

DIRTY BOUWBE PRESENTS

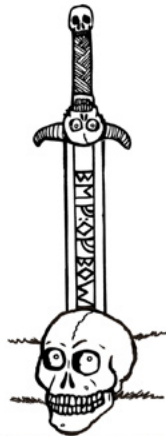
TALES FROM THE ROADHOUSE



CHRISTOFFERSON: LANDEROS: NORVAISAITE
VOL III

DIRTY BOWBE PRESENTS
**TALES
FROM THE
ROADHOUSE**
VOLUME 3

THE BIOS. 3
INTRODUCTION..... 5
KNIGHT OF THE FORBIDDEN WOOD..... 6
A CUP OF OL' GROGNARD 18



DIRTY BOWBE'S ROADHOUSE

THE BIOS

CASEY W. CHRISTOFFERSON

Casey W. Christofferson is an author of fantasy and science fiction Role Playing Game supplements, and short fiction. Casey began his career writing for Necromancer Games in 2001 and has continuously provided content for Frog God Games, Troll Lord Games, Goodman Games, Kenzer & Co., & 77 Worlds/Fire-side Creations. Casey has dozens of titles in print or on digital format including Bard's Gate, Tome of Horrors Series, Quests of Doom, City of Brass, The Haunted Highlands RPG setting, a children's tale called Tinsel the Christmas Elf and many more.

Casey has worked alongside the likes of Bill Webb, Clark Peterson, James M. Ward, Matthew Finch, and Stephen Chenault. In 2006 he shared the ENnie for best Adversary/Monster supplement with Scott Greene for Tome of Horrors 3. His most recent projects include the revised and expanded version of City of Brass, contributions to the upcoming Lost Lands Setting, as well as various other adventures for 5th edition and Swords & Wizardry. In 2018 he agreed to sign on with Frog God Games as artistic consultant for the fantasy RPG lines. This may have something to do with the fact that he personally instructed several of the Frog God Games artists such as Artem Shukaev, Faith Bugar, and Adrian Landeros while they were still in high school!

SANTA NORVAISAITE

Santa Norvaisaite was born and raised in a small city in Latvia. Her interest in art began at a very young age after she discovered folders of her mother's sketches and artwork. She soon began expressing her imagination through her own drawings.

A series of life events led Santa and her mother to immigrate to Canada. There she attended and graduated high school and worked for a few years while attending a three-year program of Game Development at George Brown with a focus on 3D mod-

eling. While there she re-connected with her love and passion for art and soon chose to pursue illustration and concept art as a career.

She has worked on multiple freelance projects and has done private commissions throughout the years. Her inspiration and focus while working on a painting is the atmosphere, light, and environment surrounding the scene.

ADRIAN LANDEROS

Adrian Landeros is a digital and traditional based illustrator born in Aguascalientes, Mexico. His work allows him to create and conceptualize ideas from talented authors and art directors into vivid and creative pieces varying from fantasy and mythic digital illustrations to the depths of science fiction traditional ink works. Adrian's illustrations are currently represented by Frog God Games, and Planet X Games. As a student he was recognized in various art competitions for his pen and ink and digital works of art.

Adrian is influenced by artists such as the masterful Frank Frazetta and Jose Guadalupe Posada who inspired him to keep exploring and learning more about the beauty of anatomy, composition and ink line art. He believes that passion and true love for creating art is the purest source of greatness and creativity in any field of art. Raised from humble beginnings he has been fascinated by art and has been practicing it since his youth. The drive for improvement, passion, working alongside creative minds in a professional manner and constant curiosity within illustration is what keeps him going. Adrian specializes in very detailed illustrations focusing on light, anatomy and composition with a unique, defined and dedicated style which is very flexible to what the author or commissioner requires. While he also has a classic cross hatching style when it comes to ink illustrations, He seeks improvement and more knowledge about illustration and hopes to reach an even higher level of professionalism and hopes more people will enjoy his work someday at an international level.

INTRODUCTION

Tales from the roadhouse Volume III includes a treat for new fans of Troll Lord Games' Castles & Crusades and the Haunted Highlands setting, which differs from the Lost Lands Setting of Frog God Games as were published in the previous two volumes of *Tales from the Roadhouse* that were exclusively released for Humble Bundle. This is not an accident, as I have worked for both publishers simultaneously over the last two decades and through great friendship ol' Bowbe exists in both dimensions as well.

Though out of print now for several years the Haunted Highlands setting that I developed for Troll Lord Games featured nearly a thousand pages of old school fantasy material. A centerpiece to the early publication history of the Haunted Highlands was a Role Playing Games rendition of Dirty Bowbe's Roadhouse.

Although in its infancy at the time, The Roadhouse featured in module DB 1 "*The Haunted Highlands*" described the owner and Ol' Bowbe himself, Bull and his crew of miscreants. The Roadhouse was a waystation in the midst of a land overrun by the invasion from the orc horde of Yorgach. Although these events were taking place in the background it left plenty of room for characters to either participate in the events of the war, or exploit the plunder of its aftermath.

