

# Streams of silver 19. shadows



" Garumn's Gorge," Bruenor said, drawing a line across the rough map he had scratched on the floor. Even though the effects of Alustriel's potion had worn off, simply stepping inside the home of his youth had rekindled a host of memories in the dwarf. The exact location of each of the halls was not clear to him, but he had a general idea of the overall design of the place. The others huddled close to him, straining to see the etchings in the flickers of the torch that Wulfgar had retrieved from the corridor.

" We can get out on the far side," Bruenor continued. " There's a door, opening one way and for leaving only, beyond the bridge."

" Leaving?" Wulfgar asked.

" Our goal was to find Mithril Hall," Drizzt answered, playing the same argument he had used on Bruenor before this meeting. " If the forces that defeated Clan Battlehammer reside here still, we few would find reclaiming it an impossible task. We must take care that the knowledge of the hall's location does not die in here with us."

" I'm meaning to find out what we're to face," Bruenor added. " We mighten be going back out the door we came in; it'd open easy from the inside. Me thinking is to cross the top level and see the place out. I'm needing to know how much is left afore I call on me kin in the dale, and others if I must." He shot Drizzt a sarcastic glance.

Drizzt suspected that Bruenor had more in mind than " seeing the place out," but he kept quiet, satisfied that he had gotten his concerns through to the

dwarf, and that Catti-brie's unexpected presence would temper with caution all of Bruenor's decisions.

" You will come back, then," Wulfgar surmised.

" An army at me heels!" snorted Bruenor. He looked at Catti-brie and a measure of his eagerness left his dark eyes.

She read it at once. " Don't ye be holding back for me!" she scolded. " Fought beside ye before, I have, and held me own, too! I didn't want this road, but it found me and now I'm here with ye to the end!"

After the many years of training her, Bruenor could not now disagree with her decision to follow their chosen path. He looked around at the skeletons in the room. " Get yerself armed and armored then, and let's be off - if we're agreed."

"'Tis your road to choose," said Drizzt. " For 'tis your search. We walk beside you, but do not tell you which way to go."

Bruenor smiled at the irony of the statement. He noted a slight glimmer in the drow's eyes, a hint of their customary sparkle for excitement. Perhaps Drizzt's heart for the adventure was not completely gone.

" I will go," said Wulfgar. " I did not walk those many miles, to return when the door was found!"

Regis said nothing. He knew that he was caught up in the whirlpool of their excitement, whatever his own feelings might be. He patted the little pouch of newly acquired baubles on his belt and thought of the additions he might

soon find if these halls were truly as splendid as Bruenor had always said. He honestly felt that he would rather walk the nine hells beside his formidable friends than go back outside and face Artemis Entreri alone.

As soon as Catti-brie was outfitted, Bruenor led them on. He marched proudly in his grandfather's shining armor, the mithril axe swinging beside him, and the crown of the king firmly upon his head. "To Garumn's Gorge!" he cried as they started from the entry chamber. "From there we'll decide to go out, or down. Oh, the glories that lay before us, my friends. Pray that I be taking ye to them this time through!"

Wulfgar marched beside him, Aegis-fang in one hand and the torch in the other. He wore the same grim but eager expression. Catti-brie and Regis followed, less eager and more tentative, but accepting the road as unavoidable and determined to make the best of it.

Drizzt moved along the side, sometimes ahead of them, sometimes behind, rarely seen and never heard, though the comforting knowledge of his presence made them all step easier down the corridor.

The hallways were not smooth and flat, as was usually the case with dwarven construction. Alcoves jutted out on either side every few feet, some ending inches back, others slipping away into the darkness to join up with other whole networks of corridors. The walls all along the way were chipped and flaked with jutting edges and hollowed depressions, designed to enhance the shadowy effect of the ever-burning torches. This was a place of mystery and secret, where dwarves could craft their finest works in an atmosphere of protective seclusion.

This level was a virtual maze, as well. No outsider could have navigated his way through the endless number of splitting forks, intersections, and multiple passageways. Even Bruenor, aided by scattered images of his childhood and an understanding of the logic that had guided the dwarven miners who had created the place, chose wrong more often than right, and spent as much time backtracking as going forward.

There was one thing that Bruenor did remember, though. "Ware yer step," he warned his friends. "The level ye walk upon is rigged for defending the halls, and a stoneworked trap'd be quick to send ye below!"

For the first stretch of their march that day, they came into wider chambers, mostly unadorned and roughly squared, and showing no signs of habitation. "Guard rooms and guest rooms," Bruenor explained. "Most for Elmor and his kin from Settlestone when they came to collect the works for market."

