

UMBROUS UNPLEASANTNESS AT UNDRETH'S UNICORN



Explore the Border Kingdoms in this exciting short story by Forgotten Realms creator Ed Greenwood



Presents

UMBROUS UNPLEASANTNESS AT UNDRETH'S UNICORN

A Border Kingdoms Tale / May 2018

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Layout and design by Dave Zajac
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A BORDER KINGDOMS TALE

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Border Kingdoms. A region that's just "The Borders" to most in Faerûn, who know of the Border Kingdoms as a madcap backwater where all manner of brigands, fugitives, misfits, and madwits fetch up—or more often, "run to hide." Verdant lands where a few pastures and a woodlot can be a Grand Duchy, albeit a vestpocket realm a good archer can readily send a war-shaft from one end of to the other.

There have been times, especially in the 1200s DR, when outlaws, pirates, adventurers, cultists, and renegade hedge-wizards sought the Borders so often and with such vigor that the map of its kingdoms, duchies grand and otherwise, independent cities, and baronies changed often and with bewildering rapidity (or as Elminster once put it, "Overnight—darned nigh every overnight"). In recent decades, Border settlements usually retain their names, but land borders shift with each clash of blades, and who sits as the lord or ruling lady of this or that place changes seemingly with every season, or even month.

Yet for the last five centuries, the Borders have always been a place of many small realms, of petty rulers and of defiant eccentrics who bow before no throne, a region many run to.

East of Calimshan, a narrow wedge of lush river valleys, farms, and wooded heights trapped between the Lake of Steam and the rising northwesternmost edge of the Shaar, the Border Kingdoms are where adventurers retire to become kings, emperors (over a few fields), high lords and exalted ladies . . . and where rebels who thirst to topple the thrones of scores of places elsewhere in Faerûn go to hide and scheme and build their strength for rebellions to come. Every corner of Toril has its tales of buried treasure, but the Borders bristles

with them, almost as many legends of hidden loot as pirate isles anywhere can boast—and the Borders are also known as a haven for shapeshifters cloaking themselves in human form so as to hide among the unwitting.

Things are always brewing in the Borders, and adventurers—and those seeking to hire them—are always coming to the Borders. Readily conquerable yet always untamed, too remote and too much trouble for any large land to scour out, the Border Kingdoms are always with us. So many risings and fallings of realms leave traces behind; overgrown ruins galore are scattered across the bucolic landscape, as are abandoned wizards' towers, and more than a few mines and hidden "dungeons" beneath the hills and forests.

In short, the Border Kingdoms are lands of endless adventure.

Make yourself at home!

Ed Greenwood, Creator of The Forgotten Realms

One vagabond and sometime adventurer who came to the Borders recently was the Old Wolf of Waterdeep, Mirt the Moneylender, now acting as a shadowy hand (secret agent) of Laeral Silverhand, the Open Lord of the Deep. Witness now his reception at a wayside inn in Bucklegrim (in the fallen realm still known as the Land of Two Princes) one cool day, in a little tale I call:

UMBROUS UNPLEASANTNESS AT UNDRETH'S UNICORN

“WELL, WE HAVE A CASTLE,” THE ONE-EYED COOPER MUTTERED.
“He collects castles, I’ve heard.”

His friend the thatcher eyed the silver coins—good trusted minting, of Ormpur and Tethyr—that the fat, wheezing outlander was sliding casually across the table to add to the growing pile in front of the cooper, and hastened to add, in an even lower murmur, “So beware whenever you see a wyvern mark. The Black Wyvern’s spying out Bucklegrim before he sends his army in to add us to his collection. Won’t be long now, I’m thinking.”

“We’re *all* thinking,” Vordren the cooper agreed, watching Mirt’s fat fingers pin another silver shard to the smooth-worn boards of the tabletop and begin to slide them through the array of quist cards, though neither he nor Eldaero of Eldaero’s Fine Thatching had in truth yet won a hand against the wise-eyed old outlander. The friendly game was mere cover for the fat man’s passing them coins for what they’d tell. Time to earn a little more. “Though truth to tell, the dukeling-in-waiting needn’t conquer us to take hold of Revelrar.”