The Haunted Highlands setting led to the development of tons of gaming products including mass combat RPG rules "Fields of Battle." Fields was a set of quick and nasty rules that literally used all of your tabletop miniatures at the same time in epic battles where the hero was always front and center instead of just an observer to the "fray" as my good friend and owner of Troll Lord Games Stephen Chenault likes to call it!

Enough with the reminisce, on to the stories! The two tales featured here were originally published in Crusader Magazine by Troll Lord Games several years ago. This time, they have been richly illustrated by my good friends Santa Norvaisaite and

Adrian Landeros, and if you notice Santa has crafted a new cover for the series that hearkens back to those classic pulp novel covers from the 70s and early 80s that I cut my teeth on as a young and aspiring Dungeon Master and gamer with a hope to someday publish RPG material and write adventure stories!

We hope you enjoy this new outing for Humble Bundle. Charity is dear to the heart of all three of us and we want to thank the dear readers for their participation in this new campaign of caring.

Yours Truly

Casey W. Christofferson

Santa Norvaisaite

Adrian Landeros

March 2020

KNIGHT OF THE FORBIDDEN WOOD



Sir Jorgen rode through the misty forest trail. Little more than a game path his trusty courser snorted from the thick mist that obscured their vision to but a few feet before them. Jorgen frowned and pet his horse's neck as he slid from the saddle. Shouldering his lance he took the courser's reins. Such thick mist would harm his steed's lungs, making him useless, and harming the faithful beast unnecessarily.

Jorgen swore a prayer to Vanium and proceeded into the ever darkening wood without an ounce of fear in his heart. Fear was unknown to him. It had been beaten out of him through his years of training, and washed from him through the blessings of his sovereign lord and god. Rumors had spread to the monastery of his training that some evil champion had entered the Forbidden Wood and had taken to waylaying travelers with evil intent.

Jorgun had leapt at the chance to once again prove his worth to his god, and with the blessings of the monastery bishop he had been bathed and clad in the armor of the faith, given a fine horse and sent forth to purge the forest of this new evil. Jorgun was sure in his quest to dispose of this villain for he was no stranger to battles with evil things. He had fought the ogres and trolls of these woods with the fellows of the order who trained him, and had participated in the defense of Eastern Dro Mandras during Yorgach's invasion.

Now he would clean another bit of this unholy dankness from the Forbidden Wood. He would spread the light of the Fearless one once again!

Darkness spread and he thought to stop and make his camp for the night. Walking in his heavy chain was tedious, he was strong and young, but a rest was in order. Just then he heard a cry in the woods, and the sounds of a sharp voice. The charger's ears pricked up and Jorgen's eyes caught a glow of light amongst the trees ahead. "Just a bit further boy," he said to the mount as he pushed on a hundred yards until the horse and young knight found a clearing in the wood.

A campfire was lit in the center of the circle clearing, its light dancing wildly amongst the boughs of the tall oak and hickory trees which surrounded it. In the far corner of the clearing

stood a black pavilion set with a black pennant and hanging from a solitary oak tree was a shield emblazoned in jet. A pure white destrier was picketed amongst some tall grass along the edge of the clearing. Upon smelling this new mount the destrier reared and whinnied some challenge to his own courser in a tongue known only to horses, centaurs, and the pagan druids who followed the Green Man.

As Jorgun's eyes adjusted to the firelight he noted that there was a figure crouched before the tree with the black shield. The figure was slight and shivering. The firelight made the figure's hair gleam like burnished gold, as it writhed and strove against its iron manacles. Surely this was a maiden in distress! Vanium be praised, for Jorgun would find new ways to please the God of the Righteous this night!

But first, Jorgun cautioned himself. He must be brave but he must also be smart. He should not endanger this fair one's safety. He carefully tied his mount by its reins to a nearby branch and stored his lance. It would not be needed, he was sure. Instead he drew his trusty blade. Crafted from ancient Umesh-ti steel, the sword itself was engraved and inlaid with a silver sword of Vanium, just below the ferrule. Jorgun also slung his shield from the horse's flank and strapped it tightly to his left arm. It too was emblazoned with the holy sigil of the Lord of Chivalry.

Jorgun contemplated stealing upon the maiden from the dark edges of the encampment, slicing her bonds and sending her and his fine mount back to the monastery where she would be put in contact with her family. A fair rescue in the name of a fair god of a fair maiden! This seemed a deed that would please his lord, but Jorgun knew in his heart that he could do more. So he stepped forth into the glow of the encampment and pounded the steel of his kite with the bronze of his hilt.

"I come to free yon fair maiden!" Jorgun exclaimed.

"Yes, Yes!" beseeched the maiden chained to the tree. "Free me please.! The foul occupant of the black pavilion would destroy me in the name of some unholy rite! Please sir knight, for he is a dastardly fiend, the worst by far of any I have ever encountered."

