

# Streams of silver 5. the crags



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Drizzt took the lead as the four companions jogged along the banks of the river Mirar, putting as much ground between themselves and Luskan as possible. Although they hadn't slept in many hours, their encounters in the City of Sails had sent a burst of adrenaline through their veins and none of them was weary.

Something magical hung in the air that night, a crispy tingling that would have made the most exhausted traveler lament closing his eyes to it. The river, rushing swiftly and high from the spring melt, sparkled in the evening glow, its whitecaps catching the starlight and throwing it back into the air in a spray of bejeweled droplets.

Normally cautious, the friends could not help but let their guard down. They felt no danger lurking near, felt nothing but the sharp, refreshing chill of the spring night and the mysterious pull of the heavens. Bruenor lost himself indreamsof Mithril Hall; Regis inmemoriesof Calimport; even Wulfgar, so despondent about his ill-fated encounter with civilization, felt his spirits soar. He thought of similar nights on the open tundra, when he had dreamed of what lay beyond the horizons of his world. Now, out beyond those horizons, Wulfgar found only one element missing. To his surprise, and against the adventuring instincts that denied such comfortable thoughts, he wished that Catti-brie, the woman he had grown to cherish, was with him now to share the beauty of this night.

If the others had not been so preoccupied with their own enjoyment of the evening, they would have noticed an extra bounce in Drizzt Do'Urden's graceful step as well. To the drow, these magical nights, when the heavenly

dome reached down below the horizon, bolstered his confidence in the most important and difficult decision he had ever made, the choice to forsake his people and his homeland. No stars sparkled above Menzoberranzan, the dark city of the black elves. No unexplainable allure tugged at the heartstrings from the cold stone of the immense cavern's lightless ceiling.

" How much my people have lost by walking in darkness," Drizzt whispered into the night. The pull of the mysteries of the endless sky carried the joy of his spirit beyond its normal boundaries and opened his mind to the unanswerable questions of the multiverse. He was an elf, and though his skin was black, there remained in his soul a semblance of the harmonic joy of his surface cousins. He wondered how general these feelings truly ran among his people. Did they remain in the hearts of all dwarf? Or had eons of sublimation extinguished the spiritual flames? To Drizzt's reckoning, perhaps the greatest loss that his people had suffered when they retreated to the depths of the world was the loss of the ability to ponder the spirituality of existence simply for the sake of thought.

The crystalline sheen of the Mirar gradually dulled as the lightening dawn dimmed the stars. It came as an unspoken disappointment to the friends as they set their camp in a sheltered spot near the banks of the river.

" Be knowin' that nights like that are few," Bruenor observed as the first ray of light crept over the eastern horizon. A glimmer edged his eye, a hint of the wondrous fantasizing that the normally practical dwarf rarely enjoyed.

Drizzt noted the dwarf's dreamy glow and thought of the nights that he and Bruenor had spent on Bruenor's Climb, their special meeting place, back in the dwarf's valley in Ten-Towns. " Too few," he agreed.

With a resigned sigh, they set to work, Drizzt and Wulfgar starting breakfast while Bruenor and Regis examined the map they had obtained in Luskan.

For all of his grumbling and teasing about the halfling, Bruenor had pressured him to come along for a very definite reason, aside from their friendship, and though the dwarf had masked his emotions well, he was truly overjoyed when Regis had come up huffing and puffing on the road out of Ten-Towns in a last-minute plea to join the quest.

Regis knew the land south of the Spine of the World better than any of them. Bruenor himself hadn't been out of Icewind Dale in nearly two centuries, and then he had been just an unbearded dwarf-child. Wulfgar had never left the dale, and Drizzt's only trek across the world's surface had been a nighttime adventure, skipping from shadow to shadow and avoiding many of the places the companions would need to search out, if they were ever to find Mithril Hall.

Regis ran his fingers across the map, excitedly recalling to Bruenor his experiences in each of the places listed, particularly Mirabar, the mining city of great wealth to the north, and Waterdeep, true to its name as the City of Splendors, down the coast to the south.

Bruenor slipped his finger across the map, studying the physical features of the terrain. " Mirabar'd be more to me liking," he said at length, tapping the

mark of the city tucked within the southern slopes of the Spine of the World.