“Needn’t,” Eldaero agreed, “but probably will. Here in Bucklegrim we’ve barrels of ale, an’ food for your table, an’ beds an’ all. All the ruins of Revelrar has is ghosts an’ lurking monsters. *Hungry* monsters.”

“An’ bats,” Vordren added. “*Hundreds* of bats. There’s a lass in this town who sews them into gowns to sell to peddlers.”

“And just *who*,” the thatcher said in disgust, as he nodded, “would wear a dress made of *dead bats*?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Mirt grunted, shifting his substantial bulk in the seat. “I know noble ladies of taste and discernment who’d insist on *live* ones.”

The cooper and the thatcher exchanged pleasantly surprised looks, then said in unison, “*That’s* just what the peddler said!”

A silver shard duly arrived in front of each of them. Mirt added a chuckle to it, for free, and laid down a card.

Vordren peered at it, then laid down one of his own. The wrong way up, but no one made comment on that.

“So why does the son and heir of the proudest Grand Merchant Duke of Emrys muster armies and collect castles?” the stout outlander grunted, a trifle too casually. “Is he just bored and restless, and fancies himself an adventurer? Or is he dreaming dreams of empire?”

Eldaero smirked. “Well, I knew a girl that Duke hired a time or two to see him through cold an’ lonely nights, if you get my drift, an’ she said *he* saw himself as king of Taldathia!”

Another coin began its journey, about the same time as Mirt remembered to frown at his cards as if considering which one to play next. Defending one’s fortress in quist isn’t easy at the best of times, and paying no attention in a game one is purportedly losing is far from the best of times. “Taldathia?”

“So if Talduth Vale swallowed a realm here an’ a realm there, becoming a big kingdom with a king, an’ that king was Grand Merchant Duke Pryarr Orglast,” Vordren the cooper explained, “he’d call his kingdom Taldathia.”

A head turned at another table across the common room of the Unicorn, just for a moment—not far, and its owner quickly quelled the movement, but not for the first time.

Mirt pretended not to notice, but one of his hands—the one not sliding coins—set down his hand of cards to scratch his nose, then just happened to drop down below the table, into his lap.

“Isn’t he already the Imperial Overduke?” he asked. “Isn’t that high and mighty enough for him?”

“Nay, nay, this one’s not the Overduke; he’s one of the six Grand Merchant Dukes under the Overduke!”

Mirt rolled his eyes, and the cooper and the thatcher chuckled.

“Border Kingdoms, remember?” said Vordren. “This one’s Pryarr Orglast, an’ he’s busy becoming a mighty wizard!”

“So, no,” Eldaero put in, “rich an’ powerful as he is right now *isn’t* high an’ mighty enough for him. Still less his son.” He lowered his voice to barely above a whisper, and added, “Daerdrard Orglast, the Black Wyvern.”

“Hunh,” Mirt rumbled loudly, almost drowning out the thatcher’s words. “So is this son of his playing warmaster for him?”

As he asked, the old moneylender kept his eyes on the two men playing quist with him, not on yonder table of the head-turners. It was one of only two tables in the common room aside from his occupied right now, the other seating a family too busy arguing over where in the Borders they’d been served the worst cheese to notice anything else going on until it landed in said cheese. Or their laps. Literally.

“Or just getting impatient,” he added, “because daddy is getting old and his dreams are seeming more and more like they’re going to stay grumble-talk and fancy, and never get any farther?”

“Uhhhh...”

Eldaero the thatcher was sitting facing in the right direction to fully and readily see what was going on at the table of the head-turners, and whatever he was seeing right now was making his words trail away into apprehensive, I'm-well-along-the-road-to-be-sick silence.