Catching a better look at her, he could see that the maiden was indeed fair beyond measure, with hair of gold and flashing eyes of blue that glinted in the firelight. Her lips were full and her bosom, though gods forgive he should notice, with his vows of chastity and faith... were ample and heaving against the laces of her gown as she wrestled against the chains that held her fast to the trunk of the mighty oak.

“Fear not lady!” said Jorgun. “I shall see your chains removed by right of my steel and the will of my god this instant!”

Jorgun strode forward, sword brandished and made to dash the links of the black iron with his naked metal, which shown with a greenish white light against the warm orange of the campfire.

“I wouldn’t set that one free if I were you,” said a calm but rich voice which seemed to emanate from near the entrance of the black pavilion. “She is not who she seems, and I am afraid young knight, that you are simply not strong enough to contain her. At least not in the manner in which she is used to being shall we say... managed. If you can call her a she, and not an “it” that is.”

“Oh dear Gods it is him,” the girl hissed. Writhing further at her bonds, her bosoms heaving even more vigorously as she wrenched against the iron chains, drawing blood at her wrists as she kicked at the oak tree and stared at Jorgun with her flashing blue, ever imploring eyes.

“Please my lord, save me from this demon,” she exclaimed. Her words dripped acidly as she shivered in fear. The figure that emerged from the tent seemed larger than he truly was and Jorgun stepped towards the slight girl, placing himself between her and the keeper of the black pavilion.

The pavilion’s owner was well over six feet tall, but built to his frame. He appeared to be a man in his early thirties whose wide shoulders rippled with power beneath his gleaming silver armor. The man’s hair resembled a lion’s mane and was a perfect shade of honey blond. The mane seemed to catch the night breeze as he brushed it from his eyes. His jaw was square and clean shaven. His eyes were the effervescent blue that one sees in the surf of a tropical sea. The knight’s armor was polished to a mirror’s gleam, and bore a striking resemblance to the armor

worn by High Commanders in the Holy Orders of Vanium, save that the armor was free of any embellishment or badge of allegiance. A fine sword hilt stood out from a bejeweled scabbard at the knight's left hip.

“And you, Cathrisis, how dare you accuse me of being a fiend? You, of all creatures? I who have deigned to let you dwell so long in this realm? Shame on you harlot, speak no more lies or I will be forced to shorten your deceiver's tongue,” the knight said with a sardonic curl to his lips.

Jorgun flared with anger at the threat towards the helpless maiden.

“Sir, how dare you address a maiden in such an evil manner,” Jorgun exclaimed. “I had thought to offer you the chance of surrender so that you can face the judgment of Vanium for your depredations within this wood. Now I must insist you apologize at once or face the wrath of my steel!”

“Surrender to you?” The knight laughed with a wry grin. “Boy, I beg you not to free this callow wench, whom I will not apologize to, and instead insist that you flee this hellish forest at once. Go forth, marry a swineherd's daughter and have a dozen children. Anything but presume to know the truth about my prisoner. That wench of the underworld is comprised of such filth that her degradations are beyond forgiveness to even your sanctimonious deity. Her sins are legendary and she should, nay, must be punished accordingly.

Jorgun's Umeshti steel blade flickered towards the maiden Cathrisis and clashed upon the iron chain which held her by the tree to bits. “Run Milady, get ye to safety whilst I face this craven foe,” he exclaimed.

“You're really going to wish you hadn't done that,” the knight said as he drew his sword from its scabbard and flexed his wrist and hand. The sword gleamed with a high polish. It appeared to be very old, yet unblemished by combat.

“Vanium be praised. Through him may I find victory in dire battle against this dark knight of the wood,” Jorgun exclaimed as he pointed his sword to the constellation of Vanium, next pointing it at his foes.



“You really think so young man?” the knight asked. “You think the great god is going to come down from the skies and smite me? We shall see”, he said with a grin as he braced himself for Jorgun’s onslaught.

“I know it,” Jorgun exclaimed as his sword arced down toward the knight’s helmetless head.

The knight sidestepped and turned Jorgun’s blade with ease, turning the young paladin’s attack and nearly disarming him. Jorgun, surprised, flailed out with his shield, attempting to bash the knight to the ground, but again the knight avoided Jorgun’s blow.

The knight circled Jorgun, his unshielded arm held neatly behind his back as he examined the younger combatant’s stance. “I see you have trained in the fighting styles of Lady Jurion and you have served time under Captain Rohanse. It is a good technique. They are able swordsmen,” the knight observed.

Jorgun reset his footing and set to his training. He noted that his opponent standing without shield granted him an unfair advantage over the lion-maned knight so he took a few steps back and dropped his shield to the mossy turf.

“Why would you do that young paladin?” the knight asked. “You need every defense your God can grant you. You should start with the one between your ears and pick your shield back up.”