" Mithril Hall's in mountains, that much I know, and not aside the sea."

Regis considered the dwarf's observations for just a moment, then plunked his finger down on yet another spot, by the scale of the map a hundred miles and more inland from Luskan. " Longsaddle," he said. " Halfway to Silverymoon, and halfway between Mirabar and Waterdeep. A good place to search out our course."

" A city?" Bruenor asked, for the mark on the map was no more than a small black dot.

" A village," Regis corrected. " There are not many people there, but a family of wizards, the Harpells, have lived there for many years and know the northland as well as any. They would be happy to help us."

Bruenor scratched his chin and nodded. " A fair hike. What might we be seeing along the way?"

" The crags," Regis admitted, a bit disheartened as he remembered the place. " Wild and orc-filled. I wish we had another road, but Longsaddle still seems the best choice."

" All roads in the north hold danger," Bruenor reminded him.

They continued their scrutiny of the map, Regis recalling more and more as they went. A series of unusual and unidentified markings - three in particular, running in an almost straight line due east of Luskan to the river network south of Lurkwood - caught Bruenor's eye.

" Ancestral mounds," Regis explained. " Holy places of the Uthgardt."

" Uthgardt?"

" Barbarians," answered Regis grimly. " Like those in the dale. More wise to the ways of civilization, perhaps, but no less fierce. Their separate tribes are all about the northland, wandering the wilds.

Bruenor groaned in understanding of the halfling's dismay, all too familiar himself with the savage ways and fighting prowess of barbarians. Orcs would prove much less formidable foes.

By the time the two had finished their discussion, Drizt was stretching out in the cool shade of a tree overhanging the river and Wulfgar was halfway through his third helping of breakfast.

" Yer jaw still dances for food, I see!" Bruenor called as he noted the meager portions left on the skillet.

" A night filled with adventure," Wulfgar replied gaily, and his friends were glad to observe that the brawl had apparently left no scars upon his attitude.

" A fine meal and a fine sleep, and I shall be ready for the road once more!"

" Well don't ye get too comfortable yet!" Bruenor ordered. " Ye've a third of a watch to keep this day!"

Regis looked about, perplexed, always quick to recognize an increase in his workload. " A third?" he asked. " Why not a fourth?"

"The elf's eyes are for the night," Bruenor explained. "Let him be ready to find our way when the day's flown."

"And where is our way?" Drizzt asked from his mossy bed. "Have you come to a decision for our next destination?"

"Longsaddle," Regis replied. "Two hundred miles east and south, around Neverwinter Wood and across the crags."

"The name is unknown to me," Drizzt replied.

"Home of the Harpells," Regis explained. "A family of wizards renowned for their good-natured hospitality. I spent some time there on my way to Ten-Towns."

Wulfgar balked at the idea. The barbarians of Icewind Dale despised wizards, considering the black arts a power employed only by cowards. "I have no desire to view this place," he stated flatly.

"Who asked ye?" growled Bruenor, and Wulfgar found himself backing down from his resolve, like a son refusing to hold a stubborn argument in the face of a scolding by his father.

"You will enjoy Longsaddle," Regis assured him. "The Harpells have truly earned their hospitable reputation, and the wonders of Longsaddle will show you a side of magic you never expected. They will even accept..." He found his hand involuntarily pointing to Drizzt, and he cut short the statement in embarrassment.

But the stoic drow just smiled. "Fear not, my friend," he consoled Regis. "Your words ring of truth, and I have come to accept my station in your world." He paused and looked individually into each uncomfortable stare that was upon him. "I know my friends, and I dismiss my enemies," he stated with a finality that dismissed their worries.

"With a blade, ye do," Bruenor added with a soft chuckle, though Drizzt's keen ears caught the whisper.

"If I must," the drow agreed, smiling. Then he rolled over to get some sleep, fully trusting in his friends' abilities to keep him safe.

They passed a lazy day in the shade beside the river. Late in the afternoon, Drizzt and Bruenor ate a meal and discussed their course, leaving Wulfgar and Regis soundly asleep, at least until they had eaten their own fill.

"We'll stay with the river for a night more," Bruenor said. "Then southeast across the open ground. That'd clear us of the wood and lay open a straight path 'fore us."

