

A HOUSELESS GOD & OTHER TALES

Tales of Eurich Gunshoff
by Stephen Chenault



A HOUSELESS GOD & OTHER TALES

STEPHEN CHENAULT

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~ DEAD MAN'S BATH ~

The surging waters pushed up against the stone feet of the old bridge, carrying debris from up river that gathered in the eddies at the bridge's feet but for a moment, before twisting free and rushing off down the turbulent stream. The bridge seemed greater than the road that lay before and after it. A huge edifice in the dark wood. It was not known what hands set the stone to cross the river, but whoever did, did so with skill and a keen knowledge of the river and the land about. It stood the test of time, resisting raging waters and chewing roots. What few men dared the Darkenfold, called it the *Damenheit Bridge*, why, no one now recalled.

Late of the Perth Timberland, Eurich Gunshoff sat astride his heavy destrier in the shadow of an old gnarled tree. He sat straight in the saddle, the chain links of his mail and the iron of his plate, heavy in the stifling air. His coif lay jumbled upon his shoulders and his helm hung off the saddle, amidst the packs and jumbled gear. Next to the helm hung a long-hafted battle axe, designed for use while mounted.

Gunshoff looked upon the bridge through pale blue eyes. His steed did as well. Ears perked up and forward, the horse smelled the blood in the air and heard the familiar sound of iron as it ground into flesh.

Before them, upon the bridge's high span stood a man with some type of cleaver in hand. He was busily chopping at the lifeless body of a comrade or stranger, whoever it was that had crossed his path. The forest drove many mad, for it was a dark place and home to a variety of spirits, some fair, some foul. But more, the forest itself was alive. If you listened carefully you could hear it breath, hear the murmurings of old trees with dark roots. It was dark too, for the bark drank the light of a camp's fire as surely as a thirsty man drinks water. The air was heavy, thick with malice and it preyed upon the minds of lesser men. These wandered the wastes, lost in the dark wood until they died upon the blade of some foul creature or the tusks of some beast.

But on the bridge the man wailed away. Hacking at the body until exhaustion finally overcame him and he collapsed onto the bridge parapet, cleaver in hand, his blood-spattered face set upon weary arms.

Gunshoff watched until the body was little more than a ruin of gore, eking its way down to the river below, before he began to move forward. When he got to the bridge he dismounted and told the steed to stay. It nuzzled him as he pulled his sword from its scabbard. "Not today Blue. I need no cleaver marks in your fair hide. We've to make Ends Meet before the week is up and I'm not inclined to walk."

Turning to the man on the bridge, he began to walk toward him with purpose. "Hail dog! I've need of this bridge and you've need of rest, so come and let's resolve this."

Lifting his head the man looked up at Gunshoff. It took time for reason to enter his eyes, or the facsimile thereof. When it did, a certain glee overtook him. His eyes shone and his hands quivered. Taking up his cleaver he began walking toward Gunshoff.

The man was wild, his clothes ragged and soaked through, as if he had just climbed from the river below. His pale skin shone almost yellow, his face bloated, but etched with the twisted pain of a madman. He muttered some gibberish, lust filled madness. As he did so, water bubbled up from his mad man's lips as if he had drunk deep but failed to swallow.

Eurich cast a quick glance back toward his steed, at the shield hanging amidst the packs. "Damn the iron!"

The wild man fell upon him in a rush that allowed him to cross the bridge far faster than any could or should. Eurich side stepped, rolled his shoulder off the man's wild, erratic swing, sending him bounding down the bridge.

As quick as he missed he rebounded, leaping back up in a fury of incoherent, water filled babbles to drive the cleaver down upon Eurich. The blades clashed and Eurich twisted the sword, turning the cleaver and opening the man's face to the bone. Blood splattered across the stone as Eurich leapt back. But the Wildman, unconcerned at the wound which left part of his face hanging upon his chest, pressed home the attack.

Beyond the madness Eurich could sense an undercurrent of evil, the foul breath of one driven from the Endless Pools, or forbidden entry for what crime only this wretched creature and the gods could discern.

With blood-curdling, spit filled screams, the man rained blows upon the knight. Most were easily turned, but a few found their mark, rending mail and bruising flesh. After a third such blow opened a wound in his hand, Eurich's whole demeanor changed. Gone in an instant was the self-assured confidence of one dispatching a road-side ruffian, replaced now by an animal battling on instinct. With a speed that belied belief he turned the battle. Shedding the vestige of the civilized, world he fell upon the lunatic with a web of steel. His body moved before his mind registered, his

blade opened half a dozen wounds in the man's rotting flesh even before he lopped off the cleaver-borne arm, sending it and a trail of blood splattering across the bridge.

No moment was spared in the madman's attack, ignoring the bloody stump he rushed Eurich, only to feel the cold iron of the long sword open his skull from top to jaw. The gray-brown matter of the man's brains, washed in the gore of his own blood, tumbled from the wound as he fell forward with a thud.

"Gods and bones." Eurich stepped back from the wreckage and leaned on the parapet, looking at the body before him.

A peculiar stream cut through the blood and brain. Eurich traced it back to the mouth where water seemed to be trickling out. As he looked closer he could see a growing pool of water around the man, diluting the blood and soaking the ragged clothing. In a moment the body sagged, crumbling into itself as the water spread. A foul odor drove Eurich back and the water turned brackish, as if filled with putrid flesh.

But a wind picked up the stink and carried it far away, by which time the body, clothing and all, was little more than a pool of foul water, mixed with blood and ichor.

Calling his steed to him, Eurich fetched his shield and as he did so a cackling glee caught his attention. The horse reared and neighed a half-hearted challenge as Eurich spun to face the man again, climbing over the bridge's rail, covered in river rot and water. Springing upon the bridge span he rushed Eurich with a mad yell.

The attack now was even more ferocious, but the cleaver was gone, replaced now with a long dagger. The creature fell upon Eurich with unrestrained power, battering the shield, swinging or stabbing with the dagger. The knight deftly shifted the attack, first breaking the force of the charge and then turning the creature about and opening his flank to his thigh.

At that, the beastly man leapt back. Crouching, he unleashed a blood-curdling scream at the Knight, that sent Eurich's steed clattering back down the bridge, birds flying from trees and Eurich's mind reeling. Staggering from the blow, his mind went blank and he could see nothing but a burning white light.

He felt the creature's attack more than he saw it. Its rancid, watery breath, flapping feet. The cold heat of its flesh as it pulled upon the shield and slashed with the dagger. The ripping pain across his midriff brought

Eurich back to the battle and with a skill born of countless contests he drove the shield forward and up, forcing the creature off balance. With a further push and thrust of his sword the creature tumbled backward, landing hard on the stone bridge.

He towered over the bestial man. Blade in hand, his fierce visage shook with a power beyond him. "Begone wretch! Justice! All things come to one!"

The beast screamed and cowed and curling up upon itself it crawled away. Whimpering he climbed the bridge rail and vanished.

"Now what in the name of the First Wind is going on." Crossing the bridge Eurich looked down into the water below. The river churned about the pylons, striking against them in great waves that tumbled back down, to be drawn under and into the torrid stream. Debris, carried from up river followed the water. Striking the pylon, flipping and vanishing into the flow. But a moment's observation revealed a hand and arm pulled up, and then as quickly drug under. After another moment, a face broke the water's surface. It too vanished as quickly as it rose. But it was enough for Eurich to see it was the face of a man, young it seemed, but dead now, drowned in the river and caught in the flow around the bridge.

He knew then what ailed the bridge. An allip, a murdered spirit, trapped in limbo, driven mad by a world beyond its understanding. It would haunt this bridge until given some direction. Though it fled from him before, the fear would fade. It would return.

He called Blue to him. Taking rope from his pack he tied it off to the saddle. Quickly stripping to his breaches, with only a dagger in his belt, he dove over the side of the bridge, rope in hand. Though the current was fierce he used the rope to pull himself forward and get a footing on the pylon. There he looped the rope around the body and tied it off. Diving he found what tangled mess held the young man to the bridge. The man's back pack held him. An errant strap caught on a boat hook on the bridge. Cutting it loose he took the back pack and struck out for the shore.

In only a few moments he was guiding Blue to pull the body free of the river and up and onto the bridge.

It was bloated and battered, but little eaten by the fish. No doubt the current saved the man from being devoured and his bones sinking to the bottom of the river. The man seemed young, though it was hard to be sure. But his end was horrid, he had had his throat cut. The cut was deep and went from ear to ear, which suggested that he had been attacked from behind. Probably by someone he knew.

Searching the pack he found spoiled food, a flask, flint and steel. A small box, filled now with water, seemed to contain some powders in it.

But at the bottom, tightly wrapped in leather binding, was a book. Inside was a note.

Wendil,

May this book serve you well. Do not forget us at home. Safe Journey.

~ Andace

“Well Andace, his journey was not safe, nor did the book serve him well.” Eurich pocketed the book. Gathering up the remains of young Wendil he bore him off the bridge. The horse followed him.

Pulling an old shovel from the packs he set about digging a grave. He chose a spot away from the river, on a small mound just north of the road, beneath a tree. Here he dug deep in the soft earth and wrapping the body in his blanket, he lowered it into the ground. Within a few moments, he was standing over the mound.

“Know peace, young Wendil. May your journey begin and continue uninterrupted. Justice to you and yours. All things come to one.”

Mounting Blue, Eurich turned back to the road. A sign not far off the road, with the word Willowbreak etched into its rough surface led to a trail that meandered south into the wood. He mused for a moment, wondering if he wanted a warm bed and cool drink. But the thought of company was too much for him and he turned his horse to the west and continued down the road.

~THE GONFOD~

“You are a strange knight, sir Eurich. You care little for the trappings of your fellows and carry no colors to speak of, why is that?”

The fire crackled warm, burning off some of the damp air that always pervaded the Darkenfold. Eurich settled into a nook of the log he used as a seat. “I’ve been on my own for many years. My master had a patron, but I never did. I’ve taken no land, nor earned the benefice of some lord – though I’ve been rewarded handsomely for my services from time to time – and have no need of colors.”

“What of your Master?”

“He is gone.”

“That is passing strange. You serve no higher purpose?”

“I serve nobody. No king nor god. I seek only what is just.”

“Only what is just, eh? That’s an interesting turn of phrase. Whose justice?”

“Right and wrong are simple paths.”

The priest laughed. It was wholesome and infectious. Eurich and the others smiled despite themselves. “Some might dispute that comment good Sir Eurich. But I shall not. Far be it from me to question a man whose path is clear before him.”

Eurich held up his mug and nodded his head. “It is fear that clouds our judgment.”

“The fear of death is a mighty thing, good knight.”

“Not death, not even pain.”

“What then? What fear clouds our judgment?”

“The fear of loss.”

The priest leaned back against his packs. The fire played monster with his face, casting shadows that flickered back and forth across his visage. He watched the knight and then the fire. At last he took a long drink. “You speak of the gods, of Ornduhl, of all that must come after.”

Eurich looked up. “I speak only for myself.”

Smiling, the priest leaned forward with a gesture of his mug. “Ornduhl is a god like no other. One of the first born of the Val Eahrakun. His power

was unmatched in all the ages of the world, but once. He was made of the All Father's hidden thought and was driven by his own desires, for he believed that he, and he alone, understood the true meaning of things. But his brother disagreed with him and they quarreled.

"When it was learned that the All Father's thought would one day run dry and the last of it spill into the Endless Pools, and that the world would end, Ornduhl denied it."

"That is the Gonfod?" One of the companions spoke up, clearly interested in the tale the priest spun.