“Sir, I have an unfair advantage over you with my shield and you, unshielded. You may gather your shield from yonder tree, and then I may pick up mine own. Otherwise we shall duel as thus, steel upon steel, unshielded.” Jorgun replied. As Jorgun pointed to the tree with his sword he noticed that the now unchained maiden had not left her spot, but instead watched the duel between the warriors with great interest. Her piercing eyes seemed to cut through the fire’s glow and the gleam of their steel armaments as her eyes met Jorgun’s.

“My champion!” she exclaimed.

“Oh do shut up you vile tart,” the knight admonished with a laugh.

Jorgun was emboldened by the maidens encouragement and pointed his sword at the upstart knight.

“Time to be judged black knight,” he said.

“This is your last chance boy, to get on your horse and ride back to your monastery,” the knight replied.

“You claim to know my order, black knight, so if you know it, then you know that I cannot, nay, I will not turn away from evil when I face it.”

The swordsmen circled one another, their eyes fixed in a gaze of fire and ice as each tested the defense of the other. Swords clanged against one another, showing sparks into the firelight. Their blades were like the tails of scorpions locked in a game of death. Their eyes locked like pincers, holding one another within this tight dance of steel. The strange knight’s face was almost expressionless save the serious set to his jaw. Jorgun had the advantage of youth and in his breast he felt the swelling of his faith; faith that the Lord of Chivalry would guide his strong arm against this wicked opponent. Jorgun could see that his youth was winning out over the knight’s training and expertise. He sensed no fear, though he detected some desperation as the knight defended his every advance.

Jorgun saw his advantage at last, as the knight stepped from his stance and turned perpendicular to him, his heart exposed through a narrow pass between pauldron and breastplate.

Jorgun feinted a gauntleted punch with his free hand causing the black knight to lift his left arm, leaving himself unguarded. With a lunge Jorgun made to pierce the knight's ribcage when with quickness that astonished the young paladin, the man pivoted, grabbed the blade of his Umeshti sword with a steel gauntleted hand, and twisted it with a wrenching motion from Jorgun's grip. The older knight lashed out with his right leg and kicked Jorgun square in the chest sending him careening backwards towards the ancient oak. Stumbling, his brain filled with confusion and disbelief, Jorgun was caught in a pair of sinewy arms from behind. An unknown sensation of horror filled him as he looked down at the blue brocade of the maiden Cathrasis's sleeves, only to see that the supple milky arms and delicate hands had somehow grown hideous talons. A long wet tongue slithered across his throat, tasting his salty sweat. The black knight in the gleaming armor strode forward, sword in hand, with a sad look upon his face as Jorgun's world reeled around him.

"No Lord Rennert!" Cathrasis hissed. "This good soul is mine! I am free of your chain and demand his flesh as compensation!"

The knight shook his head sadly. "Not on my watch," he said and raised his sword high bringing it down upon the young man's pate as the Jorgun swooned into a fit of blackness.

Jorgun was awakened by a splash of icy water striking his face. His head screamed in agony and he could taste blood in the back of his throat. He gasped and spit as the stinging cold water flew up his nose. Sputtering, he found his hands bound, he was tied spread eagle to a wooden frame inside a dark, circular chamber. His eyes began to focus somewhat and he realized that the chamber was not indeed an actual chamber but the interior of a large tent, likely the black knights pavilion. The tent was lit only by a small lantern hanging from a hook attached to one of the lodge poles.

Cathrasis was crouched at his feet, though she had incurred some horrific transformation. She was again chained with a black iron collar and manacles, though a pair of sharp horns extended from her forehead and a pair of leathery bat wings

protruded from her shoulders. The chain was staked to the floor and a circle of salt appeared to be drawn around her at the foot of his rack. She appeared somewhat bruised and her gown was sundered and scorched. She stared at him hungrily as he suddenly felt the presence of his captor within the tent.

Cathrisis hissed and recoiled to the edge of her salt circle as Rennert strode next to the young man's cot and examined his bruised skull, insuring that he had not fractured the boy's head or unduly damaged his brain. He roughly held Jorgun's eyes open as he checked them for dilation. Satisfied with his examination he at last spoke.

"You were warned Sir Jorgen. My pavilion was drawn to this forest for a reason. Just as you were drawn to my campsite like a fly to a spider's web. Your pride and vanity brought you here, and like all good champions of Vanium, you thought to rid the world of its evils without really understanding the truth. Your own evils brought you here and through them you shall find your doom. Fear not young man for in death you will have a victory of sorts over the evils you swore to destroy."

Rennert drew the ornate hilted sword from its oiled scabbard. The gold and jeweled pommel took on a hideous aspect as he did and the wicked gleaming blade wavered like an image viewed through an open flame. Jorgun, still fearless, said a catechism to Vanium as Rennert approached.

Rennert paused, and lowered the blade.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked the young paladin.