"Perhaps it would be better if we traveled only by night for a few days," Drizzt suggested. "We know not what eyes follow us out of the City of Sails."

"Agreed," replied Bruenor. "Let's be off, then. A long road before us, and a longer one after that!"

"Too long," murmured Regis, opening a lazy eye.



Bruenor shot him a dangerous glare. He was nervous about this trek and about bringing his friends on a dangerous road, and in an emotional defense, he took all complaints about the adventure personally.

" To walk, I mean," Regis quickly explained. " There are farmhouses in this area, so there must be some horses about."

" Horses'd bring too a high price in these parts," replied Bruenor.

" Maybe..." said the halfling slyly, and his friends could easily guess what he was thinking. Their frowns reflected a general disapproval.

" The crags stand before us!" Regis argued. " Horses might outrun orcs, but without them, we shall surely fight for every mile of our hike! Besides, it would only be a loan. We could return the beasts when we were through with them."

Drizzt and Bruenor did not approve of the halfling's proposed trickery, but could not refute his logic. Horses would certainly aid them at this point of the journey.

" Wake the boy," Bruenor growled.

" And about my plan?" asked Regis.

" We'll make the choice when we find the opportunity!"

Regis was contented, confident that his friends would opt for the horses. He ate his fill, then scraped together the supper's meager remnants and went to wake Wulfgar.

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They were on the trail again soon after, and a short time after that, they saw the lights of a small settlement in the distance.

" Take us there," Bruenor told Drizzt. " Mighten be that Rumblebelly's plan's worth a try."

Wulfgar, having missed the conversation at the camp, didn't understand, but offered no argument, or even questioned the dwarf. After the disaster at the Cutlass, he had resigned himself to a more passive role on the trip, letting the other three decide which trails they were to take. He would follow without complaint, keeping his hammer ready for when it became needed.

They moved inland away from the river for a few miles, then came upon several farms clustered together inside a stout wooden fence.

" There are dogs about," Drizzt noted, sensing them with his exceptional hearing.

" Then Rumblebelly goes in alone," said Bruenor.

Wulfgar's face twisted in confusion, especially since the halfling's look indicated that he wasn't thrilled with the idea. " That I cannot allow," the barbarian spouted. " If any among us needs protection, it is the little one. I'll not hide here in the dark while he walks alone into danger!"

" He goes in alone," Bruenor said again. " We're here for no fight, boy. Rumblebelly's to get us some horses."

Regis smiled helplessly, caught fully in the trap that Bruenor had clearly set for him. Bruenor would allow him to appropriate the horses, as Regis had insisted, but with the grudging permission came a measure of responsibility and bravery on his part. It was the dwarf's way, of absolving himself of involvement in the trickery.

Wulfgar remained steadfast in his determination to stand by the halfling, but Regis knew that the young warrior might inadvertently cause him problems in such delicate negotiations. "You stay with the others," he explained to the barbarian. "I can handle this deal alone."

Mustering up his nerve, he pulled his belt over the hang of his belly and strode off toward the small settlement.

The threatening snarls of several dogs greeted him as he approached the fence's gate. He considered turning back - the ruby pendant probably wouldn't do him much good against vicious dogs - but then he saw the silhouette of a man leave one of the farmhouses and start his way.

"What do you want?" the farmer demanded, standing defiantly on the other side of the gate and clutching an antique pole arm, probably passed down through his family's generations.

"I am but a weary traveler," Regis started to explain, trying to appear as pitiful as he could. It was a tale the farmer had heard far too often.

"Go away!" he ordered.

"But - "

" Get you gone!"

Over a ridge some distance away, the three companions watched the confrontation, though only Drizzt viewed the scene in the dim light well enough to understand what was happening. The drow could see the tenseness in the farmer by the way he gripped the halberd, and could judge the deep resolve in the man's demands by the unbending scowl upon his face.

But then Regis pulled something out from under his jacket, and the farmer relaxed his grip upon the weapon almost immediately. A moment later, the gate swung open and Regis walked in.

