

Streams of silver 12. the trollmoors



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This was a land of blackened earth and misted bogs, where decay and an imposing sensation of peril overruled even the sunniest of skies. The landscape climbed and dropped continually, and the crest of each rise, mounted in hopes of an end to the place by any traveler here, brought only despair and more of the same unchanging scenes.

The brave Riders of Nesme ventured into the moors each spring to set long lines of fires and drive the monsters of the hostile land far from the borders of their town. The season was late and several weeks had passed since the last burning, but even now the low dells lay heavy with smoke and the waves of heat from the great fires still shimmered in the air around the thickest of the charred piles of wood.

Bruenor had led his friends into the Trollmoors in stubborn defiance of the riders, and was determined to pound his way through to Silverymoon. But after only the first day's travel, even he began to doubt the decision. The place demanded a constant state of alertness, and each copse of burned-out trees they passed made them pause, the black, leafless stumps and fallen logs bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to bog blokes. More than once, the spongy ground beneath their feet suddenly became a deep pit of mud, and only the quick reactions of a nearby companion kept them from finding out how deep any of the pits actually were.

A continual breeze blew across the moors, fueled by the contrasting patches of hot ground and cool bogs, and carrying an odor more foul than the smoke and soot of the fires, a sickly sweet smell disturbingly familiar to Drizzt Do'Urden - the stench of trolls.

This was their domain, and all the rumors about the Evermoors the companions had heard, and had laughed away in the comfort of The Fuzzy Quarterstaff, could not have prepared them for the reality that suddenly descended upon them when they entered the place.

Bruenor had estimated that their party could clear the moors in five days if they kept a strong pace. That first day, they actually covered the necessary distance, but the dwarf had not foreseen the continual backtracking they would have to do to avoid the bogs. While they had marched for more than twenty miles that day, they were less than ten from where they started into the moors.

Still, they encountered no trolls, nor any other kind of fiend, and they set their camp that night under a guise of quiet optimism.

"Ye'll keep to the guard?" Bruenor asked Drizzt, aware that the Drow alone had the heightened senses they would need to survive the night.

Drizzt nodded. "The night through," he replied, and Bruenor didn't argue. The dwarf knew that none of them would get any sleep that night, whether on guard, or not.

Darkness came suddenly and completely. Bruenor, Regis, and Wulfgar couldn't see their own hands if they held them inches from their faces. With the blackness came the sounds of an awakening nightmare. Sucking, sloshing footsteps closed in all about them. Smoke mixed with the nighttime fog and rolled in around the trunks of the leafless trees. The wind did not

increase, but the intensity of its foul stench did, and it carried now the groans of the tormented spirits of the moors' wretched dwellers.

" Gather your gear," Drizzt whispered to his friends.

" What do ye see, then?" Bruenor asked softly.

" Nothing directly," came the reply. " But I feel them about, as do you all. We cannot let them find us sitting. We must move among them to keep them from gathering about us."

" My legs ache," complained Regis. " And my feet have swelled. I don't even know if I can get my boots back on!"

" Help him, boy," Bruenor told Wulfgar. " The elf's right. We'll carry ye if we must, Rumblebelly, but we're not staying!"

Drizzt took the lead, and at times he had to hold Bruenor's hand behind him, and so on down the line to Wulfgar in the rear, to keep his companions from stumbling from the path he had picked.

They could all sense the dark shapes moving around them, smell the foulness of the wretched trolls. Clearly viewing the host gathering about them, Drizzt alone understood just how precarious their position was, and he pulled his friends as fast as he could.

Luck was with them, for the moon came up then, transforming the fog into a ghostly silver blanket, and revealing to all the friends the pressing danger.

Now with the movement visible on every side, the friends ran.

Lanky, lurching forms loomed up in the mist beside them, clawed fingers stretching out to snag at them as they rushed past. Wulfgar moved up to Drizzt's side, swatting the trolls aside with great sweeps of Aegis-fang, while the drow concentrated on keeping them going in the right direction.