"I have heard your name. You are Rennert the Cruel, fallen knight of the orders of Vanium. You are a slayer, murderer, and deceiver," Jorgun said through gritted teeth. "If you are going to kill me, then be quick about it. I am ready to be judged by the true god of justice."

Cathrisis trilled and giggled, her wicked forked tongue now flicking from between her lips as she spoke sibilantly. "It's not too late to give him to me Lord Rennert. You would be rid of me and the sweet boy both."

“Silence whore of darkness,” Rennert spat at her, avoiding the circle of salt within which the demoness was trapped. He turned to Jorgun and said in a calm voice, “It is true, I am all of those things. I oversaw the sack of Khanopolis and the rape of its purity. Not once did the King of Chivalry appear upon the field to stop the slaughter. Not once did he intercede in the destruction or move the heavens and earth to stop me. Why?”

He let the question hang there for a few moments.

“It is because you lack faith and principle, you have forgotten that Lord Vanium seldom enters our world physically, instead granting his valor and glory to the faithful. You lost faith, and because of that, your powers were stripped from you,” Jorgun said confidently. “Now you cavort with demons, and are indebted to the fiend Yorgovea!”

“Yes him, among others over the years,” Rennert admitted. “Yet, your god has failed because he is weak. He failed because his justice is a lie, because the strong survive and cowards always win. The blood of the valorous waters the gardens of despots and his hope is naught but a hollow speck of light amongst the yawning darkness of chaos. So great and omnipotent that he does not understand that sometimes you have to fight evil with evil to truly destroy it. Indeed he is correct on one thing...” His voice trailed off for a moment as he contemplated the fair face of the young paladin.

“Now however, I am master of the Black Pavilion,” he said, his voice growing more somber, and in many ways, more ominous. “When I took the oaths to your pauper god, I was shriven of fear. This is a foolish and terrible gift that he grants. One should know fear, young Jorgun. One should be prepared for the horrors that the realms of existence have to offer. It was not until I learned true fear that I came to respect the wretched cycle of life and death that we mortals are forced to face at the hands of capricious gods and malevolent fiends.”

As he spoke a dramatic change flashed over Rennert’s courtly frame and Jorgun caught a flicker of an emaciated creature, sunken eyes, a thinning head of wispy hair. The wretch’s loose fitting armor was not glinting of mirror polish but instead scrawled in unholy oaths and burnt black; stained head to toe in

crusted blood. This vision caused a previously unknown shiver to prick down Jorgun's spine.

"Your god is right about one thing," Rennert continued sadly. "The blood of the righteous is a useful tool against the fiends of hell. Just not in the way you were led to believe. Your sweet lifeblood is going to destroy this hell born slut for me once and for all."

He lifted his sword as Jorgun caught his breath. The blade fell with a sickening, meaty chop. To his credit, Rennert thought, the boy had died with his eyes open. The young man's blood slathered upon his blade, Rennert turned to Cathrisis and said as he stepped across the circle of salt, "Well my darling. It seems our time together is finally at an end."

Outside the coursers bowed their ears and snorted in terror as Cathrisis's unholy screams soon filled the night. The next morning, the Black Pavilion and its thrice damned occupants were nowhere to be found.



A CUP OF OL' GROGNARD

By Casey W. Christofferson

Three boars roasted on the spit in the common room. Bull sniffed deeply of the slow roasting meat as he leaned contemplatively against the bar and surveyed the customers. It was the typical motley assortment of fringe folk, common this time of year. The evening brought in the big game hunters looking for exotic furs, meat, and the odd bits commonly sought by the wizards of the cities. A group of tables sat a clan of Ugashtan the hill men who were headed south to trade wool, cheese, and furs. Sprinkled in the crowd were solitary

rangers and treasure seekers low in their cups but deep in their thoughts. He had long since sent all the girls save Holly to bed.

Holly busied herself taking the orders of a band of treasure seekers that was engaged in the study of a map of the Crater of Umeshti. They were certain that their expedition would lead them to great riches and fame. Having caught his own glimpse of their map, Bull was certain he would never see them again.

Near the door Foog the hafrhuk sat with his broad chin bowed to his chest, half asleep. Bul grinned under his bristles and took a long pull of the Swordsinger's Stout. Bul contemplated throwing a mug at the hafrhuk's head, but thought instead of his drowsy patrons and decided better of it. It was near time for him to make the rounds of the palisade and the inner grounds as it was and he hoped his kinsmen on the wall were doing a better job of staying awake than old Foog was.

Just then a swarthy duo walked into the common chamber from the yard. They were dressed in finely made traveling gear. The clink of mail was evident beneath their cloaks of wool and harness of leather. Their swords were southern made, and battle ready. With their swarthy complexions, pointed goatees, and oiled moustaches he made them immediately for Rhodensians.

The duo made way to the bar as Bull nodded his acknowledgement while Foog sputtered himself awake and spilled his half mug of ale upon his lap. Bull let out a low chuckle and turned his attention fully to the guests who approached his bar.