The friends waited anxiously for several grueling hours with no further sign of Regis. They considered confronting the farmers themselves, worried that some foul treachery had befallen the halfling. Then finally, with the moon well past its peak, Regis emerged from the gate, leading two horses and two ponies. The farmers and their families waved good-bye to him as he left, making him promise to stop and visit if he ever passed their way again.

" Amazing," laughed Drizzt. Bruenor and Wulfgar just shook their heads in disbelief.

For the first time since he had entered the settlement, Regis pondered that his delay might have caused his friends some distress. The farmer had insisted that he join in for supper before they sat down to discuss whatever business he had come about, and since Regis had to be polite (and since he had only eaten one supper that day) he agreed, though he kept the meal as

short as possible and politely declined, when offered his fourth helping. Getting the horses proved easy enough after that. All he had to do was promise to leave them with the wizards in Longsaddle when he and his friends moved on from there.

Regis felt certain that his friends could not stay mad at him for very long. He had kept them waiting and worrying for half the night, but his endeavor would save them many days on a dangerous road. After an hour or two of feeling the wind rushing past them as they rode, they would forget any anger they held for him, he knew. Even if they didn't so easily forgive, a good meal was always worth a little inconvenience to Regis.

Drizzt purposely kept the party moving more to the east than the southeast. He found no landmarks on Bruenor's map that would let him approximate the straight course to Longsaddle. If he tried the direct route and missed the mark, no matter how slightly, they would come upon the main road from the northern city of Mirabar not knowing whether to turn north or south. By going directly east, the dwarf was assured that they would hit the road to the north of Longsaddle. His path would add a few miles, but perhaps save them several days of backtracking.

Their ride was clear and easy for the next day and night, and after that, Bruenor decided that they were far enough from Luskan to assume a more normal traveling schedule. " We can go by day, now," he announced early in the afternoon of their second day with the horses.

" I prefer the night," Drizzt said. He had just awakened and was brushing down his slender, well-muscled black stallion.

" Not me," argued Regis. " Nights are for sleeping, and the horses are all but blind to holes and rocks that could lame them up."

" The best for both then," offered Wulfgar, stretching the last sleep out of his bones. " We can leave after the sun peaks, keeping it behind us for Drizzt, and ride long into the night."

" Good thinking, lad," laughed Bruenor. " Seems to be afternoon now, in fact. On the horses, then! Time's for going!"

" You might have held your thoughts to yourself until after supper!" Regis grumbled at Wulfgar, reluctantly hoisting the saddle onto the back of the little white pony.

Wulfgar moved to help his struggling friend. " But we would have lost half a day's ride," he replied.

" A pity that would have been," Regis retorted.

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That day, the fourth since they had left Luskan, the companions came upon the crags, a narrow stretch of broken mounds and rolling hills. A rough, untamed beauty defined the place, an overpowering sense of wilderness that gave every traveler here a feeling of conquest, that he might be the first to gaze upon any particular spot. And, as was always the case in the wilds, with the adventurous excitement came a degree of danger. They had barely entered the first dell in the up-and-down terrain when Drizzt spotted tracks that he knew well: the trampling march of an orc band.

" Less than a day old," he told his concerned companions.

" How many?" asked Bruenor.

Drizzt shrugged. " A dozen at least, maybe twice that number."

" We'll keep to our path," the dwarf suggested. " They're in front of us, and that's better'n behind."

When sunset came, marking the halfway point of that day's journey, the companions took a short break, letting the horses graze in a small meadow.

The orc trail was still before them, but Wulfgar, taking up the rear of the troupe had his sights trained behind.

" We are being followed," he said to his friends' inquiring faces.

" Orcs?" Regis asked.

The barbarian shook his head. " None like I have ever seen. By my reckoning, our pursuit is cunning and cautious."

" Might be that the orcs here are more wise to the ways of goodly folk than be the orcs of the dale," said Bruenor, but he suspected something other than orcs, and he didn't have to look at Regis to know that the halfling shared his concerns. The first map marking that Regis had identified as an ancestral mound could not be far from their present position.

" Back to the horses," Drizzt suggested. " A hard ride might do much to improve our position."

" Go till after moonset," Bruenor agreed. " And stop when ye've found a place we can hold against attack. I've a feeling we're to see some fighting 'fore the dawn finds us!"