They moved deeper. A pressing stillness engulfed them, their footfalls and the occasional crackle of a torch the only sounds, and even these seemed stifled in the stagnant air. To Drizzt and Bruenor, the environment only enhanced their memories of their younger days spent under the surface, but for the other three, the closeness and the realization of tons of stone hanging over their heads was a completely foreign experience, and more than a little uncomfortable.

Drizzt slipped from alcove to alcove, taking extra care to test the floor before stepping in. In one shallow depression, he felt a sensation on his leg, and upon closer inspection found a slight draft flowing in through a crack at the base of the wall. He called his friends over.

Bruenor bent low and scratched his beard, knowing at once what the breeze meant, for the air was warm, not cool as an outside draft would be. He removed a glove and felt the stone. "The furnaces," he muttered, as much to himself as to his friends.

"Then someone is below," Drizzt reasoned.

Bruenor didn't answer. It was a subtle vibration in the floor, but to a dwarf, so attuned to the stone, its message came as clear as if the floor had spoken to him; the grating of sliding blocks far below, the machinery of the mines.

Bruenor looked away and tried to realign his thoughts, for he had nearly convinced himself, and had always hoped, that the mines would be empty of any organized group and easy for the taking. But if the furnaces were burning, those hopes were flown.

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"Go to them. Show them the stair," Dendybar commanded.

Morkai studied the wizard for a long moment. He knew that he could break free of Dendybar's weakening hold and disobey the command. Truly Morkai was amazed that Dendybar had dared to summon him again so soon, for the wizard's strength had obviously not yet returned. The mottled wizard hadn't yet reached the point of exhaustion, upon which Morkai could strike at him, but Dendybar had indeed lost most of his power to compel the specter.

Morkai decided to obey this command. He wanted to keep this game with Dendybar going for as long as possible. Dendybar was obsessed with finding

the drow, and would undoubtedly call upon Morkai another time soon.

Perhaps then the mottled wizard would be weaker still.

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" And how are we to get down?" Entreri asked Sydney. Bok had led them to the rim of Keeper's Dale, but now they faced the sheer drop.

Sydney looked to Bok for the answer, and the golem promptly started over the edge. Had she not stopped it, it would have dropped off the cliff. The young mage looked at Entreri with a helpless shrug.

They then saw a shimmering blur of fire, and the specter; Morkai, stood before them once again. " Come," he said to them. " I am bid to show you the way."

Without another word, Morkai led them to the secret stair, then faded back into flames and was gone.

" Your master proves to be of much assistance," Entreri remarked as he took the first step down.

Sydney smiled, masking her fears. " Four times, at least," she whispered to herself, figuring the instances when Dendybar had summoned the specter. Each time Morkai had seemed more relaxed in carrying out his appointed mission. Each time Morkai had seemed more powerful. Sydney moved to the stair behind Entreri. She hoped that Dendybar would not call upon the specter again - for all their sakes.

When they had descended to the gorge's floor, Bok led them right to the wall and the secret door. As if realizing the barrier that it faced, it stood patiently out of the way, awaiting further instructions from the mage.

Entreri ran his fingers across the smooth rock, his face close against it as he tried to discern any substantial crack in it.

" You waste your time," Sydney remarked. " The door is dwarven crafted and will not be found by such inspection."

" If there is a door," replied the assassin.

" There is," Sydney assured him. " Bok followed the drow's trail to this spot, and knows that it continues through the wall. There is no way that they could have diverted the golem from the path."

" Then open your door," Entreri sneered. " They move farther from us with each moment!"

Sydney took a steadying breath and rubbed her hands together nervously. This was the first time since she had left the Hosttower that she had found opportunity to use her magical powers, and the extra spell energy tingled within her, seeking release.

She moved through a string of distinct and precise gestures, mumbled several lines of arcane words, then commanded, " Bausin saumine!" and threw her hands out in front of her, toward the door.

Entreri's belt immediately unhitched, dropping his saber and dagger to the ground.



" Well done," he remarked sarcastically, retrieving his weapons.

Sydney looked at the door, perplexed. " It resisted my spell," she said, observing the obvious. " Not unexpected from a door of dwarven crafting. The dwarves use little magic themselves, but their ability to resist the spellcastings of others is considerable."

" Where do we turn?" hissed Entreri. " There is another entrance, perhaps?"

" This is our door," Sydney insisted. She turned to Bok and snarled, " Break it down!" Entreri jumped far aside when the golem moved to the wall.