For hours they ran, and still the trolls came on. Beyond all feelings of exhaustion, past the ache, and then the numbness in their limbs, the friends ran with the knowledge of the certain horrible death that would befall them if they faltered for even a second, their fear overruling their bodies' cries of defeat. Even Regis, too fat and soft, and with legs too short for the road, matched the pace and pushed those before him to greater speeds.

Drizzt understood the futility of their course. Wulfgar's hammer invariably slowed, and they all stumbled more and more with each minute that passed. The night had many hours more, and even the dawn did not guarantee an end to the pursuit. How many miles could they run? When would they turn down a path that ended in a bottomless bog, with a hundred trolls at their backs?

Drizzt changed his strategy. No longer seeking only to flee, he began looking for a defensible piece of ground. He spied a small mound, ten feet high perhaps, with a steep, almost sheer, grade on the three sides he could see from his angle. A solitary sapling grew up its face. He pointed the place out to Wulfgar, who understood the plan immediately and veered in. Two trolls loomed up to block their way, but Wulfgar, snarling in rage, charged to meet them. Aegis-fang slammed down in furious succession again and again, and

the other three companions were able to slip behind the barbarian and make it to the mound.

Wulfgar spun away and rushed to join them, the stubborn trolls close in pursuit and now joined by a long line of their wretched kin.

Surprisingly nimble, even despite his belly, Regis scampered up the tree to the top of the mound. Bruenor, though, not built for such climbing, struggled for every inch.

" Help him!" Drizzt, his back to the tree and scimitars readied, cried to Wulfgar. " Then you get up! I shall hold them."

Wulfgar's breath came in labored gasps, and a line of bright blood was etched across his forehead. He stumbled into the tree and started up behind the dwarf. Roots pulled away under their combined weight, and they seemed to lose an inch for every one they gained. Finally, Regis was able to clasp Bruenor's hand and help him over the top, and Wulfgar, with the way clear before him, moved to join them. With their own immediate safety assured, they looked back in concern for their friend.

Drizzt battled three of the monsters, and more piled in behind. Wulfgar considered dropping back from his perch halfway up the tree and dying at the dwarf's side, but Drizzt, periodically looking back over his shoulder to check his friends' progress, noted the barbarian's hesitation and read his mind. " Go!" he shouted. " Your delay does not help!"

Wulfgar had to pause and consider the source of the command. His trust of, and respect for, Drizzt overcame his instinctive desire to rush back into the

fray, and he grudgingly pulled himself up to join Regis and Bruenor on the small plateau.

Trolls moved to flank the drow, their filthy claws reaching out at him from every side. He heard his friends, all three, imploring him to break away and join them, but knew that the monsters had already slipped in behind to cut off his retreat.

A smile widened across his face. The light in his eyes flared.

He rushed into the main host of trolls, away from the unattainable mound and his horrified friends.

The three companions had little time to dwell on the drow's fortunes, however, for they soon found themselves assailed from every side as the trolls came relentlessly on, scratching to get at them.

Each friend stood to defend his own side. Luckily, the climb up the back of the mound proved even steeper, at some places inverted, and the trolls could not effectively get at them from behind.

Wulfgar was most deadly, knocking a troll from the mound's side with each smack of his mighty hammer. But before he could even catch his breath, another had taken its place.

Regis, slapping with his little mace, was less effective. He banged with all his strength on fingers, elbows, even heads as the trolls edged in closer, but he could not dislodge the clutching monsters from their perch. Invariably, as

each one crested the mound, either Wulfgar or Bruenor had to twist away from his own fight and swat the beast away.

They knew that the first time they failed with a single stroke, they would find a troll up and ready beside them on the top of the mound.

Disaster struck after only a few minutes. Bruenor spun to aid Regis as yet another monster pulled its torso over the top. The dwarf's axe cut in cleanly.

Too cleanly. It sliced into the troll's neck and drove right through, beheading the beast. But though the head flew from the mound, the body kept coming. Regis fell back, too horrified to react.

" Wulfgar!" Bruenor cried out.

The barbarian spun, not slowing long enough to gape at the headless foe, and slammed Aegis-fang into the thing's chest, blasting it from the mound.