"The Gonfod is the final age of the world, when the gods shall war for the final time. The gods will fight and all the creatures of the world as well. But it is said that Ornduhl will gather his host upon the River of Time and stop its flow, so that all may exist...good, evil, high and low...without loss. But his brother, Corthain, the Justiciar, will contest him, for he believes he knows the purpose of the All Father. Who shall win out, it is not known for sure, but it shall be an age of unbridled war and chaos when all things must change."

Eurich laughed. "The fear of loss."

"Aye knight, the fear of loss. That drives Ornduhl on his determined path."

"It clouds his judgment."

"Spoken like a champion of the Justiciar." The priest smiled in good humor.

Eurich returned the smile. "I am no one's champion. I help those I deem in need."

"As you wish, good Knight."

"But," the warrior spoke up, "it is told that Ornduhl was slain by Corthain and all his realm brought to ruin."

"That is not the whole story, nor the truth of it. It is not so easy to kill a god and not possible to slay one of the named of the Val Eahrakun. But their quarrel was violent and tore the world asunder. Corthain came to the world as a knight and Ornduhl took the form of a bull and they fought. So great was their struggle that the towers of Aenochia came down upon them. But they were not finished and broke into the underworld, coming even to the Furthnopt. There Huadun rose to defend her master and the five-headed dragon drove Corthain into the heavens and into the Firmament beyond and Ornduhl pursued.

"The fight continued until Corthain grew in wrath and drove his spear, Erahmindear into Ornduhl's flank and bled him. Ornduhl tried to wrest the spear from his side, but could not and this allowed Corthain to drive him from the heavens and through the world and even to the Gegemesh.

Ornduhl could not break free of the spear until at last he fell through the roof of the Homeless House and crashed onto his very throne. There Corthain spitted the Red God, driving the spear ever deeper, until he was pinned to the chair of his might.

"This undid Ornduhl, though his might was greater than all other things but a few, it mattered not. Grasping mighty Erahmindear, he ground it in his grasp, breaking the haft into a thousand shards. In his dying gasp, he let out a mighty groan and died.

"But he was not dead. For he is one of the named and death cannot overtake him. But he was frozen in time, bound to his throne by the spear and the righteous anger of his brother."

"So, he is not dead? Only bound?"

"That is the truth of it and his return is bound to the Gonfod. It is said that when Ornduhl the Red God is freed of his binding and the spear made whole that the Gonfod shall begin and the world's ending too. An age of war and terror shall descend on Aihrde. And the world shall end as Corthain demands or shall remain as it always has been, as Ornduhl believes.

"That, good Eurich, is why I say you speak like a Knight of Corthain. He is the greatest of the Val Eahrakun, he is good and held as a paragon of what is righteous. Yet, he shall fight to end the world, for it is as the All Father desired. Like him, you have no fear of loss."

Eurich took a long drink from his goblet, emptying it. "Loss of worldly power is a small thing. In the end, you must lie down with the deeds of your life and be content."

"But how shall it come to pass?" The warrior seemed overly keen on the story of the Red God and the Gonfod. Realizing this, he blushed an apology. "I am a wild and reckless fool, good Sir Priest. I have no patron but whoever pays me. My family are all dead. The friends I have are few and many at the fire here."

"No bother good friend. The old tales are fascinating tales and the gods are, well, the gods.

"But to your question, how shall what come to pass? The rising of Ornduhl and the beginning of the Gonfod?"

"Aye, the Gonfod."

"The Gonfod is the final age of the world. During that age, the last of the All Father's thoughts shall pass down the River of Time and come to the Endless Pools. And when they do, all things must end, pulled into the pools and consumed. But the age itself shall be marked by violence and war, for Ornduhl the Red God, shall rise again and put all his might toward stopping the River of Time in its course. It is said, by those who follow him,

that this shall begin the Golden Age of the world for Ornduhl shall fulfill the hidden desires of the All Father, for he alone saw into the mind of the All Father in those long-ago ages before the world was made. They believe that Ornduhl shall end the Judgement of Corthain too and all the gods of old return to their power and majesty. They believe it is all to one purpose, that the Red God shall rise and stop the River of Time when the All Father so desired. And this shall be the Golden Age, when the tyranny of purpose shall end and all live in wild abandon.

"But Corthain shall contest Ornduhl, for he was made of the All Father's purpose and he alone knows what the All Father sought to create . . . and to end. For all things must end. Too, Ornduhl is an unkind master, cruel and bitter, filled with malice and envy and it is believed by the wise that his age would not be a Golden Age, but one of blood and turmoil. He has ruled in Aihilde before, and it was a bestial time, the echoes of which are heard even today. For this reason and many more Corthain will fight his brother and the wars between them will shake the world to its foundation, so that none escape it.

"Many believe that the Gonfod shall begin when Ornduhl rises from his throne in the Homeless House."

"When shall that be? Will the heavens shake? Will the seas rise? What calamity shall mark his return?"

Eurich smiled and leaned back, looking up at the heavens. Through the foliage of the trees he could see a faint haze of light, far beyond the stars. It stretched for as far as he could see. That was the Wall of Worlds. It held the monsters of the void from Aihilde. The priest broke his reverie.

"Nay, good friend. There shall be no calamities, only happenstance. These are the Mysteries of Ynul."

"Priest, you have more tales within tales than any I've ever met!" The man laughed and drained his mug. "What are these Mysteries of Ynul?"

"None know, but the high priests of Ynul. She held the ear of Ornduhl in the long ago and it is said that he spoke of many things to her, even his own fall and rise.

"But I have heard these mysteries. The confession of a priest on the road, whose captors I slew. He was badly mauled, beaten and his throat cut by a dull knife. He bled out slowly and thought he was speaking to one of his order."

The warrior filled his cup again. "I don't know if I want to know these mysteries. The secrets of priests . . . no offense . . . are dangerous things. I wish no ill omens!"

"You'll get none from me. I pay homage to the Cobbler. He keeps me safe on the road and guides me. I have had knowledge of these Mysteries for

some time, but strangely feel I should impart them to you all.” He looked at Eurich for a moment. The knight continued to look at the heavens above.

“Well then go on! Whose wrath am I to risk? Firthnach the Cobbler or Ynul Handmaiden of Mordius?” The man smiled and drank.

“The one I found on the road spoke with an addled brain and was drowning in his own blood, so some of it was garbled, but this much I learned. Ynul is of the Val Eahrakun, though she is not named. She dwelt with Ornduhl for many ages of the world and learned to discern his true meaning. He knew many things that were and that would be. She learned of the enmity between the brothers. She learned that Ornduhl did not fear his brother, only his brother’s wrath. For when roused the Justiciar is unforgiving. Then she heard the calamity of Ornduhl’s fall at the hands of Corthain and saw that he would escape it by fleeing the host of his body with the design of returning when his brother’s wrath had cooled.

“But Ynul knew more even than Ornduhl, for she heard the echoes of the River of Time in his voice and she could see the fate of him, as was her gift. She knew Ornduhl’s arrogance and greed would bind him. Though what form this would take she could not say and that the wrath of Corthain would be dulled. She saw that for Ornduhl to return to his power would require others to intervene.

“All that she saw was true. For the wrath of Corthain took the guise of the spear Erahmindear and he lanced the Red God with it. Ornduhl broke the spear, hoping to dull the wrath of Corthain, and though he did this, he bound himself to the throne, for the point of Erahmindear was lodged in him and he could not pull it free. When he breathed his last, the power of his might rose, as he intended but it was filled with the pain of the wrath of Corthain and became mindless. How it rose to many parts of the world.

“This the mysteries all relate, and they foretell that one must first free the point of the spear from Ornduhl before his spirit is returned, and he rise again. But no power of man can move the wrath of Corthain, only the spoken word of one of the named may do this. And none will defy Corthain and pull the spear free but for Ornduhl. So, the purposes of the Red God are confounded and he cannot contest the world’s ending upon the River of Time. And the world will end when it ends.

“Or so some believe.”

“What do the Mysteries relate?”

“They speak of the reckless folly of men and the righteousness of gods. But they speak of the words of Ornduhl. How Corthain failed to gather all of them in the Red Wind and that they dwell still in hidden places, captured by the magi of yesteryear. Hidden in scrolls or books. They speak of these words of power and how they alone can free the head of Erahmindear from

Ornduhl and allow the Red Wind to return.”

“Then begins the end of the world, eh priest?”

“Aye. Or the Golden Age. Or nothing at all will change. Who amongst we mortals can say in this fickle world of gods and monsters?”

“Do not put much stock in the end of the world my friends.” Eurich set his goblet to the side and pulled his blankets up over his shoulder. “It will end, or it will not, either way, you’ll still have to eat in the morning.” And with that, he went to sleep.

~THE MORTALITY OF GREEN~

Smoke rose in columns from several of the burnt-out houses. The palisade that guarded the village was breached through a gate that stood open. A body lay in the dirt in front of it. Beyond all was quiet, but for the occasional popping sound of burning wood.

Gently guiding his horse forward Eurich uncased his long, broad-bladed wolf spear and swung his shield around. Though in truth he could see that who, or whatever, had attacked the village was gone, as were the villagers themselves. Either dead inside or scattered to the brush who could say.

Crossing the stone bridge that led to the gate he rode slowly up to the body that lay in the dirt. It was an older man with a long beard. His once white clothes were stained with mud and grass and blood. Two arrows, both clearly fletched and marked by orcs, were lodged in his left breast. Blood bubbled up in the froth around the man's mouth a sign that he still lived, and that the arrows had penetrated his lung.

Casting a glance around, Eurich swung one leg over the saddle horn and dropped to the ground. Leaning the spear against the steed's flank he bent over the man. "How is it old timer? Can I do anything for you?"

Blinking eyes erratically, the wounded man managed to open one. The other was too crusted with froth and blood to bend to his will. He peered at Eurich for a long while until some hint of focus came into an eye glassing over with death.

"I had a tree...a little sapling." He coughed, spitting blood and some viscous material from his nose and mouth.

"Indeed? I think this tree is the least of your worries. But what of it?"

"Cornelius."

"A name? For the tree? Or you?"

"I am called," he spat, and grimaced, "Cornelius."

"I am Eurich Gunshoff. What may I do for you Cornelius? I fear your wounds are mortal."

"The sapling. It was taken from me and carried into the wilds of the forest."

"Someone stole your tree?" Eurich was clearly unimpressed with the

object of the thieves' desire.

"Aye friend Eurich. The tree..." More coughing brought Eurich to action.

Lifting the man, he gently propped him up against the wall. "All things come to one." With a visible sigh, Cornelius relaxed and his breathing was easier, no blood sputtered from his mouth and color returned to his face. After a drink of water from his flask, Eurich wiped Cornelius' brow.

"Thank you, Eurich. You are a good man and will find no home in the Endless Pools."

"That is for the gods to decide, my friend. But tell me of this tree that seems to be uppermost on your mind."

In a clear voice that belied his wounds, Cornelius spoke. "I am a member of the Order of the Oak." Seeing recognition in Eurich's face, he continued. "I was charged to bring a sapling to this wood, to the people of Ends Meet and give it them as a gift and for their betterment." The color left his face as his new-found strength began to fade. "I am not long for this world, Eurich."

"No. Your wounds are mortal and I'll lay you in the earth before the sun sets."

Cornelius looked at Eurich for a long minute. "No. No, set me in the water and let the river take me wither it will." He sunk into himself as his life sought freedom from the mortal coil that was his body.