"You there, innkeeper, we would like lodging, board, and ale to slake our thirst," said one of the men, a gold tooth flashed in his mouth and Bul noted a tattoo upon the man's forearm that he had seen within the previous year upon the arm of another, but kept the matter to himself.

Bul hooked a thumb at the signboard behind the bar which detailed the Roadhouse's bill of fare.

"Pick what you want, as long as your coin is good and you don't start any trouble, you'll be well served," he said.

The second southerner's brows furrowed a bit, and he scratched at his manicured beard. "Northman?" he asked.

Bull nodded his acknowledgement. “Aye, I hail from the Icy Wastes near the Crown of the World and what of it?”

The taller man shrugged. “Nothing, strange I guess. It is rare to see one of your kind so landlocked...” he stopped short on further comment as his companion shot him a sharp glance.

Bul shrugged and began filling a pair of tall mugs with a frothy amber ale from one of the several tapped ale barrels behind the bar. “Maybe so. Our folk are travelers. I suppose it is natural that wanderlust goes hand in hand with harrowing cold, and sunless nights, Bowbe.”

The men scowled a bit but their faces relaxed instantly as he set the mugs before them. They drank deeply as they looked over the board’s menu of foodstuffs.

“The boar is roasting on the low coals. Gather a plate if you like and I will set out apples and bread for you Bowbes if you like,” Bull offered.

“Perhaps in a while,” the shorter of the pair offered as he and his traveling partner drank deeply of their ale. “I am Veriazio, and this is my associate Marro.”

Marro inclined his head slightly, still too arrogant to show respect to any save a pure blooded Rhodensian. He too drank deeply of his mug of amber ale and had half of it finished within a few breaths.

“Say there landlord,” Veriazio asked, “we are looking for an old associate of ours who was working the frontier on an Imperial Bounty...”

Bull slid a mug to Veriazio, and another to his partner Marro before they could continue their line of inquiry.

“The Rhodensian Empire has no sway here, nor from what I hear in its own imperial strongholds, Bowbe,” Bull said. “In fact, the last I knew there were none among the princes who could rightly make the claim to the Imperial throne.”

He paused as Veriazio’s face flushed angrily and Marro’s jaw clenched noticeably. “Not to worry Bowbes, for the Duke of Kar-

bosk holds little sway in the Highlands, save what he contracts with me and my associates for bounties taken in the frontier,” Bull added with a grin.

The pair, though still tense, greedily grabbed for their mugs and drank them down.

Bull readily slid them another. “Tell me Bowbes,” he asked. “Of this missing friend of yours.”

This time it was Marro os spoke. “Ulrouth was his name. He had come north in search of a very lucrative bounty, but never returned. We thought perhaps he had been detained. You would surely have recognized him, as he was a northman like yourself.”

“Half northman,” Veriazio interrupted. “Before setting out we hired an augurer. She told us that he had disappeared somewhere in these Haunted Highlands. Ulroth was long of limb and light of hair, his father was a northerner, though his mother hailed from the Empire.”

“Ahh,” Bull said sagely, “tall Bowbe, light brown hair, got it. So he looks like every other Karboskian? Anything else?” He noticed as he asked that the hearty ale was starting to have its effect.

Variazio pulled up his sleeve to show his tattoo and Marro pointed to his as well. Each bore the mark of a sword bound in a chain and shackles, though each of the men had a different number of links to his chain. Bull tilted his head and grinned slightly in apparent appreciation. “Nice ink Bowbes,” he said. His thoughts raced. The shackles were the mark of Kharzarn the God of slavers, and the sword was likely the emblem of some southern mercenary guild. Bull had heard of men such as these who often hunted for those who had escaped the Rhodensian slave colonies upon the southern continent. The tattoo, on the other hand, he knew quite well indeed.

“I see,” Bull said with mock awe. “You are important hunters indeed to have come so far on your quest. Important men such as yourselves deserve a cup of our private stock, and with it, I shall tell you where to seek for your missing friend. “

The duo looked at each other and drained their mugs as Bull went into the back room. They loosed their blades ever so subtly in their sheaths and smiled at one another slyly. The ale filled them with its bravery and they felt for certain that the mystery of Ulrouth's disappearance was soon at an end.

The broad shouldered Northman returned from the back with two small cups filled near to the rim with a thick almost purplish colored liquid.

“It is a special blend Bowbe, for tis a mixture of the famous Dwarven Blue lightning and some of my own mellowed stock.” Bull said. “As you may know the crafters of Blue Lightning are secretive in the methods and manufacture of their whisky, and the dwarves of the Fander Mountains rarely trade with the other folk of the lands anymore.”

The two men nodded as they took their cups, and sniffed the liquor. It had a rich and earthy scent, with a hint of metal and rich wood, not uncommon to dwarven distillers. As Marro and Variazo lifted the mugs to their lips Bull raised a thick hand to caution them.

