

A keg of oil.

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Shimmergloom swooped back and forth along the length of the gorge, waiting to meet the intruders on its own terms in the open cavern and confident that the shadow hounds would flush them out.

Drizzt had nearly reached the level of the dragon, pressing on in the face of peril with no other concerns than those he felt for his friends.

" Hold!" Entreri called to him from a short distance below. " Are you so determined to get yourself killed?"

" Damn the dragon!" Drizzt hissed back. " I'll not cower in the shadows and watch my friends be destroyed."

" There is value in dying with them?" came the sarcastic reply. " You are a fool, drow. Your worth outweighs that of all your pitiful friends!"

" Pitiful?" Drizzt echoed incredulously. " It is you that I pity, assassin."

The drow's disapproval stung Entreri more than he would have expected. " Then pity yourself!" he shot back angrily. " For you are more akin to me than you care to believe!"

" If I do not go to them, your words will hold the truth," Drizzt continued, more calmly now. " For then my life will be of no value, less even than your own! Beyond my embrace of the heartless emptiness that rules your world, my entire life would then be no more than a lie." He started up again, fully expecting to die, but secure in his realization that he was indeed very different from the murderer that followed him.

Secure, too, in the knowledge that he had escaped his own heritage.

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Bruenor came back through the curtain, a wild smirk upon his face, an oil-soaked cloak slung over his shoulder, and the keg tied to his back. Regis looked upon him in complete confusion, though he could guess enough of what the dwarf had in mind to be worried for his friend.

"What are ye lookin' at?" Bruenor said with a wink.

"You are crazy," Regis replied, Bruenor's plan coming into clearer focus the longer he studied the dwarf.

"Aye, we agreed on that afore our road e'er began!" snorted Bruenor. He calmed suddenly, the wild glimmer mellowing to a caring concern for his little friend. "Ye deserve better'n what I've given ye, Rumblebelly," he said, more comfortable than he had ever been in apology.

"Never have I known a more loyal friend than Bruenor Battlehammer," Regis replied.

Bruenor pulled the gem-studded helmet from his head and tossed it to the halfling, confusing Regis even more. He reached around to his back and loosened a strap fastened between his pack and his belt and took out his old helm. He ran a finger over the broken horn, smiling in remembrance of the wild adventures that had given this helm such a battering. Even the dent where Wulfgar had hit him, those years ago, when first they met as enemies.

Bruenor put the helm on, more comfortable with its fit, and Regis saw him in the light of old friend.

" Keep the helm safe," Bruenor told Regis. " It's the crown of the King of Mithril Hall!"

" Then it is yours," Regis argued, holding the crown back out to Bruenor.

" Nay, not by me right or me choice. Mithril Hall is no more, Rumble - Regis. Bruenor of Icewind Dale, I am, and have been for two hundred years, though me head's too thick to know it!

" Forgive me old bones," he said. " Suren me thoughts've been walking in me past and me future."

Regis nodded and said with genuine concern, " What are you going to do?"

" Mind to yer own part in this!" Bruenor snorted, suddenly the snarling leader once more. " Ye'll have enough gettin' yerself from these cursed halls when I'm through!" He growled threateningly at the halfling to keep him back, then moved swiftly, pulling a torch from the wall and dashing through the door to the cavern before Regis could even make a move to stop him.

The dragon's black form skimmed the rim of the gorge, dipping low beneath the bridge and returning to its patrolling level. Bruenor watched it for a few moments to get a feel for the rhythm of its course.

" Yer mine, worm!" he snarled under his breath, and then he charged. " Here's one from yer tricks, boy!" he cried at the room holding Wulfgar and Catti-brie. " But when me mind's to jumping on the back of a worm, I ain't about to miss!"

" Bruenor!" Catti-brie screamed when she saw him running out toward the gorge.

It was too late. Bruenor put the torch to the oil-soaked cloak and raised his mithril axe high before him. The dragon heard him coming and swerved in closer to the rim to investigate - and was as amazed as the dwarf's friends when Bruenor, his shoulder and back aflame, leaped from the edge and streaked down upon it.

Impossibly strong, as though all of the ghosts of Clan Battlehammer had joined their hands with Bruenor's upon the weapon handle and lent him their strength, the dwarf's initial blow drove the mithril axe deep into Shimmergloom's back. Bruenor crashed down behind, but held fast to the embedded weapon, even though the keg of oil broke apart with the impact and spewed flames all across the monster's back.

Shimmergloom shrieked in outrage and swerved wildly, even crashing into the stone wall of the gorge.

Bruenor would not be thrown. Savagely, he grasped the handle, waiting for the opportunity to tear the weapon free and drive it home again.