Trouble.

Mirt finished sliding coins to needy informants for the moment, and promptly used the hand freed from this duty for doing something suddenly and pressingly needful, down in his lap.

Vordren noticed but was too busy tensing to fling himself headlong out of his chair sometime in the next few moments to come to the usual conclusion about hands going under the table during a card game in the Unicorn: someone was slipping duplicate cards out of a pouch or codpiece to alter their chances of winning.

Mirt didn't bother tensing. He lumbered to his feet, to lurch around the table and crash down heavily into the fourth and vacant chair beside Eldaero. Leaving himself now facing Vordren the cooper. And the table of the head-turners.

A table he again failed to notice, perhaps because he was busy groaning as he propped one floppy-booted foot up on a handy stool, followed by grunting to the two Bucklegrimmers, "Sorry, lads. I know 'tis hardly the done thing to shift seats in mid-game, but I'm old and the road here was long and I have this leg, see . . ."

Men were rising with slow, deliberate "we're coming for you" menace from that table now. One was idly juggling a wicked-looking dagger, and another, who wore leather ropehandler's gloves, was shaking straight what looked suspiciously like a garotte as he came. And their glares were for him.

Vordren was going pale. And obviously thinking the fat outlander *must* be old. And was about to die. Messily.

Mirt yawned and shifted his leg to a more comfortable perch atop the stool, whilst parking his other battered old sea-boot beneath it. Then he applied himself to rubbing the food-stained but once-fine fabric stretched taut over his belly, managing to *still* not notice the men now stalking nearer, though even the cheese-obsessed family had.

And accordingly, had abruptly broken off their arguing to fall silent and stare, wide-eyed, at the entertainment soon to come.

“Aye,” Mirt added affably, reaching out a hand to rake his coins and cards back within easy reach in front of him, “old am I, and all too apt to ache these days, where once I bounded about happily playing the young lion . . . these days, I’m more the Old Wolf...”

“Uh, outland saer . . .” Eldaero interrupted uncertainly, as the men of the Black Wyvern—for as they advanced, even Mirt’s eye had fallen on the little black wyverns on their matching belt buckles—loomed up, “I, uh, believe we’d better continue our game at another time . . .”

“Oh? How so?”

“He *means*,” the foremost of the Black Wyvern’s men snarled, leaning forward over the broad old table between them with long and dirty-looking dagger in hand, “that dead men play quist poorly.”

Mirt blinked up at him. “I—I don’t understand,” he grunted, the quaver of old age rising in his voice for the first time. “What d’you mean? What is this talk of dead men?”

The dagger slid to the fore, point first.

“We don’t like strangers in Bucklegrim. Particularly outlanders who ask too many questions.”

“Nay, nay, Oruth,” said the man with the garotte, who was headed around the far end of the table now, with the third and fourth men of the Black Wyvern right behind him, all of them wearing unpleasant smiles. “You’ve got it wrong. *We likes* them. *We likes* them with their tongues cut out, and their

ears cut off, left to beg somewhere far from here. Clear out of the Borders, in fact.”

“Ah, well said, Arund. I stand corrected,” Oruth of the drawn dagger chuckled. “You go first.”

Mirt produced a sudden grin. “Ah, well, if yer *offering*, now...”

And his hand came up out of his lap and dashed two walnuts into Arund’s face. An instant before his other hand gave Oruth’s face the gift of a generous fistful of silver coins.

Oruth roared and slashed out blindly with his dagger, but sliced only empty air, hampered as he was by the width of the table and Vordren’s abrupt departure—caroming off him and away across the room, amid shrieks of delighted fear from the cheese-fanciers. The children among whom were suddenly shouting out wagers and enthusiastic suggestions for acts of violence.

Arund, however, mounted no attack at all. He was too busy staggering back, sneezing and weeping and whooping for breath uncontrollably, all at once. Activities he was evidently out of practise at, judging by his poor performance at all three of them.