Two more hands grabbed at the lip. From Wulfgar's side, another troll had crawled more than halfway over the crest. And behind them, where Bruenor had been, a third was up and straddling the helpless halfling.

They didn't know where to start. The mound was lost. Wulfgar even considered leaping down into the throng below to die as a true warrior by killing as many of his enemies as he could, and also so that he would not have to watch as his two friends were torn to pieces.

But suddenly, the troll above the halfling struggled with its balance, as though something was pulling it from behind. One of its legs buckled and then it fell backward into the night.

Drizzt Do'Urden pulled his blade from the thing's calf as it went over him, then deftly rolled to the top of the mound, regaining his feet right beside the startled halfling. His cloak streamed in tatters, and lines of blood darkened his clothing in many places.

But he still wore his smile, and the fire in his lavender eyes told his friends that he was far from finished. He darted by the gaping dwarf and barbarian and hacked at the next troll, quickly dispatching it from the side.

"How?" Bruenor asked, gawking, though he knew as he rushed back to Regis that no answer would be forth-coming from the busy drow.

Drizzt's daring move down below had gained him an advantage over his enemies. Trolls were twice his size, and those behind the ones he fought had no idea that he was coming through. He knew that he had done little lasting damage to the beasts - the stab wounds he drove in as he passed would quickly heal, and the limbs he severed would grow back - but the daring maneuver gained him the time he needed to clear the rushing horde and circle out into the darkness. Once free in the black night, he had picked his path back to the mound, cutting through the distracted trolls with the same blazing intensity. His agility alone had saved him when he got to the base, for he virtually ran up the mound's side, even over the back of a climbing troll, too quickly for the surprised monsters to grasp him.

The defense of the mound solidified now. With Bruenor's wicked axe, Wulfgar's pounding hammer, and Drizzt's whirring scimitars each holding a side, the climbing trolls had no easy route to the top. Regis stayed in the

middle of the small plateau, alternately darting in to help his friends whenever a troll got too close to gaining a hold.

Still the trolls came on, the throng below growing with every minute. The friends understood clearly the inevitable outcome of this encounter. The only chance lay in breaking the gathering of monsters below to give them a route of escape, but they were too engaged in simply beating back their latest opponents to search for the solution.

Except for Regis.

It happened almost by accident. A writhing arm, severed by one of Drizzt's blades, crawled into the center of their defenses. Regis, utterly revolted, whacked at the thing wildly with his mace. " It won't die!" he screamed as the thing kept wriggling and grabbing at the little weapon. " It won't die! Someone hit it! Someone cut it! Someone burn it!"

The other three were too busy to react to the halfling's desperate pleas, but Regis's last statement, cried out in dismay, brought an idea into his own head. He jumped upon the writhing limb, pinning it down for a moment while he fumbled in his pack for his tinderbox and flint.

His shaking hands could hardly strike the stone, but the tiniest spark did its killing work. The troll arm ignited and crackled into a crisp ball. Not about to miss the opportunity before him, Regis scooped up the fiery limb and ran over to Bruenor. He held back the dwarf's axe, telling Bruenor to let his latest opponent get above the line of the ridge.

When the troll hoisted itself up, Regis put the fire in its face. The head virtually exploded into flame and, screaming in agony, the troll dropped from the mound bringing the killing fire to its own companions.

Trolls did not fear the blade or the hammer. Wounds inflicted by these weapons healed quickly, and even a severed head would soon grow back. Such encounters actually helped propagate the wretched species, for a troll would regrow a severed arm, and a severed arm would regrow another troll! More than one hunting cat or wolf had feasted upon a troll carcass only to bring its own horrible demise when a new monster grew in its belly.

But even trolls were not completely without fear. Fire was their bane, and the trolls of Evermoor were more than familiar with it. Burns could not regenerate and a troll killed by flames was dead forever. Almost as if it were purposely in the gods' design, fire clung to a troll's dry skin as readily as to dry kindling.

The monsters on Bruenor's side of the mound fled away or fell in charred lumps. Bruenor patted the halfling on the back as he observed the welcomed spectacle, hope returning to his weary eyes.