Catti-brie and Regis rushed to the edge of the gorge, helplessly calling out to their doomed friend. Wulfgar, too, managed to drag himself over, still fighting the black depths of despair.

When the barbarian looked upon Bruenor, sprawled amid the flames, he roared away the dragon's spell and, without the slightest hesitation, launched Aegis-fang. The hammer caught Shimmergloom on the side of its

head and the dragon swerved again in its surprise, clipping the other wall of the gorge.

" Are ye mad?" Catti-brie yelled at Wulfgar.

" Take up your bow," Wulfgar told her. " If a true friend of Bruenor's you be, then let him not fall in vain!" Aegis-fang returned to his grasp and he launched it again, scoring a second hit.

Catti-brie had to accept the reality. She could not save Bruenor from the fate he had chosen. Wulfgar was right - she could aid the dwarf in gaining his desired end. Blinking away the tears that came to her, she took Taulmaril in hand and sent the silver bolts at the dragon.

Both Drizzt and Entreri watched Bruenor's leap in utter amazement. Cursing his helpless position, Drizzt surged ahead, nearly to the rim. He shouted out for his remaining friends, but in the commotion, and with the roaring of the dragon, they could not hear.

Entreri was directly below him. The assassin knew that his last chance was upon him, though he risked losing the only challenge he had ever found in this life. As Drizzt scrambled for his next hold, Entreri grabbed his ankle and pulled him down.

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Oil found its way in through the seams in Shimmergloom's scales, carrying the fire to the dragon flesh. The dragon cried out from a pain it never believed it could know.

The thud of the warhammer! The constant sting of those streaking lines of silver! And the dwarf! Relentless in his attacks, somehow oblivious to the fires.

Shimmergloom tore along the length of the gorge, dipping suddenly, then swooping back up and rolling over and about. Catti-brie's arrows found it at every turn. And Wulfgar, wiser with each of his strikes, sought the best opportunities to throw the warhammer, waiting for the dragon to cut by a rocky outcropping in the wall, then driving the monster into the stone with the force of his throw.

Flames, stone, and dust flew wildly with each thunderous impact.

Bruenor held on. Singing out to his father and his kin beyond that, the dwarf absolved himself of his guilt, content that he had satisfied the ghosts of his past and given his friends a chance for survival. He didn't feel the bite of the fire, nor the bump of stone. All he felt was the quivering of the dragon flesh below his blade, and the reverberations of Shimmergloom's agonized cries.

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Drizzt tumbled down the face of the gorge, desperately scrambling for some hold. He slammed onto a ledge twenty feet below the assassin and managed to stop his descent.

Entreri nodded his approval and his aim, for the drow had landed just where he had hoped. "Farewell, trusting fool!" he called down to Drizzt and he started up the wall.

Drizzt never had trusted in the assassin's honor, but he had believed in Entreri's pragmatism. This attack made no practical sense. " Why?" he called back to Entreri. " You could have had the pendant without recourse!

" The gem is mine," Entreri replied.

" But not without a price!" Drizzt declared. " You know that I will come after you, assassin!"

Entreri looked down at him with an amused grin. " Do you not understand, Drizzt Do'Urden? That is exactly the purpose!"

The assassin quickly reached the rim, and peered above it. To his left, Wulfgar and Catti-brie continued their assault on the dragon. To his right, Regis stood enamored of the scene, completely unaware.

The halfling's surprise was complete, his face blanching in terror, when his worst nightmare rose up before him. Regis dropped the gem-studded helm and went limp with fear as Entreri silently picked him up and started for the bridge.

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Exhausted, the dragon tried to find another method of defense. Its rage and pain had carried it too far into the battle, though. It had taken too many hits, and still the silver streaks bit into it again and again.

Still the tireless dwarf twisted and pounded the axe into its back.

One last time the dragon cut back in mid-flight, trying to snake its neck around so that it could at least take vengeance upon the cruel dwarf. It hung motionless for just a split second, and Aegis-fang took it in the eye.

The dragon rolled over in blinded rage, lost in a dizzying swirl of pain, headlong into a jutting portion of the wall.

The explosion rocked the very foundations of the cavern, nearly knocking Catti-brie from her feet and Drizzt from his precarious perch.

One final image came to Bruenor, a sight that made his heart leap one more time in victory: the piercing gaze of Drizzt Do'Urden's lavender eyes bidding him farewell from the darkness of the wall.

Broken and beaten, the flames consuming it, the dragon of darkness glided and spun, descending into the deepest blackness it would ever know, a blackness from which there could be no return. The depths of Garumn's Gorge.

And bearing with it the rightful King of Mithril Hall.