"Eurich, the sapling was no mere tree. It was an off spring of the Great Tree in the Eldwood which in turn sprang from the seed of Eahrataut, the tree of life that the All Father gave to the world, into which Mordius the Green lay her everlasting spirit." His eye glassed over as the wound sprang blood anew and it spread out under his white cloaks, staining it in patterns both bright and dull. "Into the woods with you Eurich. You must fetch the sapling and bring it even to Ends Meet. Do not let it become fouled by the black heart of the Darkenfold."

Eurich knelt by the dying man, torn by emotions.

"Swear to me Eurich. Swear to me." His breath was barely a whisper as the blood frothed from his mouth.

With a sigh both reluctant and tired Eurich took the druid's hand, "I swear, Cornelius. I will fetch this sapling from those who took it and deliver it to Ends Meet."

At that, the druid settled back against the wall and into the dirt and breathed a long sigh. He held on for a moment longer, but the body, ruined, let life go and it fled from him, crossing over to the Vandrupt et Erde, the River of Time.

Eurich lay him out and removing the arrows, he stripped him of his

clothing. He bore him down to the river on the east side of the village, the Westerling and lay him in the grass. He cleaned his wounds and face and combed his hair. At last, as the sun dipped below the tree line he set him in the cool waters of the river.

There, he shone. His alabaster skin, stark against the river green. He floated in Eurich's hands for a moment. "Tefnut, take this child of your wood and give him rest from the toil of his journeys. May he feast at your table and know laughter and respite from all struggles, great and small." He let him go into the current and it seemed to him that small hands took the druid and pulled him under and bore him in light down the water's twisting path and into the deep Darkenfold.

Eurich watched the body as it was washed downstream. He continued watching long after it was gone from sight. The chirping frogs, gathering for the evening's courtship, woke him from his reverie. "How now shall I pursue these brigands. Orcs, and creatures more foul, no doubt."

He took up his weapons and remounted the horse. Moving into the village beneath the dying light of the sun.

Much of it remained intact, only three of the dozen or so houses were burnt. There were no bodies anywhere, but some debris. It didn't appear as if the villagers fought at all. Rather, they fled, probably north into the bramble. Moving Blue, his steed, slowly through the village Eurich looked for signs of life. At last, when he came to a long, low structure, built half into the ground he stopped. "The Long House I suppose, old Blue."

There was movement beneath.

"Ho there! Who goes? Come out and let's see how you fare, foul or otherwise." Eurich pulled his axe free of the belt hook and allowed the haft to slide slowly down through his hand until he gripped it tight near the butt.

After a moment a boy came out of the door. He wore long woolen pants and a slightly large shirt. He had no shoes, nor hat, though a belt strung around his waist sported a butcher's knife in it. "You are no orc."

"True enough lad. I am no orc. I am Eurich Gunshoff, a knight of some renown in parts far from here. What's the tale of this village. Where are the people? And who slew the druid who I just laid to rest on Tefnut's Road?" Eurich stayed mounted, keen for any movement or strange sound.

"We were attacked early this very morning. A hunter spied them coming along the river, a rag tag band of ruffians led by a troll or a giant or something. The alarm was sounded and people began to flee to the north, escaping through yonder gate," he gestured toward the west gate. "They flee to the Thicket for safety."

"And the druid?"

"He thought to hold them, here, where you are standing, so everyone could escape. He came out of the house and fought the troll. He held his own I think, but I could not see it. I was hidden in the kitchen, I could only hear the shouts and sounds of battle. They retreated after that, rushing north and east into the Troll Glades."

Eurich sat back in the saddle. Through measured breaths he took in his surroundings. Of it all the boy seemed disingenuous. The boy's words were laced with lies, of that Eurich was certain, at the very least, he was not telling the whole truth.

"What is your name lad?" Blue stomped his hoof, feeling the subtle shift in his master's tone.

There was a slight hesitation, a drawn breath. "Gilliam."

"This is quite the quagmire your master has made."

"My master . . .?" Gilliam's tone changed and his eyes narrowed. He suddenly seemed like a spring ready to launch.

Blue took several steps backwards turning slightly to the right. "Come now. The guise is broken and your life forfeit unless you tell me what happened here."

Gilliam stepped back into the doorway, which itself was several feet down a set of steps, making it impossible for Eurich to get at him easily. "I do not understand." He whispered the words, ending them with a sharp thrrrp as his tongue dug across his upper teeth.

At that sound wolves began to creep from around the houses about the courtyard, four huge, bestial creatures. They were evil, black-hearted beasts, not true wolves at all. Their mangy coats, worm riddled hides, yellowed eyes and blackened teeth all mirrored their twisted minds.

"Kill him!" Gilliam raged from the house as his appearance changed and he morphed into his true form, a foul-looking faerie, gnome-like in appearance, with wild, greasy orange hair, marred by old scars on his scalp that continued down into his elongated face. A spiked beard gave that face a devilish appearance, but the madness in his eyes made him seem wild and crazed. He wore unkempt armor beneath a dirty, dark stained white goatskin vest.

As the worgs attacked Gilliam pulled a dagger from its sheath behind his back and unhooked his mace where it hung at his side.

The worgs sprang across the yard, two barreling in at Blue's hind legs, a third for his nose and throat, while the fourth leapt high to take Eurich from the saddle.

But the horse anticipated the attack and buckled its rear legs, both safeguarding them for a moment and allowing Eurich a free, broad stroke with his axe, which took the leaping worg fully in the side of the head. Its

cranium and much of its upper jaw flew free of it, spattering the ground and the other worgs in blood and brain.

As its body hit the ground the others gave way temporarily, in doubt and fear, allowing Blue time to dip forward and lash out with his hind legs, clipping one of the worgs in the chest. It fell back with a yelp, which sent its mate running.

Gilliam, seeing no opening in the fray, lingered in the doorway, calling commands to the worgs.

Eurich, still mounted, circled slowly, keeping an eye on all three worgs as they too circled, each looking for an opening. But when the steed looked west, toward the gate, Eurich whispered in his ear. "Charge." Blue exploded into action, his hind legs hurling him forward into a gallop. The wolves bayed in wild madness and pursued, sensing now a weakened prey. Gilliam laughed.

They hurled across the yard, pounding toward the west gate. The worgs closing in to nip at the steed's heels.

"Brace." Eurich whispered in Blue's ear again and the steed came to a crashing halt, his hind legs driving forward so that the beast was almost in a sitting position.

For their part the worgs leapt to the left and right, trying to avoid a collision, but the third leapt forward, aiming for Blue's back and Eurich in the saddle. Anticipating the attack Eurich swung his axe hard behind him, burying it into the worg's flank and with a death howl it was swept to the side and landed in the loamy earth, the axe still buried in its ribs and chest.

As Blue rose again, spinning Eurich pulled his broad sword. The worg coiled on itself tearing at the axe in its side, trying to dislodge it but did little more than gnaw on the iron as it died.

Gilliam fled, rushing into the Long House, and out the back door. Eurich spied him only for a moment as he climbed the palisade and went over the wall. The other worgs fled as well, heading out the west gate and veering south.

Eurich dismounted, dispatched the wounded worg with his sword and fetched his axe.

The day was young, hot and promised to be hotter still. He stood there awhile, looking south. But at last he crossed the yard. Blue followed behind. Fetching a tankard and some beer from within the tavern he sat on a bench outside.

"How now old friend? I think I must leave you for a bit and go in yonder wood, searching for this sapling, this dark fey and his master." Blue snorted, hooved the ground. Draining the beer, he set the mug upon the bench and dropped a coin into it.

An hour later found Blue in the stable behind the Long House, stripped of saddle and bridle, rubbed down and eating oats. The stall was left open and the stable door as well, giving the horse an avenue of escape if needed. A note, pinned to the bar, beneath the mug and a pile of coins.

Good people of Greenbriar,

I have gone for justice for Cornelius the White and to see to his property, lately stolen. I have buried him upon Tefnut's Road. Make sacrifices as you see fit. My steed, Blue, I have stabled in your barn. Kindly escort him to the town of Ends Meet and house him in the stables of the Cockle Burr Inn and Tavern. I shall rejoin him there.

*Eurich Gunshoff
Knight*

By the time Benson, the owner, returned to the Long House and read the note, Eurich was several hours into the forest, moving quickly down the banks of the Westerling River.

Beyond the wooden wall of Greenbriar were scant crop lands, several acres turned to the plow and growing potatoes and other foodstuffs. The river yielded plenty of ground water and the area was very fertile. The forest picked up some half mile beyond the palisade. The worgs had fled south, Eurich watched them. And Gilliam too had crossed over the southern wall as well. And if that wasn't reason enough to head south the trail cut into the forest along the banks of the meandering Westerling River was. The troll's passage was plain to see for he had uprooted small trees, broken limbs and crushed the underbrush where he walked.

Eurich followed the trail for several hours until night fell when he pitched a cold camp along the banks of the river. He carried a light pack with a few weeks' worth of food, a flask, rope, flint and steel, pipe, oil, a whetstone and pouch of tobacco and a small tightly wound bed roll. His shield he wore slung on his back. His axe thrust into his belt, his sword in its scabbard. A long knife hung off his back and another one was thrust in his boot.

Eating dry tack, he settled with his back against a tree. The water lulled him to sleep after awhile and he slept soundly, without disturbance.

This was repeated for several days as he wound his way down the

Westerling. The river was small, a scant 20 feet across, but seemed rather deep. It moved sluggishly, as if now that it had arrived in the Darkenfold it did not wish to leave. Its clean waters were cool and refreshing. Though the days were hot and the air still, the forest offered some respite. Huge, thick boled trees with massive canopies, they allowed little light through. Passing beneath them was stifling at times, but a westerly breeze wove its way through to the Knight, making his passage somewhat comfortable.

On the afternoon of the second day he came to a wide, long meadow. The morning sun cast bright rays of light that fell upon the flowered grass where it grew along the western banks of the river. The meadow was large, a good mile long and easily half that wide. It was dominated by a large hill-sized mound of earth, itself covered in flowered grasses.

Eurich stood upon the edge of the expanse and watched for a good long while. At last he muttered to himself, "A battle mound if ever I encountered one. I wonder what husks lie beneath that dirt."

He crossed the meadow to the mound and circled it slowly. On the far side, where the rain and weather had carved a small crevice into the mound a small bit of iron lay exposed. He pulled it free and dusted the dirt from its surface. It was a clasp for a cloak and bore the symbol of a knight of St. Luther. "Well then. You hold noble bones beneath your grasp, eh?"

Images came to him, and for a moment he stood upon the flat, dead snow-covered clearing, sword in hand, shield on high. He stood with 2 dozen knights and their squires and they braced themselves for a wild horde of orcs and ungern, giants and other creatures of evil's design. The skies were overcast and angry, the Winter Dark, that time long ago when the Horned God ruled the world and bound all beneath his wintry grasp. These were his armies, forged in his hold in Aufstrag, come to hunt the knights of fallen Kayomar. The battle was fierce and hard and many fell, but in the end the knights prevailed, for they had lived to bury their dead in the mound.

The images faded and Eurich returned to the present. A gentle wind picked up, coming from the south and west, the grass bending in waves, as if it were a green-clad sea. He set the clasp back in the earth and covered it up. Fetching some rocks from the river he shored up the crevice as best he could. "That should buy you some few more years from the weathering of this wood."

Picking up his gear, shield and axe he headed along the bank of the river, moving south. He looked for signs of their passage but there were precious few here. The meadow had recovered any trampling it suffered, or if it had not Eurich was not skilled enough to follow it.