They encountered no tangible signs during the ride, which took them nearly across the p of the crags. Even the orc trail faded off to the north, leaving the path before them apparently clear. Wulfgar was certain, though, that he caught several sounds behind them, and movements along the periphery of his vision.

Drizzt would have liked to continue until the crags were fully behind them, but in the harsh terrain, the horses had reached the limit of their endurance. He pulled up into a small copse of fir trees set on top of a small rise, fully suspecting, like the others, that unfriendly eyes were watching them from more than one direction.

Drizzt was up one of the trees before the others had even dismounted. They tethered the horses close together and set themselves around the beasts. Even Regis would find no sleep, for, though he trusted Drizzt's night vision, his blood had already begun pumping in anticipation of what was to come.

Bruenor, a veteran of a hundred fights, felt secure enough in his battle prowess. He propped himself calmly against a tree, his many-notched axe across his chest, one hand firmly in place upon its handle.

Wulfgar, though, made other preparations. He began by gathering together broken sticks and branches and sharpening their points. Seeking every advantage, he set them in strategic positions around the area to provide the



best layout for his stand, using their deadly points to cut down the routes of approach for his attackers. Other sticks he cunningly concealed in angles that would trip up and stick the orcs before they ever reached him.

Regis, the most nervous of all, watched it all and noted the differences in his friends' tactics. He felt that there was little he could do to prepare himself for such a fight, and he sought only to keep himself far enough out of the way so as not to hinder the efforts of his friends. Perhaps the opportunity would arise for him to make a surprise strike, but he didn't even consider such possibilities at this point. Bravery came to the halfling spontaneously. It was certainly nothing he ever planned.

With all of their diversions and preparations deflecting their nervous anticipation, it came as almost a relief when, barely an hour later, their anxiety became reality. Drizzt whispered down to them that there was movement on the fields below the copse.

" How many?" Bruenor called back.

" Four to one against us, and maybe more," Drizzt replied.

The dwarf turned to Wulfgar. " Ye ready, boy?"

Wulfgar slapped his hammer out before him. " Four against one?" he laughed. Bruenor liked the young warrior's confidence, though the dwarf realized that the odds might actually prove more lopsided, since Regis wouldn't likely be out in the open fighting.

" Let 'em in, or hit them out in the field?" Bruenor asked Drizzt.

" Let them in," the drow replied. " Their stealthy approach shows me that they believe surprise is with them."

" And a turned surprise is better'n a first blow from afar," Bruenor finished. " Do what ye can with yer bow when it's started, elf. We'll be waitin' fer ye!"

Wulfgar imagined the fire seething in the drow's lavender eyes, a deadly gleam that always belied Drizzt's outward calm before a battle. The barbarian took comfort, for the drow's lust for battle outweighed even his own, and he had never seen the whirring scimitars outdone by any foe. He slapped his hammer again and crouched in a hole beside the roots of one of the trees.

Bruenor slipped between the bulky bodies of two of the horses, pulling his feet up into a stirrup on each, and Regis, after he had stuffed the bedrolls to give the appearance of sleeping bodies, scooted under the low-hanging boughs of one of the trees.

The orcs approached the camp in a ring, obviously looking for an easy strike. Drizzt smiled in hope as he noted the gaps in their ring, open flanks that would prevent quick support to any isolated group. The whole band would hit the perimeter of the copse together, and Wulfgar, closest to the edge, would most likely launch the first strike.

The orcs crept in, one group slipping toward the horses, another toward the bedrolls. Four of them passed Wulfgar, but he waited a second longer, allowing the others to get close enough to the horses for Bruenor to strike.

Then the time for hiding had ended.

Wulfgar sprang from his concealment, Aegis-fang, his magical warhammer, already in motion. "Tempus!" he cried to his god of battle, and his first blow crashed in, swatting two of the orcs to the ground.

The other group rushed to get the horses free and out of the camp, hoping to cut off any escape route.

But were greeted by the snarling dwarf and his ringing axe!

As the surprised orcs leaped into the saddles, Bruenor clove one down the middle, and took a second one's head clean from its shoulders before the remaining two even knew that they had been attacked.