Its great hands pounding like battering rams, Bok slammed the wall, again and again, heedless of the damage to its own flesh. For many seconds, nothing happened, just the dull thud of the fists punching the stone.

Sydney was patient. She silenced Entreri's attempt to argue their course and watched the relentless golem at work. A crack appeared in the stone, and then another. Bok knew no weariness; its tempo did not slow.

More cracks showed, then the clear outline of the door. Entreri squinted his eyes in anticipation.

With one final punch, Bok drove its hand through the door, splitting it asunder and reducing it to a pile of rubble.

For the second time that day, the second time in nearly two hundred years, the entry chamber of Mithril Hall was bathed in daylight.

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"What was that?" Regis whispered after the echoes of the banging had finally ended.

Drizzt could guess easily enough, though with the sound bouncing at them from the bare rock walls in every direction, it was impossible to discern the direction of its source.

Catti-brie had her suspicions, too, remembering well the broken wall in Silverymoon.

None of them said anything more about it. In their situation of ever-present danger, echoes of a potential threat in the distance did not spur them to action. They continued on as though they had heard nothing, except that they walked even more cautiously, and the drow kept himself more to the rear of the party.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Bruenor sensed danger huddling in around them, watching them, poised to strike. He could not be certain if his fears were justified, or if they were merely a reaction to his knowledge that the mines were occupied and to his rekindled memories of the horrible day, when his clan had been driven out.

He forged ahead, for this was his homeland, and he would not surrender it again.

At a jagged section of the passageway, the shadows lengthened into a deeper, shifting gloom.

One of them reached out and grabbed Wulfgar.

A sting of deathly chill shivered into the barbarian. Behind, him, Regis screamed, and suddenly moving blots of darkness danced all around the four.

Wulfgar, too stunned to react, was hit again. Catti-brie charged to his side, striking into the blackness with the short sword she had picked up in the entry hall. She felt a slight bite as the blade knifed through the darkness, as though she had hit something that was somehow not completely there. She had no time to ponder the nature of her weird foe, and she kept flailing away.

Across the corridor, Bruenor's attacks were even more desperate. Several black arms stretched out to strike the dwarf at once, and his furious parries could not connect solidly enough to push them away. Again and again he felt the stinging coldness as the darkness grasped him.

Wulfgar's first instinct when he had recovered was to strike with Aegis-fang, but recognizing this, Catti-brie stopped him with a yell. "The torch!" she cried. "Put the light into the darkness!"

Wulfgar thrust the flame into the shadows' midst. Dark shapes recoiled at once, slipping away from the revealing brightness. Wulfgar moved to pursue and drive them even farther away, but he tripped over the halfling, who was huddled in fear, and fell to the stone.

Catti-brie scooped up the torch and waved it wildly to keep the monsters at bay.

Drizzt knew these monsters. Such things were commonplace in the realms of the drow, sometimes even allied with his people. Calling again on the powers of his heritage, he conjured magical flames to outline the dark shapes, then charged in to join the fight.

The monsters appeared humanoid, as the shadows of men might appear, though their boundaries constantly shifted and melded with the gloom about them. They outnumbered the companions, but their greatest ally, the concealment of darkness, had been stolen by the drow's flames. Without the disguise, the living shadows had little defense against the party's attacks and they quickly slipped away through nearby cracks in the stone.

The companions wasted no more time in the area either. Wulfgar hoisted Regis from the ground and followed Bruenor and Catti-brie as they sped down the passageway, Drizzt lingering behind to cover their retreat.

They had put many turns and halls behind them before Bruenor dared to slow the pace. Disturbing questions again hovered about the dwarf's thoughts, concerns about his entire fantasy of reclaiming Mithril Hall, and even about the wisdom in bringing his dearest friends into the place. He looked at every shadow with dread now, expecting a monster at each turn.

Even more subtle was the emotional shift that the dwarf had experienced. It had been festering within his subconscious since he had felt the vibrations on the floor, and now the fight with the monsters of darkness had pushed it to completion. Bruenor accepted the fact that he no longer felt as though he had returned home, despite his earlier boastings. His memories of the place, good memories of the prosperity of his people in the early days, seemed far

removed from the dreadful aura that surrounded the fortress now. So much had been despoiled, not the least of which were the shadows of the ever-burning torches. Once representative of his god, Dumathoin, the Keeper of Secrets, the shadows now merely sheltered the denizens of darkness.