Where the meadow ended the river continued its course deeper into the

wood. Several hundred yards south a creek fed into the Westerling, but in front of Eurich there was precious little sign of any creature's passing. Worse, the forest thickened considerably here, the trees growing closer, their roots a tangled mess, offering anyone who attempted entry a difficult time of it.

He scouted along the edge of the forest, seeking any sign that might govern the direction of his journey. He was no ranger, nor had any skills at tracking or sniffing out prey. But even as he began to curse his luck he spied a sheet of paper tacked to a tree. Written in a sprawling, barely legible script it read: "coward abandon yu chase of us yu cannot have the tree try and yu die."

"Gods forgive their penmanship." He took the paper and folding it up, he slipped it into the book he had fetched from a fallen mage on the bridge some weeks past. "I suppose then that you want me to go this way eh? To what end? And how did your troll pass without leaving a trail? Mayhap the river needs more attention."

Cutting through the woods at an angle he came out on the banks of the Westerling, across from a feeder creek. He could see signs across the river of trampled trees and underbrush. "Ah, there you are." He plunged into the waist high water and crossed to the mouth of the creek, from there he saw three canoes pulled up on the bank, poorly hidden. Trudging over to the canoes he spiked two of them, then dumped his pack, shield and axe into the third, pulled it down to the Westerling and jumped in. Within a few moments he was headed south, paddling down the smooth currents of the river. Behind him, a half mile from where they had tacked the note, the ungeru warriors lay in the undergrowth, waiting for his eventual arrival.

He moved slowly south, keeping a watch for any sign of the troll and his people. But as the sun set nothing had revealed itself. Fearing that he would miss the trail, he tied his rope off on a large rock and dropping it into the river anchored himself. He chose a broad part of the channel, one that afforded him plenty of safety from the banks. After a cold meal, he slept in the bottom of the canoe.

He slept fitfully until he was awoken by a splash.

Rising slowly, so as to not draw attention, he looked to the far bank. There, in the light of the moon, stood a small creature, some three to four feet high. He wore faded breeches and shirt, though he had no shoes nor hat. He chewed mercilessly on the stem of a pipe, though no smoke rose from its bowl. He was pulling a line back in from the water, singing in a low, melodious voice.

The water splashed around his line, frothing with fish. With a jerk of his hand the line snapped, rose from the water and a small host of fish, four or five at least, sprang from the water to land on the bank. He deftly gathered

them up and put them in a sack at his feet. Not once did he pull a hook or line from the fish he harvested.

As Eurich wondered at this he realized the creature had stopped moving and was staring at him.

"My pardons sir! I did not mean to wake you, only I must go where the fish go . . . or rather they come to me when I to them . . . which it is I cannot say. Only I do like fish, I do. I like them best fried and in butter don't you know, but butter is no easier to get than blood I always say."

"It quite alright. I was not resting well anyway"

"A river might make a good bed, but a canoe makes for a poor mattress. Leastwise that's what I've come to learn. Mayhap if they had no seats for the paddlers you could stretch your legs and rest year head on the river's bosom."

"Mayhap. Do you always fish so late?"

"Is it late? I cannot tell what is late and early anymore. The sun is always on the move and the forest shadows won't stay still for me or any other it would seem. Do you serve the gods? If so, please ask them to slow the sun's passage and give us all more time for buttered fish and pipe tobacco."

"I call no god my patron, my friend, and only serve the deed set before me. And right now, I am pursuing a troll and his band of miscreants. The monster has created quite a quagmire of things, scattering a village, killing a druid of the Order of the Oak and stealing a sapling that has some value to the people of Ends Meet."

"Quagmire eh? All trolls are quagmires, though not their brothers and sisters. These provide homes for the homeless." Smiling, he patted his head. But your troll is not one to dally, not one to sit and eat good fish steeped in butter. His mind is not about scales and flesh but about bones and flesh, the lash too, because he's mean. Though mean does not mean lean here, but something very unfishlike."

"I'm not sure what you are talking about friend, though if you know this Quagmire of a troll and of his whereabouts I'd be in your debt."

"Debt eh? What can you pay with? Fish? Have you any fish? Lures? Poles? Good line? Anything that Ian the Fisherman can use for his daily dinner? You have a canoe, but I don't care for to be out on the water so much, frightful place if comfortable bed."

"I see your pipe there. Have you any tobacco?"

For the first time the gnome on the bank fell silent. He stared at Eurich for some time until at last he whispered, his voice barely audible across the still waters of the Westerling. "I have had no tobacco for a long time. The eschl do not use it, the elves do not carry it and men will not give it up. I have had no tobacco for a long, long time."

"I have a pouch if you guide me on my way. If you give me directions to the Quagmire of a troll."

The gnome slipped into the water and swam across the river to the canoe. He pulled himself up on the side, though he did not enter the boat. "Let me see this tobacco."

Eurich produced the pouch and opened it. The aroma of the leaf flooded the canoe and air around it. Ian looked at the pouch as if it were filled with gold and tears sprang to his eyes. "I would guide you to the gates of Aufstrag for the pouch in your hands."

Laughing, the knight said, "No need for that good friend. The troll will do."

Shaking himself as if from some reverie he looked up at the Knight. "Take me back to the bank and we'll make the trade there, I will not risk that treasure you hold."

The words fell about Eurich, striking him as if rain, but they did not ring false and were not laced with deceit. Pulling the paddle out he sent the canoe across the river with a few, broad, swift strokes. In a moment they were on the west shore and Ian had scrambled out of the water and up, onto the bank. He stripped naked and threw his clothes over a tree branch. He took a moment and gathered some wood. Spooning out a small fire pit with his hand, he piled the wood in a heap and breathed it to life. As the small tongues of fire leapt and cackled he looked up to the tree "Forgive me father, but I must return your limbs to the earth so that they may be more fertile than ever when they fell from your side."

Eurich watched this peculiar prayer and the gnome's hurried actions with a patience born of a man far older than his years.

In no time Ian had a fire crackling, was sitting cross-legged before it, warming himself and cleaning his pipe. Eurich stepped out of the canoe and tied it off, sitting across from the gnome.

After a moment Ian looked up. "The only thing better than fish in butter is tobacco in the pipe. Give it to me now and I'll dry my breath with it for a few and then give you directions to where this Quagmire is laired. But mind you, I have no fish to spare and the butter is made of goat, not cow, even if I did."

Eurich passed the pouch over, only after filling his own pipe with a wad of it. Ian took it gingerly in hand and with nose to the pouch inhaled deeply. After a moment more he carefully took a pinch and lined his bowl with it, stuffing the tobacco in tightly, but not so tight as to choke off the flame. And at last, taking an ember from the fire he lit the tobacco and watched as the first signs of smoke rose up and above his head. He smoked in quiet until the pipe was filled with ash.

The knight did not interrupt the gnome, but let him smoke off the whole bowl. When at last this was done he spoke quietly, "Now Ian the Fisherman. Tell me where the troll has gone."

"Ahhhhh your Quagmire. Well he has not gone this way I can tell you for certain sure. South is the realm of Horntooth the Goblin. He dwells along the banks of the river in a lair of filth. He commands 50 warriors and a herd of tusked boars. And he has no fish to speak of. No good going there. A fishless death is no death at all and a life ill spent. No, your Quagmire did not come this way at all. There is a creek back up to the north, men call it the Longspear, I call it the fishless Longspear as the fish there are small and barely worth the effort of frying them in butter...mind you, I will still fry them in butter, as a fish in butter, no matter the size, is a fish worth eating no matter the time of day!"

"Indeed, fish are fair to eat in butter, as are most things. So, Quagmire went up the creek did he?"

"Yes, indeed he did. It's a tight fit for an overladen canoe, but not so tight as to make it impassable. But follow that creek to its source...after you leave behind your canoe...and you'll come to a valley, deep and wonderful called by those who live in it, the Flies Den. Beyond the Den is a wall of rock and a canopy of green that hides a hollow of thorns. There is where the troll makes his home. You have but to follow that creek to its end and you'll find an ending of your quest, the troll or yourself."

"Can you say anything of a creature named Gilliam?"

"Our bargain was for Quagmire only. No fish. No more. Why should I tell you of this Gilliam?"

"Let us call it the kindness of strangers."

The gnome looked sour at Eurich. "I think the poverty of fish best fits your fishless kindness."

Eurich laughed and stood up, tucking his own pipe, unsmoked, back into his pocket. "Fair enough Ian. You have carried out your side of the bargain. I can ask for no more, nor can you give me less. It is better to part with a good bargain than otherwise. Fair thee well Ian the Fisherman."

"And fair thee well . . . I did not catch your name."

"Eurich, a knight. And I have no fish, nor butter in which to fry it."

"That is true poverty. No pole I see, nor pan in the pack, nor line or hook. You are indeed a poor wandering knight. I say farewell to you Eurich. Be wary of that dark hearted faerie though. He is one of the Blackhearts, the Ur-Suk. Do not let his white goatskin fool you for he can take many guises and seem to be other than he actually is. He has a weakness though. He is fearful of birds, as are all his kind, for they were on the wrong side of Wenafar when she brought the birds to the world, our home."

“Thank you, Ian.”

“Suffer not the poverty of fish good Knight. Suffer not the poverty of fish.”

Eurich mounted the canoe and pushed off, the sound of Ian’s voice followed him as he paddled back up the stream. It carried with it the sound and smell of fish and butter, tobacco and smoke, and a carelessness that bordered on the wild indifference of those who have laid all hope aside.

It was still dark, barely past 4 in the morning when Eurich set off, back upriver. His demeanor changed and he rowed with power and conviction. For the better part of an hour he rowed, stopping for a brief rest and then on again for another hour and another rest. It was only a little after morning that he came to Longspear Creek.

As he approached he could smell cook fires and hear the mumbled talking of creatures. Beaching his canoe down from the creek he dismounted and armed himself with shield and helm. He moved quietly through the woods to the southern bank of the creek, roughly where the spiked canoes remained.

Before him, sprawled about in the grass on the bank of the creek were 8 large beastly creatures. They crouched and sat about a large fire, the embers of which sputtered smoke into the morning air. They were cooking some small antelope plucked from the forest. They walked upright, like any man, on two legs, but they were covered in a thick, coarse fur. Their heads were like those of a large dog, filled with teeth that marred their gums and lips. Clawed hands and cloven hooves rounded out their devilish appearance, but it was the great horns that sprung from their backs that gave them away. These were the ungern, soldiers of Aufstrag, the footmen of Unklar. Displaced since the fall of their master and the end of the Winter Dark Wars, they found employ where they could, even if it meant the far side of the world in the Darkenfold.

Eurich watched them for a few moments. He could feel the air about them. It was heavy, watchful, filled with a rage he could not place, not evil, not good, but old and forgetful and tired. He wondered at it for a moment, but only a moment.

Springing from the tree line he fell upon the Ungern, catching them utterly unawares. Two were at his feet before the others clawed their weapons free of scabbards and hooks, or pulled shields around to defend themselves against the armored knight who seemed to suddenly spring from the ground in their midst.

Cutting his way through to the water, he spun on his heels and blocking one heavy cleaver-like weapon with his shield he cut the legs out from under a third. That ungern toppled with a roar, falling into the waters behind the knight. The cleaver rained blows upon the knight, driving him back. But his shield and armor absorbed those blows his sword did not turn. Meanwhile the other four gathered in a loose semi-circle to block any hope of escape Eurich may have had.

But escape never crossed his mind. As they closed in, he caught the cleaver on his shield and thrust up, tearing it from the ungern's grasp, but as he did so he spun and opened the closest ungern up, cutting him from his collar bone to his groin. As he toppled Eurich sprang through the hole in the crescent and spun again. A brief melee left a fifth of his opponents at his feet, though a well-aimed blow struck the shield so hard it bent it back and jarred Eurich's bones.