" Wood" reasoned Regis. " We need wood."

Bruenor slipped his pack off his back. " Ye'll get yer wood, Rumblebelly," he laughed, pointing at the sapling running up the side of the mound before him. " And there's oil in me pouch!" He ran across to Wulfgar. " The tree, boy! Help the halfling," was the only explanation he gave as he moved in front of the barbarian.

As soon as Wulfgar turned around and saw Regis fumbling with a flask of oil, he understood his part in the plan. No trolls as yet had returned to that side of the mound, and the stench of the burned flesh at the base was nearly overwhelming. With a single heave, the muscled barbarian tore the sapling from its roots and brought it up to Regis. Then he went back and relieved the dwarf, allowing Bruenor to put his axe to use in slicing up the wood.

Soon flaming missiles lit the sky all about the mound and fell into the troll horde with killing sparks popping all about. Regis ran to the lip of the mound with another flask of oil and sprinkled it down on the closest trolls, sending them into a terrified frenzy. The rout was on, and between the stampede and the quick spread of flames, the area below the mound was cleared in minutes, and not another movement did the friends see for the few remaining hours of the night, save the pitiful writhing of the mass of limbs, and the twitchings of burned torsos. Fascinated, Drizzt wondered how long the things would survive with their cauterized wounds that would not regenerate.

As exhausted as they were, none of the companions managed any sleep that night. With the breaking of dawn, and no sign of trolls around them, though the filthy smoke hung heavily in the air, Drizzt insisted that they move along.

They left their fortress and walked, because they had no other choice, and because they refused to yield where others might have faltered. They encountered nothing immediately, but could sense the eyes of the moors upon them still, a hushed silence that foretold disaster.

Later that morning, as they plodded along on the mossy turf, Wulfgar stopped suddenly and heaved Aegis-fang into a small copse of blackened trees. The bog bloke, for that is what the barbarian's target truly was, crossed its arms defensively before it, but the magical warhammer hit with enough power to split the monster down the middle. Its frightened companions, nearly a dozen, fled their similar positions and disappeared into the moors.

" How could you know?" Regis asked, for he was certain that the barbarian had barely considered the clump of trees.

Wulfgar shook his head, honestly not knowing what had compelled him. Drizzt and Bruenor both understood, and approved. They were all operating on instinct now, their exhaustion rendering their minds long past the point of consistent, rational thought. Wulfgar's reflexes remained at their level of fine precision. He might have caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, so minuscule that his conscious mind hadn't even registered it. But his instinct for survival had reacted. The dwarf and the drow looked to each other for confirmation, not too surprised this time at the barbarian's continued show of maturity as a warrior.

The day became unbearably hot, adding to their discomfort. All they wanted to do was fall down and let their weariness overcome them.

But Drizzt pulled them onward, searching for another defensible spot, though he doubted that he could find one as well-designed as the last. Still, they had enough oil remaining to get them through another night if they could hold a

small line long enough to put the flames to their best advantage. Any hillock, perhaps even a copse of tree, would suffice.

What they found instead was another bog, this one stretching as far as they could see in every direction, miles perhaps. " We could turn to the north," Drizzt suggested to Bruenor. " We may have come far enough east by now to break clear of the moors beyond the influence of Nesme."

" The night'll catch us along the bank," Bruenor observed grimly.

" We could cross," Wulfgar suggested.

" Trolls take to water?" Bruenor asked Drizzt, intrigued by the possibilities. The dwarf shrugged.

" Worth a try, then!" Bruenor proclaimed.

" Gather some logs," instructed Drizzt. " Take no time to bind them together - we can do that out on the water, if we must."

Floating the logs as buoys by their sides, they slipped out into the cold, still waters of the huge bog.

Though they weren't thrilled with the sucking, muddy sensation that pulled at them with each step, Drizzt and Wulfgar found that they could walk in many places, propelling the makeshift raft steadily along. Regis and Bruenor, too short for the water, lay across the logs. Eventually they grew more comfortable with the eerie hush of the bog, and accepted the water route as a quiet rest.

