

Streams of silver 17. the challenge



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

They left under stars and did not stop until stars filled the sky once again. Bruenor needed no support. Quite the opposite. It was the dwarf, recovered from his delirium and his eyes focused at last upon a tangible path to his long-sought goal, who drove them, setting the strongest pace since they had come out of Icewind Dale. Glassy-eyed and walking both in past and present, Bruenor's obsession consumed him. For nearly two hundred years he had dreamed of this return, and these last few days on the road seemed longer than the centuries that had come before.

The companions had apparently beaten their worst enemy: time. If their reckoning at the Holdfast was correct, Mithril Hall loomed just a few days away, while the short summer had barely passed its midpoint. With time no longer a pressing issue, Drizzt, Wulfgar, and Regis had anticipated a moderate pace as they prepared to leave the Holdfast. But Bruenor, when he awoke and learned of the discoveries, would hear no arguments about his rush. None were offered, though, for in the excitement, Bruenor's already surly disposition had grown even fouler.

" Keep yer feet moving!" he kept snapping at Regis, whose little legs could not match the dwarf's frantic pace. " Ye should've stayed in Ten-Towns with yer belly hanging over yer belt!" The dwarf would then sink into quiet grumbling, bending even lower over his pumping feet, and driving onward, his ears blocked to any remarks that Regis might shoot back or any comments forthcoming from Wulfgar or Drizzt concerning his behavior.

They angled their path back to the Rauvin, to use its waters as a guide. Drizzt did manage to convince Bruenor to veer back to the northwest as soon

as the peaks of the mountain range came into view. The drow had no desire to meet any patrols from Nesme again, certain that it was that city's warning cries that had forced Alustriel to keep him out of Silverymoon.

Bruenor found no relaxation at the camp that night, even though they had obviously covered far more than half the distance to the ruins of Settlestone. He stomped about the camp like a trapped animal, clenching and unclenching his gnarly fists and mumbling to himself about the fateful day when his people had been pushed out of Mithril Hall, and the revenge he would find when he at last returned.

" Is it the potion?" Wulfgar asked Drizzt later that evening as they stood to the side of the camp and watched the dwarf.

" Some of it, perhaps," Drizzt answered, equally concerned about his friend. " The potion has forced Bruenor to live again the most painful experience of his long life. And now, as thememoriesof that past find their way into his emotions, they keenly edge the vengeance that has festered within him all these years."

" He is afraid," Wulfgar noted.

Drizzt nodded. " This is the trial of his life. His vow to return to Mithril Hall holds within it all the value that he places upon his own existence."

" He pushes too hard," Wulfgar remarked, looking at Regis, who had collapsed, exhausted, right after they had supped. " The halfling cannot keep the pace."

" Less than a day stands before us," Drizzt replied. " Regis will survive this road, as shall we all." He patted the barbarian on the shoulder and Wulfgar, not fully satisfied, but resigned to the fact that he could not sway the dwarf, moved away to find some rest. Drizzt looked back to the pacing dwarf, and his dark face bore a look of deeper concern than he had revealed to the young barbarian.

Drizzt truly wasn't worried about Regis. The halfling always found a way to come through better off than he should. Bruenor, though, troubled the dwarf. He remembered when the dwarf had crafted Aegis-fang, the mighty warhammer. The weapon had been Bruenor's ultimate creation in a rich career as a craftsman, a weapon worthy of legend. Bruenor could not hope to outdo that accomplishment, nor even equal it. The dwarf had never put hammer to anvil again.

Now the journey to Mithril Hall, Bruenor's lifelong goal. As Aegis-fang had been Bruenor's finest crafting, this journey would be his highest climb. The focus of Drizzt's concern was more subtle, and yet more dangerous, than the success or failure of the search; the dangers of the road affected all of them equally, and they had accepted them willingly before starting out. Whether or not the ancient halls were reclaimed, Bruenor's mountain would be crested. The moment of his glory would be passed.

" Calm yourself, good friend," Drizzt said, moving beside the dwarf.

" It's me home, elf!" Bruenor shot back, but he did seem to compose himself a bit.

" I understand," Drizzt offered. " It seems that we shall indeed look upon Mithril Hall, and that raises a question we must soon answer."