Winded he fell back to the tree line. Three ungern ranged before him.

They pressed the attack hard, but could not break through for the knight wielded the shield like a weapon and one was quickly knocked senseless and another run through until only one stood before.

Both were breathing heavily. Eurich wounded in the face and his shield arm numb from the many blows he suffered. He could not lift it, so he tossed it aside.

"Come then dog. Catch your breath as if it were your last, for I'm sending you home."

The ungern muttered some prayer in its devilish tongue and bowed its head. Never once did it take its eyes off Eurich while it did so. The only word the knight understood was Unklar. "Well then go to him." He rushed the ungern, seeking to cut it down quickly. But the beast fell back and rolled with the knight's lunge, striking him hard in the arm so that the sword flew wide.

Eurich grabbed the beast by the horn, then wrenched it back so that it fell upon the ground with a thud. Pulling his dagger from his belt he plunged the blade into the creature's side, then its chest and its chest again several times until the creature felt no more.

Rolling over Eurich climbed to his feet, pulled his axe from the loop at his belt and clove the last, and wounded ungern's head in half.

"Now the road is clear."

Eurich returned to his canoe and gear, where he left it on the Westerling and climbed in. He sat in the canoe for a moment, catching his breath. He

looked out over the river at nothing in particular, waiting for his pulse to slow. Slowly he wiped the blood from his forehead and squeezed the wound shut, holding it for a moment he spoke quietly, though clearly, "Justice. All things come to one." The pressure stopped the bleeding. The pain receded. Carefully he lifted the paddle, and continued his journey.

He paddled upriver to the mouth of the creek and the site of the battle. Turning the canoe, he began moving up the Longspear.

Looking over the dead, he spied a large crow perched atop one of the fallen ungern. It watched him curiously.

"Do not eat that foul rot bird. It does not become you." He pulled a piece of jerky from his pack and set it on the prow of his canoe. "Come, eat this."

The bird watched him, turning his head to the left and right. With a sudden caw it rose and swooped down to scoop up the morsel and devour it. "Better than the rot of Aufstrag." The crow followed him for some time until it vanished into the woods.

Eurich quickly found the channel that bore his enemies deeper into the forest and he put his back to the task. In broad, carefully timed strokes he moved the canoe. It glided through the water with a steady speed. He broke several times before noon, at which point he stopped and slept for several hours.

Late in the afternoon he resumed the journey, not stopping until well past dark. He slept that night beneath a broad-leafed tree, using the canoe as a bed. He was up before dawn.

The crow was perched upon his canoe and looking at him with its curious eyes. "Have you found a house for food in my canoe? Fair enough, for I might have need of you before this journey is finished." He fed the bird again, this time enough to fill its gullet so that it settled on the prow of the canoe and rode with him most of the long day.

By midafternoon he turned decidedly south, heading in roughly the same direction that the Westerling flowed. The crow took to wing and vanished to the west.

Eurich pushed a little harder as the country became more tangled and wild. The trees were old beyond measure, their branches long and heavy, many to the ground. With massive roots they carved footprints in the ground, marking their kingdom. Many crawled over one another as if in some timeless battle for control of their own patch of dirt. Limb fall crowded the creek, though much of it had already been cleared by the troll and his folk. Animals were few and far between, though at evening time the crow returned.

He passed several small feeder creeks but followed the channel, where

the other canoes had to have gone. By evening the creek narrowed and Eurich could see the land rising in the distance. He was headed into the Hollow, north of the Mistbane, a wild and undisturbed region of the Darkenfold. Few came here, for any reason.

He feasted in the canoe again. He and the crow sharing bread, meat and dried fruits. He slept soundly that night, the bird watching over him. When he woke he was sore and tired from the canoeing and longed for the saddle, and Blue. But the horse was many miles away, even now on his own journey to the comforts of Ends Meet. The crow was gone as well. Alone he continued up the Longspear.

Many hours before noon he came upon a beach with half a dozen canoes pulled up on it. A trail led up and into the highlands to the south, through a thick, tangled part of the forest. The sun was bright and hot and the air still. Here the Longspear was little more than a brackish stream overrun with reeds and grasses of all kinds. Pulling his canoe up alongside the others he climbed out and prepared for the last leg of the journey.

He camped that night in a thicket not far from the trail. He did his best to hide his scent in case any thing came back up the trail and should stumble on him, but whether he was successful or simply lucky, he slept soundly, dreaming of dark-feathered birds and the souls of the dead.

He woke sore and stiff. The dirt of the trail had settled into his clothes and armor. His hair was unkempt and his beard growing wild. The crow was looking at him, perched in the bramble.

“Well bird, if I am fated to die this day, I will not die looking like a scoundrel.”

He stretched for a while until the soreness faded. He went to the stream and found a pool of clear water where he bathed, shaved and cleaned his clothes. He oiled his armor, cleaned and sharpened his weapons. At last refreshed, he ate a hearty meal, consuming more of his rations than he normally would.

By mid-morning he was again the Knight he had been at Greenbriar nearly a week past.

He followed the trail where it climbed out on a high ridge overlooking the creek to the north, before it turned west and wound down into the forest. Eurich pushed on up the ridge line for a while until he reached the top. He was met by a broad flat shelf before the ridge dipped down again, into the southern expanse of the wood. From his vantage he spied the Mistbane far in the distance, snaking its way through the forest, and

beneath him the end of a broad valley.

The valley was sparsely forested, dominated by a broad trail, broken rocks and in the midst of it all, a makeshift village. A half-dozen huts stood near or around a large cooking pit. Filth and debris lay everywhere about. A few figures, what appeared to be orcs milled about, not more than half a dozen. The trail itself wandered off to the west, vanishing some miles into the forest. But the valley itself ended in a broad vine-covered cliff. To the east the valley wall climbed up into a tangled bramble of hawthorne and blackjacks.

Eurich squatted on his haunches and watched, soaking in the scene and who and what lay before him.

He was not disappointed.

Within a few minutes the vines parted, revealing a tunnel that passed beneath the ridge to the east.

Eurich paced along the valley wall, and entered the hawthorne forest. Weaving his way through the bramble and briars he came to a broad cliff that dropped down into a hollow.

Roughly a half mile across, the hollow consisted of a shallow lake and one large, dead-looking tree. A hut of bramble and limbs was built on the edge of the lake, not far from the dead tree. The rest was broken rock and stone with a few weeds and such clawing their way out of the stone. Squatted before the dead tree was a massive troll, set in the ground at his feet was a small sapling, a fresh mound of dirt heaped around it's stem. The troll seemed to be looking up at the dead tree.

And Eurich realized that that was no tree, but one of the Avurgen, a sentient, one of the first trees who the All Father made in the long-ago Days before Days. Quagmire was talking to it, conversing with it, for what reason Eurich could only wildly guess.

Below him a horror was unfolding. A nightmare for the sapling, for the Avurgen was steeped in evil. His life's twisted path reflected a mind bent toward destruction and madness. He was called Gristlebones by the troll and his bandits and it lusted for the sapling's will, for its life, to raise the little tree in its own shadow and make the sapling a vessel for the Avurgen's own hate. What was pure, and good, and sprung from the Great Tree of the Eldwood stood now at the feet of a chaos and evil so old that few could fathom it.

All this was unknown to Eurich, what was known was that he was too late, for the sapling was in the earth, and for all he knew, taking root already. He cast about for a way into the hollow, but could find none. Turning on his heel he rushed back the way he came and to the edge of the valley beyond. Down he went, passing beneath trees and around rocks to

tumble into the valley floor.

The orcs spied him and rushed to gather their weapons. Some fired arrows at the Knight, others rushed him with pole arms, swords and axes.

Undaunted, Eurich fell upon them in a madness of rage and swept them before him. They fled in terror of him leaving half their number upon the ground. The fear that gripped them sent them up the valley where they ran afoul of Gilliam and his outpost. There, the Ur-Suk slew several and rallied the others. Gathering his troop about him, he rushed back up the valley seeking Eurich and vengeance.

After the orcs scattered, Eurich set fire to the village, burning each house in turn. As the flames consumed the small ramshackle structures the black smoke climbed into the sky and the stench of the burning spread through the valley. It roused the troll as well, for trolls fear fire and were sensitive to the smell of it. So, he picked up his iron-shod mace and crossed through the tunnel that led from the hollow to the valley beyond.

There he met Eurich, standing just beyond the tunnel entrance. He hesitated for a moment, searching about for others, sensing a trap. For surely this one was not so foolish as to attack him, in his lair, alone.

“Well bone bag, you seem to be alone. Are you?”

The knight stood still, sword and shield in hand. “You are my only company, Quagmire.”

“Quagmire eh? I like it. I think I shall wear that name with pride after today. But first I must make a pouch of you . . . a pouch I’ll carry your little skull in. And who knows? Mayhap I’ll pull you out and talk to you from time to time. What do they call you?”

“I am Eurich Gunshoff, and I am the end of you.”

Eurich moved forward, straight for the troll. The troll, for his part became concerned for a moment and fell back into the shadow of the tunnel, fear taking a hold on him.

But that did not last, for the troll could smell and see that there was only one, and with a rage of noise he leapt forward and fell upon the knight. He rained blows upon Eurich’s shield and sword and the knight was driven back. One, two, three blows and the shield bent back upon itself. A fourth was turned by the blade though a notch was cut into the steel. A fifth and sixth blow bore a cleft into the iron shield and a seventh broke the strap and it fell to the ground.

All this while Eurich fell back before the relentless onslaught, absorbing the blows with his retreat as well as armor and shield. A blow struck his helm and sent it flying and another caught his sword and knocked it from his grasp. With endless energy the troll pressed his attack, even into the burning village so that they stood before the fire pit and in the middle of

half a dozen pyres.

Eurich took a blow to the side and he was swept off his feet and tumbled some distance from the troll and Quagmire laughed. But Eurich came out of the roll with his axe flying from the iron ring that held it as his belt and as the troll came at him he ducked beneath the blow and in one mighty swing hewed off the troll's leg.

The monster fell to the earth with a groan, not completely understanding why his leg would not work. As he turned, Eurich's axe met flesh and bone and Quagmire's head flew wide of his body, landing with a dull thud in the dirt and grass.

Eurich took a moment. Catching his breath, he fell to one knee and exhaustion overcame him. He looked upon the lifeless eyes of the troll, who returned his stare with a look of wonder.

From above the crow cawed and alighted upon the head and cawed again. Once quietly, but louder after that. Shortly other crows answered and began to fly into the valley, cawing to each other. In short order a great host of the birds had descended upon the troll's body and head. They began to devour it.

Eurich watched the grim spectacle for only a few moments until at last he gathered up a burning brand and passed beneath the ridge, through the tunnel and into the hollow. There he found Gristlebones, bent over the young sapling, feeding it poisoned earth. "It is a hard day for an old tree."

Hewing off the tree's branches he set them about its root and put them to the torch. The tree bent its will upon Eurich but to no avail, for the knight was immune to its evil thought. It tried to uproot itself to strike him a blow but its roots were too weak, old and brittle. In the last it moaned, calling for the troll, or orcs or any others that would come to aid it. But there were none left in reach. It could do nothing in the end but watch Eurich pull the sapling from the ground, and burn and die.