The return to reality was rude indeed.

The water around them exploded, and three troll-like forms hit them in sudden ambush. Regis, nearly asleep across his log, was thrown off it and into the water. Wulfgar took a hit in the chest before he could ready Aegis-fang, but he was no halfling, and even the considerable strength of the monster could not move him backward. The one that rose before the ever-alert Drow found two scimitars at work on its face before its head even cleared the water.

The battle proved as fast and furious as its abrupt beginning. Enraged by the continued demands of the relentless moors, the friends reacted to the assault with a counterattack of unmatched fury. The drow's troll was sliced apart before it even stood straight, and Bruenor had enough time to prepare himself to get at the monster that had dropped Regis.

Wulfgar's troll, though it landed a second blow behind the first, was hit with a savage flurry that it could not have expected. Not an intelligent creature, its limited reasoning and battle experience led it to believe that its foe should not have remained standing and ready to retaliate after it had squarely landed two heavy blows.

Its realization, though, served as little comfort as Aegis-fang pummeled the monster back under the surface.

Regis bobbed back to the surface then and slung an arm over the log. One side of his face was bright with a welt and a painful-looking scrape.

"What were they?" Wulfgar asked the drow.

" Some manner of troll," Drizzt reasoned, still stabbing at the unmoving form lying under the water before him.

Wulfgar and Bruenor understood the reason for his continued attacks. In sudden fright, they took up whacking at the forms lying beside them, hoping to mutilate the corpses enough so that they might be miles gone before the things rose to life once again.

Beneath the bog's surface, in the swirlless solitude of the dark waters, the severe thumping of axe and hammer disturbed the slumber of other denizens. One in particular had slept away a decade and more, unbothered by any of the potential dangers that lurked nearby, safe in its knowledge of supremacy.

Dazed and drained from the hit he had taken, as if the unexpected ambush had bent his spirit beyond its breaking point, Regis slumped helplessly over the log and wondered if he had any fight left in him. He didn't notice when the log began to drift slightly in the hot moors' breeze. It hooked around the exposed roots of a small line of trees and floated free into the lily-pad-covered waters of a quiet lagoon.

Regis stretched out lazily, only half aware of the change in his surroundings. He could still hear the conversation of his friends faintly in the background.

He cursed his carelessness and struggled against the stubborn hold of his lethargy, though, when the water began to churn before him. A purplish, leathery form broke the surface, and then he saw the huge circular maw with its cruel rows of daggerlike teeth.

Regis, up now, did not cry out or react in any way, fascinated by the specter of his own death looming before him.

A giant worm.

* * *

" I thought the water would offer us some protection from the foul things, at least," Wulfgar groaned, giving one final smack at the troll corpse that lay submerged beside him.

" At least the moving's easier," Bruenor put in. " Get the logs together, and let's move along. No figuring how many kin these three have stalking the area."

" I have no desire to stay and count," replied Wulfgar. He looked around, puzzled, and asked, " Where is Regis?"

It was the first time in the confusion of the fight that any of them noticed that the halfling had floated off. Bruenor started to call out, but Drizzt slapped a hand across his mouth.

" Listen," he said.

The dwarf and Wulfgar held very still and listened in the direction that the drow was now intently staring. After a moment of adjustment, they heard the halfling's quivering voice.

"... really is a beautiful stone," they heard, and knew at once that Regis was using the pendant to get himself out of trouble.

The seriousness of the situation came clear immediately, for Drizzt had sorted out the blur of images that he saw through a line of trees, perhaps a hundred feet to the west. " Worm!" he whispered to his companions. " Huge beyond anything I have ever seen!" He indicated a tall tree to Wulfgar, then started on a flanking course around to the south, pulling the onyx statue out of his pack as he went, and calling for Guenhwyvar. They would need all the help they could get with this beast.

Dipping low in the water, Wulfgar eased his way up to the tree line and started shinning up a tree, the scene now clear before him. Bruenor followed him, but slipped between the trees, going even deeper into the bog, and came into position on the other side.