Bruenor looked at him curiously, though he knew well enough what Drizzt was getting at.

" So far we have concerned ourselves only with finding Mithril Hall, and little has been said of our plans beyond the entrance to the place."

" By all that is right, I am King of the Hall," Bruenor growled.

" Agreed," said the dwarf, " but what of the darkness that may remain? A force that drove your entire clan from the mines. Are we four to defeat it?"

" It may have gone on its own, elf," Bruenor replied in a surly tone, not wanting to face the possibilities. " For all our knowing, the halls may be clean."

" Perhaps. But what plans have you if the darkness remains?"

Bruenor paused for a moment of thought. " Word'll be sent to Icewind Dale," he answered. " Me kin'll be with us in the spring."

" Barely a hundred strong!" Drizzt reminded him.

" Then I'll call to Adbar if more be needed!" Bruenor snapped. " Harbromm'll be glad to help, for a promise of treasure."

Drizzt knew that Bruenor wouldn't be so quick to make such a promise, but he decided to end the stream of disturbing but necessary questions. " Sleep well," he bid the dwarf. " You shall find your answers when you must."

The pace was no less frantic the morning of the next day. Mountains soon towered above them as they ran along, and another change came over the dwarf. He stopped suddenly, dizzied and fighting for his balance. Wulfgar and Drizzt were right beside him, propping him up.

"What is it?" Drizzt asked.

"Dwarvendarrow," Bruenor answered in a voice that seemed far removed. He pointed to an outcropping of rock jutting from the base of the nearest mountain.

"You know the place?"

Bruenor didn't answer. He started off again, stumbling, but rejecting any offers of help. His friends shrugged helplessly and followed.

An hour later, the structures came into view. Like giant houses of cards, great slabs of stone had been cunningly laid together to form dwellings, and though they had been deserted for more than a hundred years, the seasons and the wind had not reclaimed them. Only dwarves could have imbued such strength into the rock, could have laid the stones so perfectly that they would last as the mountains themselves lasted, beyond the generations and the tales of the bards, so that some future race would look upon them in awe and marvel at their construction without the slightest idea of who had created them.

Bruenor remembered. He wandered into the village as he had those many decades ago, a tear rimming his gray eye and his body trembling against the memories of the darkness that had swarmed over his clan.

His friends let him go about for a while, not wanting to interrupt the solemn emotions that had found their way through his thick hide. Finally, as afternoon waned, Drizzt moved over to him.

" Do you know the way?" he asked.

Bruenor looked up at a pass that climbed along the side of the nearest mountain. " Half a day," he replied.

" Camp here?" Drizzt asked.

" It would do me good," said Bruenor. " I've much to think over, elf. I'll not forget the way, fear not." His eyes narrowed in tight focus at the trail he had fled on the day of darkness, and he whispered, " I'll never forget the way again."

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Bruenor's driven pace proved fortunate for the friends, for Bok had easily continued along the drow's trail outside of Silverymoon and had led its group with similar haste. Bypassing the Holdfast altogether - the tower's magical wards would not have let them near it in any case - the golem's party had made up considerable ground.

In a camp not far away, Entreri stood grinning his evil smile and staring at the dark horizon, and at the speck of light he knew to be the campfire of his victim.

Catti-brie saw it, too, and knew that the next day would bring her greatest challenge. She had spent most of her life with the battle-seasoned dwarves,
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under the tutelage of Bruenor himself. He had taught her both discipline and confidence. Not a facade of cockiness to hide deeper insecurities, but a true self-belief and measured evaluation of what she could and could not accomplish. Any trouble that she had finding sleep that night was more due to her eagerness to face this challenge than her fear of failure.

They broke camp early and arrived at the ruins just after dawn. No more anxious than Bruenor's party, though, they found only the remnants of the companions' campsite.

" An hour - perhaps two," Entreri observed, bending low to feel the heat of the embers.

" Bok has already found the new trail," said Sydney, pointing to the golem moving off toward the foothills of the closest mountain.

A smile filled Entreri's face as the thrill of the chase swept over him. Catti-brie paid little attention to the assassin, though, more concerned with the revelations painted on Jierdan's face.