Eurich passed from the hollow and back to the village. He took time to pick up Quagmire's head and stake it in the fire pit. He relit the embers and built a fire around it so that the flames consumed the creature's head even as the murder of crows continued to eat the body. He gathered his weapons, and climbing up the ridge, he sat down beneath the shade of a tree and watched the murder feast. Soon, his companion alighted upon a branch near him and watched impassively.

Shortly, Eurich spied Gilliam coming up the valley flow. The fey spied the troll's head and made note of the column of smoke rising from the hollow. He saw the birds and was overcome with fear, for all his folk fear the winged people of Wenafar. With curses upon his lips he ordered the orcs up the valley to the canoes where he hoped to capture Eurich and slay

him and if not, then to pursue him up the Longspear.

Thus, it was that Gilliam led his people on a wild chase up the creek until he found the dead Ungern and he rethought his plan. But by then, many days had passed and Eurich had long since passed down the valley to the rivers below and crossed into the wild country beneath Gurthap falls.

~A HOUSELESS GOD~

The forest gave way to a broad trail that wound its way through the darkened woods. A cool, fresh wind blew from the west, funneled down the pathway from on high. It was the first air free of the smell of deep soils and aged wood that Eurich had smelt in days. It livened his spirits, for the Darkenfold was an unyielding forest, where the trees grew short and broad with thick crowns that wove together to make an impenetrable canopy. The air was always heavy, thick, and left an unpalatable taste in the mouth. And it was dark, only blades of pale daylight reached the floor, but leaving the surrounding wood in ever-darker shades of green and gray.

Eurich moved up the trail a few hundred feet until he came to a small glade set off to the south of it. Here the ruins of some forgotten stonework offered a moment's respite and he sat down upon a wall only a few feet high. In front of him, resting in the shade of a tree was a dais that held a dull eyed, weathered statue of a man with a frog's head. The stone the frog creature held in his hand was round and looked more like a ball than anything else. Weather had left it shapeless. And whatever he held in his other hand was gone, for that arm was broken off at the elbow and doubtless lay in the dirt and roots that covered the one-time floor of this old house.

Beneath the canopy Eurich had only the faintest idea of east and west, north and south. Several weeks back he had left the Post Road and followed the course of a river, the Westerling, south into the Darkenfold. He moved east of the river where he tangled with a troll and other creatures. Outnumbered and with his path blocked by a small army he was forced to take a different path. He thought that if he struck west, he would hit the Westerling and be able to follow its path north back to the Post Road.

But he long since lost his way. He moved south at first, avoiding orcs and other forest riff raff, then cutting to the west he struck a broad river, one he assumed was the Westerling. He crossed it, putting it between him and his pursuers and striking north he arrived below the confluence of two rivers. This he did not remember on his way south. One of the rivers came from the north and east, the other from the north and west. Though he

did not know it, these were the Watchita and Westerling Rivers and they joined where he stood at Gurthap Falls.

The land here rose sharply in a broad, long shelf-like cliff called the Upplands. Both rivers tumbled over steep falls, before they joined each other beneath a spit of land that towered 60 feet above the confluence. None of this meshed with where he thought he had to go, and he was at a loss. But worse the promontory sported an old castle and keep that seemed occupied. Five separate smoke trails climbed into the sky above the keep. There was little chance of those in the keep being friendly.

To avoid them Eurich cut his way into the woods, moving west and south, away from the rivers, thinking to loop around and come back to the western most of the two rivers, which he mistakenly assumed was the Mistbane. But not only was the Mistbane over 30 miles further to the west, his attempt to rejoin either of the rivers proved fruitless, as he became turned around in forest. He wandered lost in the woods for days.

Long ago the Darkenfold was part of a much greater forest, the Ethvold that covered almost all the valleys of Kayomar. It spread from the Bleached Hills in the north, all along the flanks of the Bergrucken and Rhodope Mountains in the east and west, to the swamps of the south and the Amber Sea. It was deep and dark, and the abode of Tefnut and a host of the Val-Eaharakun, gods from beyond the world. Amenut made his house there, as did Nunt of the Deep Pool and Heth, the servant of Toth.

The forest was first cut by dwarves from Norgorad Kam. They came through the wood on paths blazed with axe and fire, building roads to connect their own realms in the Bergrucken Mountains to the Rhodopes, where they mined for silver, iron and other ores. They built houses and towers along the way, and delved dungeons beneath the ground. They set snares upon the stone, to protect them from the wilderness and the beasts who stalked it, both evil and benign. It stood thus for countless centuries until men came.

Led by three brothers, Aedgen, Areos and Kayomar, the Ethrum came to the wild lands seeking a home from the inhospitable north where the Red God hounded them. They first encountered Tefnut and were amazed at her power and wonder. But they soon encountered others of her order and were enthralled. They worshiped them, calling them gods and seeking power and aid from them. And the Val-Eaharakun accepted their roles and allowed the men to build altars to them, and later temples and cities of stone. Washed in the adoration and love of the Ethrum the Val-Eaharakun

grew powerful and their power extended far and wide.

It grew with the forest and the people and their towers. It became bound to it all, for they spent of themselves to make the forest strong and the Ethrum stronger. Their power passed into the wood and the land, the streams and deep caves, the roots and leaves, the lakes and hills, the towers and temples, the roads and cities. And as the wood grew, so grew the power of the Val Eahrakun, until at their zenith the whole of the Ethvold was subjugated and priest kings of the Ethrum ruled from bejeweled thrones and bore golden armor into battle and all fell in fear before them. They built statues of Amenut and Nunt, Heth and others. They coated them with jewels and precious metals and built altars at their feet, leaving all manner of sacrifice to feed and please the gods of the Ethvold.

And they saw no end to the world, their wealth and their power.

But it was not so.

Their kingdoms ran afoul of other realms still greater and gods filled with far more malice than Amenut and Heth. War came to the Ethvold, a bitter and brutal war with the Easterners. They knew no restraint and laid waste to towns and put many to death. They pulled down temples and cast altars into the rivers. The Gods of the Ethvold were weakened with each loss and they lamented spending their own power in the service of the Ethrum, but they learned their folly in defeat as they were driven to ground. As they fell, so fell the Ethrum and the Ethvold and all was countless years of suffering and death and loss.

In time the gods were forgotten by most, replaced by new gods, young gods with power not unlike the old. And the old gods were called upon rarely and they passed into memory, crawling into caves and dark places, awash in the sorrow of their glorious past, now lost. They were called the Og Aust then, and many saw them as demons and feared them.

More wars and a dark age of Winter followed and all this left the Ethvold a broken wood, shrunk and wasted. Now all that remained were patches to the north, the Eldwood to the east and the Darkenfold to the south and west, the last bastion of the old world and the home to the demon-gods of the Og Aust.

Of all this Eurich knew little if any at all. There were many tales of the old world, and parting one from its many dissimulations was of little interest to Eurich. He had spent many nights in the walled town of Elne upon the forest's eastern edge, listening to tales of the Darkenfold. He knew of the spirits of the Og Aust, those demons of yesterday who men worshiped like gods. He heard tales of altars awash in blood and the screaming madness of sacrificial victims, of wealth heaped in temples, squandered and lost in deep dungeons and ancient ruins. But he paid little heed to them, for his

mind was more bent toward the here and now, the iron at his side and mail upon his chest. The world holds many threats, real if mundane, without inventing demons to haunt one's sleep.

None of this crossed his mind as he sat upon the trail, looking to the west. By accident or design he had stumbled upon the Pigs Trail, a track that led from the Hollow where he began his journey to the Mistbane River and one that afforded access to the Upplands and the Southern Way, a road that would lead him to Ends Meet and the Cockleburrr Inn and Tavern, where he had sent his horse for safe housing.

But all this escaped Eurich. He pondered what direction to take. Following the trail to the east would lead him into the country he had just passed through, but it might lead him to the river he sought, the Westerling. From there he could hike north to Greenbriar and the Post Road. But the trail might not lead that far, and it could simply lead him into the deeper woods from which he had only just escaped. To the west seemed more inviting, though he knew next to nothing about it, other than if he came to the mountains he could trace a path along their roots until he came to Petersboro in the far north.

Looking up at the statue of the frog-headed man above him he said, "What now lord of frogs? What direction do I take? Or can you spirit me away to some other world and bring me safely home again?"

The stone did not answer but looked impassively above him. It seemed to Eurich that the statue moved, as if its gaze shifted and the one good hand pulled close to the stony chest. "West it is then. And I best move before you do and hound me to the Endless Pools where death is like life without purpose or design."

He rose and took his pack from the ground, much lighter now, as he had long since eaten most of his food. The bag itself was dirty and torn and the bedroll slung across it in little better shape. He had managed to keep his armor clean for several days but he ran out of oil and his rags were soiled with blood and grime of earlier battles. Everything about him was showing signs of use and lack of care, even his face sported the shadows of what promised to be a thick beard.

By afternoon the trail broadened and passed beneath a long, steep cliff. Clearly a part of the uptick in the land he had encountered at the falls several days back, he followed it, using it to guide his way. It became clear to him that the trail was also a stream bed that must certainly flood when the rain comes. This did not concern him much as it was broad, flat country to the south and in the worst case any flood waters would spill off in that direction.

As the sun began to dip beneath the distant horizon he found a small

pool at the base of the cliff. It was surrounded by flat rocks that afforded a comfortable place to rest. The cliff towered over him, running east and west. Only the forest to the south offered any threat, and though it was close, Eurich was too tired to give it much heed.

Setting his shield down, Eurich unbuckled his belt and set it, ax and sword down as well. He took his helmet off and after taking a long drink and filling his flask, he washed his face, neck and hands. Rifling through his pack he found the last of his hard tack, which he ate and washed down with more water from the pool.

“Well by the Red God’s Gates, I’ll be hungry by morning.”

“‘Tis a shame to starve in a land of such plenty,” came a voice.

Eurich started, grabbing the red wire pommel of his broad sword. But he could see that he would be feathered before ever he pulled the blade free.

A woman stepped from the forest eaves.

She was dressed in dark green breeches and a chain shirt. The chainmail was largely hidden by the dark tunic that hung to just above her knees. A broad hooded cloak was pulled back and tied behind her, affording her arms freedom to draw and fire the bow that she held at the ready. Her face was pale, and eyes dark green. All this was crowned by long, fiery red hair that she wore bound and braided in a variety of knots that kept the hair both out of her face and behind her, though even with this, shocks of red escaped the ordered tangle. There was an uncanny beauty about her, a beauty not sullied by the scar that ran the length of her left cheek. A quiver jutted out over her right shoulder and held a good eight or nine arrows. A long, curved dagger, jutted from the broad furry girdle that was wrapped around her waist and held with a leather strap.

“I fear that you have me at a disadvantage.” Eurich studied her for a moment and discerned that her intent was not evil. He had always been a quick judge of character, and this had never failed him. He could see into the hearts of people and know them, if they were evil or had evil intentions. In any case, had she intended to kill him, he would likely be breathing his last.

“You look lost and a bit disheveled, friend. I think it is the forest that has you at a disadvantage.” She approached carelessly, as if she had discerned that he was not a threat. Stopping at the pool she bent and spooned water into her mouth, though Eurich made note that she held the arrow nocked and the bow slightly drawn with her one hand.

Eurich smiled and sat back, releasing the hold upon his sword. “Aye, that it does. I have been wandering through here for at least a week, though in truth I have lost track of time.”

“Time is less important than your way in the Darkenfold. Lose the latter

and you'll lose the former for certain." She sat back on her haunches, bow still in one hand.

Eurich took note that she did not struggle to keep it slightly drawn, nor to hold the arrow in the string. Clearly skilled with the weapon and strong to boot.