" There are more, too," Regis bargained in a louder voice, hoping that his friends would hear and rescue him. He kept the hypnotizing ruby spinning on its chain. He didn't think for a moment that the primitive monster understood him, but it seemed perplexed enough by the gem's sparkles to refrain from gobbling him up, at least for the present. In truth, the magic of the ruby did little against the creature. Giant worms had no minds to speak of, and charms had no effect on them at all. But the huge worm, not really hungry and mesmerized by the dance of the light, allowed Regis to play through his game.

Drizzt came into position farther down the tree line, his bow now in hand, while Guenhwyvar stealthily slipped even farther around to the monster's rear. Drizzt could see Wulfgar poised, high in the tree above Regis and ready

to leap into action. The drow couldn't see Bruenor, but he knew that the crafty dwarf would find a way to be effective.

Finally the worm tired of its game with the halfling and his spinning gem. A sudden sucking of air sizzled with acidic drool.

Recognizing the danger, Drizt acted first, conjuring a globe of darkness around the halfling's log. Regis, at first, thought the sudden blackness signified the end of his life, but when the cold water hit his face and then swallowed him up as he rolled limply from the log, he understood.

The globe confused the monster for a moment, but the beast spat a stream of its killing acid anyway, the wicked stuff sizzling as it hit the water and setting the log ablaze.

Wulfgar sprang from his high perch, launching himself through the air fearlessly and screaming, "Tempus!" his legs flung wide, but his arm cocked with the warhammer fully under control and ready to strike.

The worm lolled its head to the side to move away from the barbarian, but it didn't react quite fast enough. Aegis-fang crunched through the side of its face, tearing through the purplish hide and twisting the outer rim of its maw, snapping through teeth and bone. Wulfgar had given all that he possibly could in that one mighty blow, and he could not imagine the enormity of his success as he slapped belly-first into the cold water, beneath the drow's darkness.

Enraged by pain and suddenly more injured than it had ever been, the great worm issued a roar that split trees asunder and sent creatures of the moors

scurrying for cover miles away. It rolled an arch along its fifty-foot length, up and down, in a continual splash that sent bursts of water high into the air.

Drizzt opened up, his fourth arrow nocked and ready before the first even reached its mark. The worm roared again in agony and spun on the drow, releasing a second stream of acid.

But the agile elf was gone long before the acid sizzled into the water where he had been standing.

Bruenor, meanwhile, had completely gone under the water, blindly stumbling toward the beast. Nearly ground into the mud by the worm's frenzied gyrations, he came up just behind the curl of the monster. The breadth of its massive torso measured fully twice his height, but the dwarf didn't hesitate, smacking his axe against the tough hide.

Guenhwyvar then sprang upon the monster's back and ran up its length, finding a perch on its head. The cat's clawed paws dug into the worm's eyes before it even had time to react to the new attackers.

Drizzt plucked away, his quiver nearly empty and a dozen feathered shafts protruding from the worm's maw and head. The beast decided to concentrate on Bruenor next, his vicious axe inflicting the most severe wounds. But before it could roll over onto the dwarf, Wulfgar emerged from the darkness and heaved his warhammer. Aegis-fang thudded into the maw again and the weakened bone cracked apart. Acidic blobs of blood and bone hissed into the bog and the worm roared a third time in agony and protest.

The friends did not relent. The dwarf's arrows stung home in a continuous line. The cat's claws raked deeper and deeper into the flesh. The dwarf's axe chopped and hacked, sending pieces of hide floating away. And Wulfgar pounded away.

The giant worm reeled. It could not retaliate. In the wave of dizzying darkness that fast descended upon it, it was too busy merely holding to its stubborn balance. Its maw was broken wide open and one eye was out. The relentless beating of the dwarf and barbarian had blasted through its protective hide, and Bruenor growled in savage pleasure when his axe at last sank deep into exposed flesh.

A sudden spasm from the monster sent Guenhwyvar flying into the bog and knocked Bruenor and Wulfgar away. The friends didn't even try to get back, aware that their task was completed. The worm trembled and twitched in its last efforts of life.

Then it toppled into the bog in a sleep that would outlast any it had ever known - the endless sleep of death.