“Careful Bowbe's for the Ol Grogard is a strong brew,” he said. The men paused and gingerly sipped at the cups, feeling the burn on their lips, and the smooth notes of honey, cinnamon, rich oak, peat, and something else that they couldn't quite make even with their sophisticated southern palates. It was something earthy and strong and familiar but unknown to them.

“This is a fine treat landlord,” said Marro, his voice thicker now as he sipped a dram from the cup.

“Indeed,” added Variazo. “Tis some of the finest spirit my tongue has ever tasted. Tell us now ...Bowbe is it? Tell us of our missing friend and we may reward you in kind for the hospitality you have shown us this night.

Bull pushed back his blond locks from his eyes and fixed them both with his piercing blue-grey stare as he took a sip from his own horn.

“Well my Bowbes, it was about a year ago and I was on my way back to the roadhouse.” Bull said.

Bull pulled the Wagon short and sniffed at the air. It stank of blood and shit and death.

The cart trail he rode along was practically non-existent, but a map given him by the old Dwarf Forgutt had got him along the little used path that Dwarven traders once used to skirt the Crater and bring their goods to the Duchy. Forgutt had warned him that the trail was now used mostly by bandits hiding from the Duke’s law, or treasure seekers hoping to plunder a long forgotten ruin of the Umeshti civilization.

The horses were skittish, and he spoke softly to them “Gently Bowbe’s nothing to harm your hides here” he said. Loosening the sword in the scabbard across his back he hopped down from the wagon and stepped into the thick brush along the side of the path where a cloud of flies buzzed with the voice of cursed Navolka, called Balzebal in other lands.

A nearly fresh corpse lay on its face covered in maggots. Deep rents tore the brown, blood stained mail upon the corpses back and the blade of a sword was broken off at the victim’s ribcage. Through the crawling mass of flies and worms Bull could make out a single red and grey braid growing from the back of what was once a bald head. The victim’s left arm was outstretched and ended in three two fingers and a thumb. Not a new wound that one, as Bull frowned and sighed slightly. Sadness and anger filled the pit of his gut as he rolled the corpse over. Not a single wound pierced the bodies front.

“Oldan Half-Hand,” Bull breathed beneath is breath. “What happened to you old friend?”

Bull thought for a moment as he said a prayer to Bowbe angrily and punched the earth. Olhan had hired himself out as a guide to a fellow with a northman’s name, but southern gear about a week ago. The man had commissioned some other local sell-swords of low repute to form a sort of posse as the man felt his



quarry was somewhere in the highlands, perhaps in the vicinity of the Grove of the Green man, or north of Long Loc. Before he had left with the fellow Oldan had told Bull that he was certain the man was a bounty hunter searching for the Swordsinger. Bull had paid Oldan some extra coin to make sure that he wouldn't find the half-elf's whereabouts anytime soon. How this had translated into Oldan being stabbed in the back made no sense. Bull searched the corpse and found Oldan's sword, knife, and coin-purse missing as well.

Searching further he found the hilt of the sword broken off in his back among the roots of a nearby gum tree. Bull picked up the hilt and recognized it as southern steel. Far inferior to the metal of the Ugashtan guide who lay at Bull's feet.

Another twenty steps into the woods Bull found another pair of corpses. These were slain with hack marks to the front. He recognized one as a known bandit, with a bounty of twenty gold offered by the Sherriff of Karbosk. His weapons lay about him and his eyes were eaten away by maggots but he was otherwise recognizeable. Bull cut his head off and took it with him. The other was obviously one of his associates, though coyotes and vultures had left his corpse unrecognizeable.

Bull busied himself that morning burying his friend beneath the gum tree and continued his journey to the Dwarven tradesmen on the lower spur of the Fander range. The journey northwest took him four more days and after conducting his business it was another week on the road before his tired horses and heavily laden wagon had made it within spitting distance of the Roadhouse again. Night was falling and he caught sight of a single campfire lit within the woods ahead. Possibly Ugashtan tribesmen out hunting beyond the Roadhouse, but it was always wise to be careful. The Ruhks from the East had been known to raid even this far west, and horrors from the Crater were a constant concern. Out of caution he stopped his wagon and crept upon the campsite with practiced grace. A canvas monopole lean-to was set in a small clearing among the trees and a horse and mule staked just at the edge of the circle of light cast by the fire. A solitary man sat roasting rabbits along the edge of the flame. Bull stepped into the ring of light and made his presence known. "Hail traveler, I saw you fire from the path," he said. "Too large a fire for one man. It casts too much light Bowbe, and may attract the attention of bandits, trolls, or much worse."

The man at the fire stood quickly, his hand dropping to the hilt of a sword at his belt. "Are you suggesting you are worse, stranger?" the man asked.

"Not at all Bowbe," Bull said calmly. "Dirty Bowbe's Roadhouse is about a half day south of here, maybe less. I know the area well. There are bad folk who would take advantage of a solitary traveler who doesn't know the paths, or enough to heat some stones before nightfall and use them for warmth through the night. Some creatures in these lands see campfires as a signal for an easy meal."