The soldier seemed unsure of himself. He took up after them as soon as Sydney and Entreri started behind Bok, but with forced steps. He obviously wasn't looking forward to the pending confrontation, as were Sydney and Entreri.

Catti-brie was pleased.

They charged ahead through the morning, dodging sharp ravines and boulders, and picking their way up the side of the mountains. Then, for the

first time since he had begun his search more than two years before, Entreri saw his prey.

The assassin had come over a boulder-strewn mound and was slowing his strides to accommodate a sharp dip into a small dell thick with trees, when Bruenor and his friends broke clear of some brush and made their way across the facing of a steep slope far ahead. Entreri dropped into a crouch and signaled for the others to slow behind him.

" Stop the golem," he called to Sydney, for Bok had already disappeared into the copse below him and would soon come crashing out of the other side and onto another barren mound of stone, in clear sight of the companions.

Sydney rushed up. " Bok, return to me!" she yelled as loudly as she dared, for while the companions were far in the distance, the echoes of noises on the mountainside seemed to carry forever.

Entreri pointed to the specks moving across the facing ahead of them. " We can catch them before they get around the side of the mountain," he told Sydney. He jumped back to meet Jierdan and Catti-brie, and roughly bound Catti-brie's hands behind her back. " If you cry out, you will watch your friends die," he assured her. " And then your own end will be most unpleasant."

Catti-brie painted her most frightened look across her face, all the while pleased that the assassin's latest threat seemed quite hollow to her. She had risen above the level of terror that Entreri had played against her when they had first met back in Ten-Towns. She had convinced herself, against her

instinctive revulsion of the passionless killer, that he was, after all, only a man.

Entreri pointed to the steep valley below the facing and the companions. " I will go through the ravine," he explained to Sydney, " and make the first contact. You and the golem continue along the path and close in from behind."

" And what of me?" Jierdan protested.

" Stay with the girl!" Entreri commanded, as absently as if he was speaking to a servant. He spun away and started off, refusing to hear any arguments.

Sydney did not even turn to look at Jierdan as she stood waiting for Bok's return. She had no time for such squabbles and figured that if Jierdan could not speak for himself, he wasn't worth her trouble.

" Act now," Catti-brie whispered to Jierdan, " for yerself and not for me!" He looked at her, more curious than angry, and vulnerable to any suggestions that might help him from this uncomfortable position.

" The mage has thrown all respect for ye, man," Catti-brie continued. " The assassin has replaced ye, and she'd be liken to stand by him above ye. This is yer chance to act, yer last one if me eyes be tellin' me right! Time to show the mage yer worth, Soldier of Luskan!"

Jierdan glanced about nervously. For all of the manipulations he expected from the woman, her words held enough truth to convince him that her assessment was correct.

His pride won over. He spun on Catti-brie and smacked her to the ground, then rushed past Sydney in pursuit of Entreri.

"Where are you going?" Sydney called after him, but Jierdan was no longer interested in pointless talk.

Surprised and confused, Sydney turned to check on the prisoner. Catti-brie had anticipated this and she groaned and rolled on the hard stone as though she had been knocked senseless, though in truth she had turned enough away from Jierdan's blow that he had merely glanced her. Fully conscious and coherent, her movements were calculated to position her where she could slip her tied hands down around her legs and bring them up in front of her.

Catti-brie's act satisfied Sydney enough so that the mage put her attention fully on the coming confrontation between her two comrades. Hearing Jierdan's approach, Entreri had spun on him, his dagger and saber drawn.

"You were told to stay with the girl!" he hissed.

"I did not come on this journey to play guard to your prisoner!" Jierdan retorted, his own sword out.

The characteristic grin made its way onto Entreri's face again. "Go back," he said one last time to Jierdan, though he knew, and was glad, that the proud soldier would not turn away.

Jierdan took another step forward.

Entreri struck.

Jierdan was a seasoned fighter, a veteran of many skirmishes, and if Entreri expected to dispatch him with a single thrust, he was mistaken. Jierdan's sword knocked the blow aside and he returned the thrust.

Recognizing the obvious contempt that Entreri showed to Jierdan, and knowing the level of the soldier's pride, Sydney had feared this confrontation since they had left the Hosttower. She didn't care if one of them died now - she suspected that it would be Jierdan - but she would not tolerate anything that put her mission in jeopardy. After the drow was safely in her hands, Entreri and Jierdan could settle their differences.