Drizt picked as targets the orcs closest to the groups under attack, delaying the support against his friends for as long as possible. His bowstring twanged, once, twice, and a third time, and a like number of orcs fell to the earth, their eyes closed and their hands helplessly clenched upon the shafts of the killing arrows.

The surprise strikes had cut deeply into the ranks of their enemies, and now the drow pulled his scimitars and dropped from his perch, confident that he and his companions could finish the rest off quickly. His smile was short-lived, though, for as he descended, he noticed more movement in the field.

Drizt had come down in the middle of three creatures, his blades in motion before his feet had even touched the ground. The orcs were not totally surprised - one had seen the drow dropping - but Drizt had them off balance and swinging around to bring their weapons to bear.

With the dwarf's lightninglike strikes, any delay at all meant certain death, and Drizt was the only one in the jumble of bodies under control. His scimitars slashed and thrust into orc's flesh with killing precision.

Wulfgar's fortunes were equally bright. He faced two of the creatures, and though they were vicious fighters, they could not match the giant barbarian's power. One got its crude weapon up in time to block Wulfgar's swing, but Aegis-fang blasted through the defense, shattering the weapon and then the unfortunate orc's skull without even slowing for the effort.

Bruenor fell into trouble first. His initial attacks went off perfectly, leaving him with only two standing opponents - odds that the dwarf liked. But in the excitement, the horses reared and bolted, tearing their tethers free from the branches. Bruenor tumbled to the ground, and before he could recover, was clipped in the head by the hoof of his own pony. One of the orcs was similarly thrown down, but the last one landed free of the commotion and rushed to finish off the stunned dwarf as the horses cleared the area.

Luckily, one of those spontaneous moments of bravery came over Regis at that moment. He slipped out from under the tree, falling in silently behind the orc. It was tall for an orc, and even on the tips of his toes, Regis did not like the angle of a strike at its head. Shrugging resignedly, the halfling reversed his strategy.

Before the orc could even begin to strike at Bruenor, the halfling's mace came up between its knees and higher, driving into its groin and lifting it clear off the ground. The howling victim grasped at its injury, its eyes lolling

about aimlessly, and dropped to the ground with no further ambitions for battle.

It had all happened in an instant, but victory was not yet won. Another six orcs poured into the fray, two cutting off Drizzt's attempt to get to Regis and Bruenor, three more going to the aid of their lone companion facing the giant barbarian. And one, creeping along the same line Regis had taken, closed on the unsuspecting halfling.

At the same moment Regis made out the drow's warning call, a club slammed between his shoulder blades, blasting the wind from his lungs and tossing him to the ground.

Wulfgar was pressed on all four sides, and despite his boasts before the battle, he found that he didn't care for the situation. He concentrated on parrying, hoping that the drow could get to him before his defenses broke down.

He was too badly outnumbered.

An orcan blade cut into a rib, another clipped his arm.

Drizzt knew that he could defeat the two he now faced, but doubted that it would be in time for him to help his barbarian friend. Or the halfling. And there were still reinforcements on the field.

Regis rolled onto his back to lay right beside Bruenor, and the dwarf's groaning told him that the fight was over for both of them. Then the orc was above him, its club raised above its head, and an evil smile spread wide

upon its ugly face. Regis closed his eyes, having no desire to watch the descent of the blow that would kill him.

Then he heard the sound of impact... above him.

Startled, he opened his eyes. A hatchet was embedded into his attacker's chest. The orc looked down at it, stunned. The club dropped harmlessly behind the orc, and it, too, fell backward, quite dead.

Regis didn't understand. " Wulfgar?" he asked into the air.

A huge form, nearly as large as Wulfgar's, sprang over him and pounced upon the orc, savagely tearing the hatchet free. He was human, and wearing the furs of a barbarian, but unlike the tribes of Icewind Dale, this man's hair was black.

" Oh, no," Regis groaned, remembering his own warnings to Bruenor about the Uthgardt barbarians. The man had saved his life, but knowing the savage reputation, Regis doubted that a friendship would grow out of the encounter. He started to sit up, wanting to express his sincere thanks and dispel any unfriendly notions the barbarian might have about him. He even considered using the ruby pendant to evoke some friendly feelings.

But the big man, noting the movement, spun suddenly and kicked him in the face.

And Regis fell backward into blackness.