All of Bruenor's companions sensed the disappointment and frustration that he felt. Wulfgar and Drizzt, expecting as much before they had ever entered the place, understood better than the others and were now even more concerned. If, like the crafting of Aegis-fang, the return to Mithril Hall represented a pinnacle in Bruenor's life - and they had worried about his reaction assuming the success of their quest - how crushing would be the blow if the journey proved disastrous?

Bruenor pushed onward, his vision narrowed upon the path to Garumn's Gorge and the exit. On the road these long weeks, and when he had first entered the halls, the dwarf had every intention of staying until he had taken back all that was rightfully his, but now all of his senses cried to him to flee the place and not return.

He felt that he must at least cross the top level, out of respect for his long dead kin, and for his friends, who had risked so much in accompanying him this far. And he hoped that the revulsion he felt for his former home would pass, or at least that he might find some glimmer of light in the dark shroud that encompassed the halls. Feeling the axe and shield of his heroic namesake warm in his grasp, he steeled his bearded chin and moved on.

The passageway sloped down, with fewer halls and side corridors. Hot drafts rose up all through this section, a constant torment to the dwarf, reminding

him of what lay below. The shadows were less imposing here, though, for the walls were carved smoother and squared. Around a sharp turn, they came to a great stone door, its singular slab blocking the entire corridor.

" A chamber?" Wulfgar asked, grasping the heavy pull ring.

Bruenor shook his head, not certain of what lay beyond. Wulfgar pulled the door open, revealing another empty stretch of corridor that ended in a similarly unmarked door.

" Ten doors," Bruenor remarked, remembering the place again. " Ten doors on the down slope," he explained. " Each with a locking bar behind it." He reached inside the portal and pulled down a heavy metal rod, hinged on one end, so that it could be easily dropped across the locking latches on the door. " And beyond the ten, ten more going up, and each with a bar on th' other side."

" So if ye fled a foe, either way, ye'd lock the doors behind ye," reasoned Catti-brie. " Meeting in the middle with yer kin from the other side."

" And between the center doors, a passage to the lower levels," added Drizzt, seeing the simple but effective logic behind the defensive structure.

" The floor's holding a trap door," Bruenor confirmed.

" A place to rest, perhaps," said the drow.

Bruenor nodded and started on again. His recollections proved accurate, and a few minutes later, they passed through the tenth door and into a small, oval-shaped room, facing a door with the locking bar on their side. In the

very center of the room was a trap door, closed for many years, it seemed, and also with a bar to lock it shut. All along the room's perimeter loomed the familiar darkened alcoves.

After a quick search to ensure that the room was safe, they secured the exits and began stripping away some of their heavy gear, for the heat had become oppressive and the stuffiness of the unmoving air weighed in upon them.

" We have come to the center of the top level," Bruenor said absently. " Tomorrow we're to be finding the gorge."

" Then where?" Wulfgar asked, the adventurous spirit within him still hoping for a deeper plunge into the mines.

" Out, or down," Drizzt answered, emphasizing the first choice enough to make the barbarian understand that the second was unlikely. " We shall know when we arrive."

Wulfgar studied his dark friend for some hint of the adventurous spirit he had come to know, but Drizzt seemed nearly as resigned to leaving as Bruenor. Something about this place had diffused the drow's normally unstoppable verve. Wulfgar could only guess that Drizzt, too, battled unpleasant memories of his past in a similarly dark place.

The perceptive young barbarian was correct. The drow's memories of his life in the underworld had indeed fostered his hopes that they might soon leave Mithril Hall, but not because of any emotional upheaval he was experiencing upon his return to his childhood realm. What Drizzt now remembered keenly

about Menzoberranzan were the dark things that lived in dark holes under the earth. He felt their presence here in the ancient dwarven halls, horrors beyond the surface dwellers' imagination. He didn't worry for himself. With his drow heritage, he could face these monsters on their own terms. But his friends, except perhaps the experienced dwarf, would be at a sorry disadvantage in such fighting, ill-equipped to battle the monsters they would surely face if they remained in the mines.

And Drizzt knew that eyes were upon them.

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Entreri crept up and put his ear against the door, as he had nine times before. This time, the clang of a shield being dropped to the stone brought a smile to his face. He turned back to Sydney and Bok and nodded.

He had at last caught his prey.

The door they had entered shuddered from the weight of an incredible blow. The companions, just settled in after their long march, looked back in amazement and horror just as the second blow fell and the heavy stone splintered and broke away. The golem crashed into the oval room, kicking Regis and Catti-brie aside before they could even reach for their weapons.