"I am called Eurich Gunshoff, a knight. Though I have no home of my own, nor lord that I serve."

"Karen Ava Craddock. I was born and raised in these woods."

"The woods?"

She eased visibly, at last releasing the tension in the partially drawn bow. The arrow slid slowly across the bow until bow, string, arm and fingers were all relaxed. "I was born in a town north of here, Ends Meet. But my family is not there anymore."

Eurich sensed a slight shift in her tone. It was clear to the knight that they had touched a nerve. "Well I came down this way from Greenbriar, tangled with a troll and ungern in the woods to the east. I am even now making my way to that town. With a little luck my horse is there."

"Aye. I picked your trail up a few days ago, just before you crossed the river below the falls. Those orcs were hot on your heels. You are lucky you became lost, as they went north, assuming you had followed the river bank. They don't normally lose a trail so easily. It was fortunate."

"Well then, my thanks to whatever gods govern these woods and to Mordius, the Lady in Green and Tefnut of the Rivers and whomsoever else watches over me. Though I've rested since, that river crossing caught me sorely wounded from my fight."

She smiled, for she felt at ease with him. There was an innate goodness about him, a goodness bound in iron. His blue eyes were clear and without doubt and his speech direct and lacked that clever trepidation that tainted most people's speech. He was not tall, but strongly built and even in this rough state carried himself with a quiet strength born of self-worth. He knew his road, even when lost in the woods. She had run wild in the forest for so long and rarely talked to any but a few in Ends Meet and some of the Coal Burners that wandered the forest, that she had almost forgotten what company was like. "Call me Ava."

"Well Ava. I would offer you food but I have little left but flint and steel and this ragged bed roll."

"I have set snares in the shade of the timber over yon. We'll have rabbit before long." She produced a small spit and set it by the pool. "Get us a fire going and I'll see what the forest has given us."

Before long they were both eating cooked rabbit, flavored with wild onions and turnips, cold and fresh from the ground. They ate in silence,

listening to the sounds of dusk as the sun vanished beyond the horizon. After they ate they settled back to rest, he against the wall of the cliff, and she upon her own bed roll not far from the fire.

She spoke then about the country he was passing through. That the road he was on was called the Pigs Trail and as often as not had wild boar roaming its length. The cliffs were called Loretta's Bluff, after a woman who had thrown herself off them, even to her death. She would say no more about who that unfortunate was, but Eurich sensed the same reluctance he had detected earlier. She spoke also of the village of Alice, abandoned and the Mistbane River, some 20-30 miles west. Beyond that lay the Rhodope Mountains and beyond that she could not say.

For his part, Eurich took comfort in her knowledge of the wood. He was no ranger, but a knight and though he could fight mounted or on foot, and had stood against all manner of creatures in dungeons beneath the ground, or ruined temples, on trackless roads, his gifts were not such that he could find his way in a dark wood.

After awhile she asked questions of him, wondering where he had come from and it was his turn to talk. He spoke of his homeland far to the east, across the sea, of his youth and how his mother farmed him out after his father died. He spoke highly of Barrith of Ogdun, the knight who he served and who taught him the ways of a knight, how to use weapons and the like. He learned about honor from Barrith and all the ways of the world. They were mendicant knights, born to serve the good. He spoke of their parting and how he wandered into the western lands, serving the Kings of Anglamay in their countless wars, how he fought pirates off the coast of Gottland when he served on the ships of the Hanse Lords to the north. He spoke of wondrous Norgorad Kam, the dwarf realm, where he broke bread with a troop of dwarves and hunted the Jolmuen, those bestial men with the bodies of boars, four arms and a tusked snout.

He woke in her a desire to see the world at large, in truth a desire she always had and she spoke of this to him. "For almost 2 score years I've wandered these woods and fought reckless beasts of wild abandon, but never have I left the comforting embrace of my Darkenfold. I do not speak the language of kings, nor the language of men who till the land." She smiled at him. "I would be as lost there as you are here."

He laughed and the sound of it startled a crow in the tree overhead. It cawed loudly, calling out some dark prayer to whatever god heeds the call of crows. "Well, I'll strike a deal with you. Guide me through this forest, your home, and I'll guide you through the kingdoms of men. When done, we'll decide which are the true trackless wastes of the world."

She smiled at him.

They left camp early the following morning, after eating what remained of the rabbit and turnips. They followed the Pigs Trail at the base of the Bluff for many hours, stopping only briefly for lunch and again late in the afternoon. Ava found wild berries and some roots along the way and they ate well and were much refreshed when she called halt just after dark.

It was her intent to take him to the Mistbane, where at times the fisherman left canoes or flat boats hidden in the reeds and beneath the willow trees. Barring that she would guide him up through the village of Alice and on the Southern Way to Ends Meet.

They spoke little as they walked, but enjoyed stories of their adventures when they rested. The hours of the day, and the day that followed tumbled away without mishap and far faster than either would have admitted.

By evening of the second day they stood upon the banks of the Mistbane, greatest of the rivers in the Darkenfold and one whose course was haunted by the ghosts of the dead. They lingered in patches of fog that drifted south with the flow of the current from the far-off Shelves of the Mist. It was deadly to be caught in one of the fogs, and the locals avoided them, taking refuge beneath the Willow trees that grew along the bank of the river on small mounds. For some reason the fogs never crossed over a Willow's roots.

The Mistbane stood at the feet of a massive chain of mountains, the Rhodopes. These stretched the south, where the Amber Sea washed their roots, to the north where they came to the doors of the Shadow Mountains. They were an inhospitable set of jagged peaks and deep valleys, that towered over the Darkenfold. But they seemed strangely comforting as if they held the forest in the cusp of their mighty hands, offering it refuge against a world both alien and dangerous.

The trail had ended upon the banks of the river, sliding beneath it as if the river came long after the trail was made. For its part, the Mistbane moved with tremendous strength. Here the river was over a hundred and fifty feet wide and deep, or so the dark-green waters would attest. Its course was interrupted by a small island that rose from the middle of the river in a jumble of well placed rocks. In the darkening gloom it took Eurich some moments to discern what it was, but he spied the figure of the frog headed man upon the rocks. A statue built long ago, sitting upon a throne of stones, holding a sphere with crown in one hand and a scepter with the other. A broad cloak was chiseled upon his back. He looked south, staring with immutable eyes.

Images came unbidden to Eurich's mind. Long, narrow, flat boats passed

down the river. Their occupants were tall, with dusky white skin and long dark hair. They wore long, silk loin clothes that stretched from broad girdles of gold and silver, all the way to their sandaled feet. Their chests were bare, both men and women, but they wore armlets of gold and crowns as well. Some carried long, curved swords, while others held ornate bows and black-hafted spears with bronze points, nearly nine feet long. They passed beneath the Frog God, who sat upon his river throne in all the glory of his youth, powerful and aloof.

"There are no canoes, nor flat boats." Ava spoke with a tinge of annoyance. "The river moves swiftly now, the snow melt to the north is still too fresh. The fishing is too good to leave boats on the bank."

Eurich startled from his trance, turned to her first and then looked north. The Bluff they had been passing beneath came to the river's edge. They would have to climb it or ford the river, or find some other path up the cliff face. "That cliff will not be easy to scale. Or can we cross and move up the river to Peteresboro?"

"There is a way under the river, but we do not seek that path. In any case the land across the river are home to the Bowlgaardge orcs and we'd have to carve our way through. But as for here, there are few paths up this Bluff." She looked back the way they came. "I do not like the village of Alice." Her face was dark for a moment and sad.

He watched her and began to discern something of the truth, but he said nothing of it. "I am at your mercy here. I do not fear orcs, but a mountain of them is not what I seek today. Can we scale the cliff?"

"I can, but I fear you cannot. I have no rope, nor do you. But there is another way. There is a cave that passes beneath the cliff. It is dangerous, for it is the home of powers from the old world, powers that are ever hungry and seek to devour whatever comes into their dens."

"Well, as I always say, Gods and bones. Gods. And bones."

She smiled again. "Let us camp Eurich, we'll track back up the trail on the morrow and pass beneath the cliff."

Somewhat after noon they stood beneath a small, rocky awning. A cave entrance, only a few feet wide cut the cliff's face like a wound. From here, back up the trail toward the west and on the bluff, Eurich could see the walls of an old castle overlooking the trail. How he had missed it when they passed beneath it the day before was a mystery to him. In truth much of it was covered in vines and ivy and small growth ranged along its walls. He took note now because the caverns came out underneath that place

and would give them access to the broad shelf above.

Ava slung her bow on her back and produced a small stone she possessed and held it aloft in her hand. It shone with a dim, green light. "This will give us light underground." She moved to pass into the cave.

"Ava. She must be laid to rest."

The archer froze where she stood beneath the cavern entrance. Her back stiffened and the muscles on her forearm tightened on the gem as if she still held the bow.

"I have fought the undead many times. Some are evil and seek to linger in the world for the harm they can cause. Others are not, but are bound between this world and the next, unable even to suffer the judgment of the Heth the Crow God. Who is this woman who fell from the bluff? Who is she to you?"

Ava did not turn, but spoke in a low, quiet voice. "She fell. She jumped. Near to this very spot. But her bones were never found, they were washed away into the river and carried to what lands none can say. She will never know rest."

Eurich sighed. "Your mother? Or was she a sister?"

Ava turned to look at him. Her face was ashen and hard, drawn, tired as if she had never known happiness. "My mother. Loretta. My sister's fate was worse. The elf king sought her for his bride and when she refused him, they slew her guardian, my father, and stole her away into the south." With dead eyes she looked at him. "My mother, when she heard, pursued, but she could not catch them and even if she did, she could have done nothing. She found my father upon the trail and knew the truth of things. But she went mad and before it was over, she had thrown herself from those heights," she looked up with a jerk of her head.

She stared at the cliff for a moment as if she could see her mother, so young, so beautiful, wrapped only in her gown, leaping over the edge in her grief filled madness. She followed the arc of the leap off the cliff and down to the ground and somewhere in her mind there was a wet thud of flesh on rocks.

"What of your sister? Did you ever find her?" He knew then that Ava had left home when she was 14, searching for her sister. Her story came together for him then.

"No. She lived with the elves for a while and bore her kidnapper a son. That much I know. But she died a few years ago, or at least I believe she did. I can hear her though. In the woods. She calls to me. She leaves messages for me beneath the goldenrod when it blooms in the spring. When I find them in bloom, and listen carefully, I can sometimes hear her and I know she is still with me."

They both stood beneath the shadow of the cliff. She looked south for awhile and he followed her gaze. The forest crowded the trail with dense trees and a darkened foliage. He could not see what she saw, but he could feel the restless spirits of the dead. Whether they were the people of long abandoned Alice, the ghost of Ava's mother, or the spirit of her sister, he could not say.

"I have a task to complete. I carry a sapling that I promised a traveler I would deliver to Ends Meet, or her people. When I have done that, we will look for your mother's bones, even if we must dam the river to find them."

She turned to him and smiled, seemingly forgetting the horror of her youth. "I know of your task and the sapling. It is why I tracked you down. I know where it should go. Where the druid would have wanted it to go."

Eurich was a little surprised. "You knew Cornelius?"

"I spoke to him when he passed down the Road of Tefnut, whither you sent him, after he died."

"You speak to the dead?"

"I can. At times. At least here, in the Darkenfold."

Eurich smiled and pulled his blade. "Well, by the First Wind, let us get this task done, for if nothing else, this sapling in my satchel is battered and leafless and hopefully still alive!"