Bull stood well enough from the fire and fixed his eyes on the fringes, allowing himself a close look at the stranger while remaining hidden mostly in shadow himself. He noted a familiar pommel protruding from the stranger's fist. "My wagon is near, and it is stocked with fine whisky for yonder Roadhouse. Shall we sample some on this cool evening?" he asked.

The stranger smiled a bit. "I would have some whisky stranger," the man said relaxing slightly.

"I have a flask here," Bull offered as he stepped into the light. He tossed the flask to the man who caught it and unscrewed the cap, taking a deep draft.

"That sword you bear. I've seen it before have I not?" asked as he let his cloak slide to the ground at his feet.

"I don't think so," the stranger said, as he stopped his draught suddenly and closed the flask.

"No, I am sure of it," Bull said. "That is Oldan Half-hand's blade. You left yours in his back about 40 miles north of here. Tell me, what did he do to deserve being stabbed in the back?"

The stranger swore and drew the Umeshti blade from its scabbard as Bull stood resolute and unarmed in the glow of the fire. "He lied to me." The man said. "He was supposed to help me track the Swordsinger to Aymon Jymoon. Unfortunately for him the sells-words I hired came to me privately and informed me that my "guide" was leading us on a wild goose chase and wasting my time and money. I ordered them to kill him on the trail so that we could make our way back to civilization and find a new, honest guide. Things went wrong and he suspected the trap. I have top hand it to Oldan. For a wild man missing half his fingers, he was a formidable warrior and slew my sell-swords with ease. While he cleaned his blade upon their cloaks I crept upon him and ended him before he had a chance to do the same to me. I know you stranger. You are the one who owns the Roadhouse called Dirty Bowbe's. I too am of the northern blood and I know your game. I will not let you take me."

"I am he who is known as the Bull, son of Wroth, Son of Skel, son of the Bulviegh, son of Hyjelar who bore the sacred horn," said Bull through his beard. He flexed his hands and shoulders though his sword remained sheathed across his back. "Oldan was a good man, and a brave warrior. You will not put his blade in my back as you put your weak southern sword in his. I will have his sword however and his steel will be returned to his sons. Have at me Bowbe, if you have the stone."



The stranger quavered a moment upon hearing the lineage of Hyjelar but set his jaw and waived the Umeshti blade before him. The sword glowed a strange green shot with orange in the firelight. “I am Ulrouth, son of Jagen Ice Tongue. Your friend should not have betrayed me. You can tell him that when you see him in Hell.”

With that Ulrouth charged forward swinging the light weight Umeshti steel blade as he came. Bull sidestepped the attack and turned drawing his own blade in one smooth motion. He flicked the long, heavy blade outward nicking Ulrouth's ear as the bounty hunter strove past. The combatants turned facing one another at ten paces. Bull held his blade in both hands, and flexed his arms as he held the blade forward pointing it at his foe. Ulrouth put a hand to his ear and pulled it back, seeing the crimson of his blood growled in rage and lifted his stolen blade.

I'll have your head bartender! He howled and rushed forward again. Bull snarled and rushed forward too, their blades clanged in the darkness casting a shower of sparks. Bull initially parried Ulrouth's first swing, then ducked under the bounty hunter's blade. Crouching low he came upwards and forwards with the might of his sword, catching Ulrouth beneath the ribs and through the lungs with the tip of his blade as he stood, lifting Ulrouth off the ground. Muscles in his thighs knotted as Ulrouth gasped and blood bubbled from his lips. Ulrouth's weight slid down the blade as he stared into Bull's cold blue grey eyes while the light escaped his own. Bull grunted and turned, dumping Ulrouth's weight to the ground. Breathing heavily he wrenched his blade from his opponents carcass and wiped it on his opponents clothes before gathering his flask.

He made his way back to the wagon. From the road he could see torches moving along the road, maybe four miles away. He had less than an hour before riders would arrive. As he figured, Ulrouth's fire had brought unwanted attention. He drove the wagon to Ulrouth's camp and thought what to do. Place Ulrouth in the tent? There would be a smell of blood in the air, and worse. Then he came on a plan. He quickly stripped Ulrouth of his clothes and doused them with whiskey from one of the large dwarven kegs. He took the Ulrouth's clothes and dumped them on the fire, the flammable liquor instantly igniting the Bounty Hunter's belongings. He stashed Oldan Half Hand's blade on his wagon and unhitched his horses to mix with Ulrouth's own animals.

When the sheriffs' patrol arrived to investigate the fire there was no sign of Ulrouth anywhere. Just Bull the Northman from the Roadhouse returning from a trip to collect some Blue Lightning.

“So Bowbes,” Bull asked with a grin as he finished his tale. “How’s your cup of Ol’ Grogard?”

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VOLUME 3

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DIRTY BOWBE'S ROADHOUSE