The monster could have squashed both of them right there, but its target, the goal that pulled at all of its senses, was Drizzt Do'Urden. It rushed by the two into the middle of the room to locate the drow.



Drizzt hadn't been so surprised, slipping into the shadows on the side of the room and now making his way toward the broken door to secure it against further entry. He couldn't hide from the magical detections that Dendybar had bestowed upon the golem, though, and Bok turned toward him almost immediately.

Wulfgar and Bruenor met the monster head on.

Entreri entered the chamber right after Bok, using the commotion caused by the golem to slip unnoticed through the door and off into the shadows in a manner strikingly similar to the drow. As they approached the midpoint of the oval room's wall, each was met by a shadow so akin to his own that he had to stop and take measure of it before he engaged.

" So at last I meet Drizzt Do'Urden," Entreri hissed.

" The advantage is yours," replied Drizzt, " for I know naught of you."

" Ah, but you will, black elf!" the assassin said, laughing. In a blur, they came together, Entreri's cruel saber and jeweled dagger matching the speed of Drizzt's whirring scimitars.

Wulfgar pounded his hammer into the golem with all his might, the monster, distracted by its pursuit of the drow, not even raising a pretense of defense. Aegis-fang knocked it back, but it seemed not to notice, and started again toward its prey. Bruenor and Wulfgar looked at each other in disbelief and drove in on it again, hammer and axe flailing.

Regis lay, unmoving against the wall, stunned by the kick of Bok's heavy foot. Catti-brie, though, was back up on one knee, her sword in hand. The spectacle of grace and skill of the combatants along the wall held her in check for a moment.

Sydney, just outside the doorway, was likewise distracted, for the battle between the dark elf and Entreri was unlike anything she had ever seen, two master swordsmen weaving and parrying in absolute harmony.

Each anticipated the other's movements exactly, countering the other's counter, back and forth in a battle that seemed as though it could know no victor. One appeared the reflection of the other, and the only thing that kept the onlookers aware of the reality of the struggle was the constant clang of steel against steel as scimitar and saber came ringing together. They moved in and out of the shadows, seeking some small advantage in a fight of equals. Then they slipped into the darkness of one of the alcoves.

As soon as they disappeared from sight, Sydney remembered her part in the battle. Without further delay, she drew a thin wand from her belt and took aim on the barbarian and the dwarf. As much as she would have liked to see the battle between Entreri and the dark elf played out to its end, her duty told her to free up the golem and let it take the drow quickly.

Wulfgar and Bruenor dropped Bok to the stone, Bruenor ducking between the monster's legs while Wulfgar slammed his hammer home, toppling Bok over the dwarf.

Their advantage was short-lived. Sydney's bolt of energy sliced into them, its force hurling Wulfgar backward into the air. He rolled to his feet near the opposite door, his leather jerkin scorched and smoking, and his entire body tingling in the aftermath of the jolt.

Bruenor was slammed straight down to the floor and he lay there for a long moment. He wasn't too hurt - dwarves are as tough as mountain stone and especially resistant to magic - but a specific rumble that he heard while his ear was against the floor demanded his attention. He remembered that sound vaguely from his childhood, but couldn't pinpoint its exact source.

He did know, though, that it foretold doom.

The tremor grew around them, shaking the chamber, even as Bruenor lifted his head. The dwarf understood. He looked helplessly to Drizt and yelled, "Ware elf!" the second before the trap sprang and part of the alcove's floor fell away.

Only dust emerged from where the dwarf and the assassin had been. Time seemed to freeze for Bruenor, who, was fixated upon that one horrible moment. A heavy block dropped from the ceiling in the alcove, stealing the very last of the dwarf's futile hopes.

The execution of the stonework trap only multiplied the violent tremors in the chamber. Walls cracked apart, chunks of stone shook loose from the ceiling. From one doorway, Sydney cried for Bok, while at the other, Wulfgar threw the locking bar aside and yelled for his friends.

Catti-brie leaped to her feet and rushed to the fallen halfling. She dragged him by the ankles toward the far door, calling for Bruenor to help.

But the dwarf was lost in the moment, staring vacantly at the ruins of the alcove.

A wide crack split the floor of the chamber, threatening to cut off their escape. Catti-brie gritted her teeth in determination and charged ahead, making the safety of the hallway. Wulfgar screamed for the dwarf, and even started back for him.

Then Bruenor rose and moved toward them - slowly, his head down, almost hoping in his despair that a crack would open beneath him and drop him into a dark hole.

And put an end to his intolerable grief.