They passed beneath the cliff then, into the darkness. The corridor opened immediately before them, ranging several feet wide and 7-8 feet high. It seemed a natural, stone cavern to them, but had they been miners they would have seen the signs of hammer and chisel.

At first the air was cool and a little ambient light spilled into the cave from outside. But this did not last long and within a few feet they were in complete darkness. The light Ava bore shone a pale green in the black cave, driving shadows to dance both before and behind them.

They wound their way for 50 or 60 feet before they came to a T in the cavern. To their right the path coiled a little back to the left, but the path on the left snaked on as far as the light of the gem would go. Ava shone her light first down one, then the other.

"Wait. What is that?" Eurich peered down the tunnel on their right, and pointed where something hung from the ceiling.

Ava shone her light upon it, and they both saw a crow hanging by its foot from the ceiling. It was alive as it moved furtively, trying to lift itself, but it was clearly too weak to do much and was near death.

Eurich moved in that direction, but Ava grabbed his arm. "Leave it. That is the sign of one of those black-hearted hags that haunt these regions. We must leave this place, or go through it quickly!"

"No. A crow gave me aid not long ago, unsought and never truly paid

for, I will not leave her kin here, hanging in this dank dungeon. I'll cut it loose and kill this hag for the wrong it has done."

Ava watched him for only a moment. Reared in the wild, she knew the faceless brutality of nature and little shocked or amazed her. The weak died. The strong struggled on. The struggle of good and evil was as foreign to her as the gills of a fish. She followed after him.

Eurich moved down to where the crow hung from a spike in the ceiling. He cut it loose and caught the bird in his hand. It looked at him with black eyes and rolled onto its legs, weak and dying. All about the floor were the bones of crows, sunk into a brackish liquid of rot and filth. But there were other bones as well, long, white bones, human and animal. In the midst of it all, huge, bloated worms surfaced, crawling toward him, seeking to find purchase on the knight's boots. They slithered up on him, but failed for they could find no purchase and they slid off into the mire. As they did so a strange keening whine rose from them as if in frustration.

"The First Wind take you to hell!" He stomped into the muck and splattered himself and Ava in the filth of the dead and the worms howled and knotted up into braids of segmented flesh. The knots tightened until the white worms turned yellow until at last their pus-filled bodies exploded their filth into the water.

But Eurich took no heed of the worms or their death throes. Carrying the crow with him, deeper into the cavern, he rounded a corner and came to a large room. Ava followed, amazed at the power of his words, and curious what he might find deeper in the cavern. Instinctively she shifted the gem to her right hand and swung her bow around.

What they saw drew them both up short. A large cavernous room stood before them, huge stalactites clinging to the ceiling hovered over a host of stalagmites on the floor. The whole looking like the maw of some ancient beast, trapped beneath the earth. But the true horror were the bones.

A veritable mountain of bones dominated the far side of the room, standing from floor to ceiling. Hundreds upon hundreds of them stood there, woven together in a macabre pattern, to what purpose neither Ava nor Eurich could fathom. Some of the bones were human, some elf, others were humanoid, others monsters, and still more were animals. Many still had flesh on them, serving as the very twine that held them together. The architect was clever and powerful, for the skin had been dried and pulled and used as ropes to tether one bone to the next, one tier to another.

"Come forth creature of Ornduhl's thought. Come forth. There is a

reckoning for such horrors.” He set the bird aside, allowing it purchase on a ledge before he swung his own shield around.

Ava set the stone next to the bird and was amazed when the bird grasped it in its dying claw. She looked again at Eurich and wondered who indeed he was.

“No reckoning today. Not for me. Only more bones for my door!” The voice was rasping, sharp and cut through them like shards of glass being ground to dust. They staggered from it, for they could feel it more than they could hear it. “You’ll but come here. Lay down. And you’ll do my bidding. You’ll bind my door with your flesh and sinews.”

The pain became searing, the cutting voice like glass in the mind and both Eurich and Ava staggered beneath it. He dropped his shield and sword and pulled at his helm. She held her bow but in a grip so tight the bones of her smaller fingers shattered.

“Now you’ll know the taste of eternity. Now you’ll know horrors of nothing. Now you’ll be more tethers of my power!”

It was as if the voice scooped large heaps of their brains from their skulls and cast them aside and to stop it Eurich tore off his helm and cast it down, clawing at his ears.

And they heard voices. Voices calling in madness, shouting for a respite they knew would not come. A timeless terror hung about them and the echo of it drove Eurich and Ava mad. The voices babbled their names, they called for their kin, they lamented their loves and life lost, they cackled in madness. All this battered Eurich and Ava until they could take no more.

But in the midst of it Ava heard a voice, both forgotten, yet familiar. It was the voice she first heard in the world, the one that fed her, taught her numbers, raised her and saw her through all the days of her youth. It was one that had left her long ago. “Mother . . . ?” She looked up, her mind clearing. Suddenly she could see the tower of bones in the still green light of the gem, the knight staggered against the wall, a look of madness on his face. There were pools of still water on the floor, the crow dead on the ledge, shadows and shades and the tower of bones.

She drew her bow and nocked an arrow and unleashed it, all in one fluid motion. The arrow struck true, severing a thick ancient bone at the bottom of the pile, cutting it clean through. Then the strength of the tower was betrayed. The flesh long rotten could not hold and snapped here and there, unleashing the ties that held the tower intact and the bones began to fall and tumble until the whole edifice came crashing to the cavern’s stone floor.

The voice turned to one of howling despair and pain and it screamed a gibbering madness of rage. And from it and the heap of bones a host of

demons rose, some small, some large, but all came at the two in a rage of pain and suffering.

Instantly the voice changed its tone, Eurich recovered. As the tower fell and unleashed its black hearted horde he pulled his axe and leapt forward with a joy born of life renewed and the falling chains of madness. He waded into the host of the damned, carving through flesh and bone, winged membranes, scales and hide. They fell before his wrath like wheat before the scythe.

But their number was far greater than Eurich ever imagined and they swarmed around him. But even there they fell, for Ava's bow sung and her arrows flew true, one after the other. One demons fell with an arrow through its throat. Another fell with its heart pierced. Another too, an arrow through the eye with such force it exploded out the back of its skull. When her arrows were spent she pulled her long-bladed knife and a short axe and waded into the fray and fought back to back with the knight.

In the end the creatures lay in a heap about them. A score or more lay dead or disembodied at their feet. Both Eurich and Ava were bleeding from a score of cuts and abrasions. Their muscles screamed and their breath was ragged and dry.

"Come, hag. Come into the light of the crow's claw and make recompense."

A sullen, heavy silence hung over the room. It was pregnant with a rage and Eurich could taste it.

Ava plucked two arrows from the fallen and fetched her bow. She began to move cautiously about the room, watching for any movement. For his part Eurich stood in the midst of the hellish ruin and felt about him with his senses, seeking the evil in the room.

They both spied the door that lay beyond where the cage of bones had stood. They could see a huge room, dominated by a deep pool. A dark figure sat atop a slag heap of stone that rose from the dark waters. It watched impassively.

On sudden the air before Eurich exploded in a black cloud of tendrils. They rose about Eurich with amazing speed and wrapped the knight in their embrace. The stink flooded his mouth and nose and plunged into his lungs. It held him tight and lifted him off the floor and began to choke him to death. He raged against it but his mind was clouded and he could not discern his axe or even his hand and arm.

Ava did not know what to do but followed her instincts. She shot an arrow into the black cloud and watched as it drove home, sticking flesh and bone. As suddenly as it appeared the black cloud dissipated, dropping Eurich back to the floor. And there stood the hag. She was old and haggard,

more bones, than flesh. Her eyes were sunken pools of gray and they held a malice that drove Ava back. The hag turned on her, Ava's arrow lodged in her right side. "Little girl! You'll join your mother's bones before this hour is up! BACK!" She hurled the word with such force that it threw Ava against the wall where she cracked her skull. She blood soaked into her hair and ran down her neck and into her face and mouth, flowing like a river. She sank against the wall, trying to summon her strength, but the hag's power held her down. She slowly nocked her arrow.

But Eurich, freed of the black mist, leapt over the heap of demon kin at his feet and fell upon the witch. She spun and received his first blow on her staff and turned him. She struck him a blow to the head that cut to the bone and drove him back. But he turned on her and shouted "The First Wind take you!" and smote her a blow that cracked her ribs and tore her flesh.

The hag's eyes widened as she saw him, as if for the first time. "No," she whispered.

He clove her head then, smiting her such a blow that the bone gave way and the axe tore through the pulpy matter of her brain, to cleave through spine and into the breast bone, where it lodged. He yanked the axe forward with such force that it tore the ribs from her body and her lungs, and the great mass of tangled organs besides. All fell at Eurich's feet in a heap of rotted filth.

As the hag fell a wind picked up. It rose from the chamber beyond and both Eurich and Ava saw the creature on the slag heap slip into the pool. They could feel it, knew its relief. Eurich saw the creature for a moment, bathed in all its glory. A man with powerful, but bulbous limbs, his thick haunches resting upon a silken divan. He held a rod in one hand and a crowned sphere in the other. About his shoulders hung a long purple cloak. His head however, was no man's head, but that of a giant frog and Eurich knew the truth of who the hag had bound in the dungeons beneath Alice.

With wide eyes it looked at Eurich, as if seeing through time, from its beginning to the present, all at once. It saw that Eurich rescued him from the hag's prison, and it understood all that had unfolded and that its power was not utterly lost.

Eurich knew the creature for what it was, Amenut, the frog god. He knew that this creature guided him here. How it did so, he could not say. And he saw that it was no demon out of hell or time's abyss. He saw it for what it was, a houseless god, whose power had waned such that it could not overcome a hag that bound it.

Three days of weary travel brought the two to a broad clearing in the forest. This was the Meadow, an open place in the forest that few knew about. Miles across, the clearing offered Eurich his first real glimpse of the sun in many days and weeks. He was tired and welcomed the hot and light like never before. The Darkenfold, he thought, was like swimming under water, and he needed a breath of air.

They bore the sapling to a pool that lay at the Meadow's center. Fed by a creek from the north the pool stayed replenished all year long. The water flowed into the pool and vanished beneath the earth, only to surface many miles to the south to tumble from Loretta's Bluff. The water was cool, and pure and good to drink.

They planted the sapling there, a dozen or so feet from the water's edge, where the soil was wet and the tree's roots would never know thirst. The light of the afternoon sun beat down on the tree and would for many years to come. It perked up immediately once it was in the ground, proving a more resilient tree than Eurich ever had thought.

Not far from the tree Ava laid the bones of her mother to rest. Fetched with care from the heap in the rooms of Amenut's cavern, she bore them to the Meadow. Eurich set a prayer upon them and with that her soul was released and passed over to the Arc of Time where it could be judged by Heth the Crow God and given rest at last.

Somewhere a crow cawed.

Some few days after, Eurich sat in the common room of the Cockleburrr Inn and Tarvern in the small wilderness town of Ends Meet. His horse had been safely delivered and looked after, he had seen to this as soon as he came to town.

He ate roasted pig and potatoes and washed it all down with a cool beer. Ava sat across from him and washed a similar meal down. "I believe you are unlost knight. And you owe me a journey..."

A HOUSELESS GOD & OTHER TALES

The landless knight, Eurich Gunshoff, had no master, but served those in need, sometimes for money, but mostly for the honor of it. He went hungry often, slept in the wilds, endured the rain and snow, the heat and wind. He fought creatures, great and small. It was a hard life. Or so he thought, until he passed beneath the eaves of the Darkenfold Forest.

Four tales of Eurich Gunshoff.



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