" Go to them!" she called to the advancing golem. " Stop this fight!" Bok turned at once and rushed toward the combatants, and Sydney, shaking her head in disgust, believed that the situation would soon be under control and they could resume their hunt.

What she didn't see was Catti-brie rising up behind her.

Catti-brie knew that she had only one chance. She crept up silently and brought her clasped hands down on the back of the mage's neck. Sydney dropped straight to the hard stone and Catti-brie ran by, down into the copse of trees, her blood coursing through her veins. She had to get close enough to her friends to yell a clear warning before her captors overtook her.

Just after Catti-brie slipped into the thick trees, she heard Sydney gasp, " Bok!"

The golem swung back at once, some distance behind Catti-brie, but gaining with each long stride.

Even if they had seen her flight, Jierdan and Entreri were too caught up in their own battle to be concerned with her.

" You shall insult me no more!" Jierdan cried above the clang of steel.

" But I shall!" Entreri hissed. " There are many ways to defile a corpse, fool, and know that I shall practice every one on your rotting bones." He pressed in harder, his concentration squarely on his foe, his blades gaining deadly momentum in their dance.

Jierdan countered gamely, but the skilled assassin had little trouble in meeting all of his thrusts with deft parries and subtle shifts. Soon the soldier had exhausted his repertoire of feints and strikes, and he hadn't even come close to hitting his mark. He would tire before Entreri - he saw that clearly even this early in the fight.

They exchanged several more blows, Entreri's cuts moving faster and faster, while Jierdan's double-handed swings slowed to a crawl. The soldier had hoped that Sydney would intervene by this point. His weakness of stamina had been clearly revealed to Entreri, and he couldn't understand why the mage had not said anything about the battle. He glanced about, his desperation growing. Then he saw Sydney, lying face down on the stone...

An honorable way out, he thought, still more concerned with himself. " The, mage!" he cried to Entreri. " We must help her!" The words fell upon deaf ears.

" And the girl!" Jierdan yelled, hoping to catch the assassin's interest. He tried to break free of the combat, jumping back from Entreri and lowering his

sword. " We shall continue this later," he declared in a threatening tone, though he had no intention of engaging the assassin in a fair fight again.

Entreri didn't answer, but lowered his blades accordingly. Jierdan, ever the honorable soldier, turned about to see to Sydney.

A jeweled dagger whistled into his back.

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Catti-brie stumbled along, unable to hold her balance with her hands bound together. Loose stone slipped beneath her and more than once she tumbled to the ground. As agile as a cat, she was up quickly.

But Bok was the swifter.

Catti-brie fell again and rolled over a sharp crest of stone. She started down a dangerous slope of slippery rocks, heard the golem stomping behind her, and knew that she could not possibly outrun the thing. Yet she had no choice. Sweat burned a dozen scrapes and stung her eyes, and all hope had flown from her. Still she ran, her courage denying the obvious end.

Against her despair and terror, she found the strength to search for an option. The slope continued down another twenty feet, and right beside her was the slender and rotting stump of a long-dead tree. A plan came to her then, desperate, but with enough hope for her to try it. She stopped for a moment to survey the root structure of the rotting stump, and to estimate the effect that uprooting the thing might have on the stones.

She backed a few feet up the slope and waited, crouched for her impossible leap. Bok came over the crest and bore down on her, rocks bouncing away from the heavy plodding of its booted feet. It was right behind her, reaching out with horrid arms.

And Catti-brie leaped.

She hooked the rope that bound her hands over the stump as she flew past, throwing all of her weight against the hold of its roots.

Bok lumbered after her, oblivious to her intentions. Even as the stump toppled, and the network of dead roots pulled up from the ground, the golem couldn't understand the danger. As the loose stones shifted and began their descent, Bok kept its focus straight ahead on its prey.

Catti-brie bounced down ahead and to the side of the rockslide. She didn't try to rise, just kept rolling and scrambling in spite of the pain to gain every inch between herself and the crumbling slope. Her determination got her to the thick trunk of an oak, and she rolled around behind it and turned back to look at the slope.

Just in time to see the golem go down under a ton of bouncing stone.