The cause of his nigh-collapse was what had been inside Mirt’s walnuts, which the outlander had evidently eaten some time ago, and then used lahl-bush sap to glue the empty shell back together again. After thoughtfully filling the cavity between the shell halves with ground pepper. Lahl sap stayed sticky and slidy forever, it seemed, and a nose and mouth full of pepper does harm to a man.

Even, it seemed, to hardened bullyblades of the sort who wore the black wyvern badge.

Impressive, to be sure. Which was probably why the wheezing old outlander had amassed a collection of walnuts large enough to toss two more of them into the faces of the men behind Arund. Who were busily trying to

draw nasty little belt-maces and get around their stricken comrade's wildly staggering, flailing-armed body.

They wept and sneezed and sobbed for breath with a volume and vigor that far outstripped Arund's, who was headed for the floor.

Which was a good thing for Mirt, because Oruth, bellowing with rage, had clambered up onto the table on his knees, and was advancing across it hacking at the air as he came, back and forth like a man in a hurry to clear clinging vines from a path.

It was at this moment that Eldaero recalled a pressing emergency at Eldaero's Fine Thatching that required his immediate attendance. He rose from the table in such haste that he sent his chair flying—but almost caught up to its loudly clattering bouncing, rolling progress in his own rush for the inn's front door.

Which he might have broken his nose on if Mirt hadn't helpfully caught hold of Oruth by his dagger-arm elbow and plunged to the floor himself, plucking the Black Wyvern's man down off the table in a wild and shouting somersault that sent Oruth helplessly rolling, to slide on the worn, stained, but once-splendid Tashalan rug and crash boots-first into the door, driving it open.

Eldaero tripped on the bullyblade and the rucked-up rug, and crashed down atop Oruth in a meaty, bouncing thudding that made the mother among the cheese-fanciers wince—as the combined momentum of the two men carried them both out of Undreth's Unicorn into the bright sun of the nice day outside.

Mirt rose, dusted himself off, and almost as an afterthought selected a particular long needle from the collection sheathed in his thick leather wrist-bracer and stuck it into Arund and the other two Black Wyvern helpless sneezers. They all fell slack and silent, collapsing in short order.

Then the fat outlander lurched and wheezed his way to the door and treated Oruth the same way. The poison on the needle probably wasn't strong enough to slay, but it would addle their wits for months, and their memories of what had befallen for most of this day would certainly be gone. Addersleep was good for that.

Eldaero and Vordren were both long gone. Prudent of them, even if they had neglected to take up the coins Mirt had slid their way.

Mirt shrugged. Ah, well. Payment refused was coin he could use elsewhere and elsewhen, and we all have need for ever more coin, these days . . .

Not to mention ale and something in the way of hot sausages, or stew. Brawling was thirsty work, to be sure.

He'd scarce collected the widely-strewn coins and cards—the cheese-loving children were eyeing his scattered silver, but one look at his widely smile and the needle still gleaming in his hand and they retreated as far as the common room's walls would let them—then rung the service-gong and reseated himself at the table, stool under his aching leg, when the front door of the Unicorn banged open again.

Mirt had chosen a seat facing it this time, so he readily caught sight of all the black wyvern belt buckles on the large, burly, battered, and unfriendly-looking men who now crowded into the room, hands on hilts.

Nine of them, and all openly armed; Mirt beheld a small collective arsenal of well-used swords riding dirty scabbards, belts fairly bristling with dagger-sheaths and cudgels rising thong-loops, as they glared around the room, causing the cheese-loving family to depart up the back stairs out of the common room with shrieks of despairing fear.

Leaving Mirt—being as the staff of the Unicorn had either all fallen suddenly deaf or more likely had decided to run and hide too, rather than answer the gong—sitting alone with three sprawled bodies around him.

"*What* by all the Watching Gods befell *here*?" the foremost of these new arrivals demanded to know, in what was almost a roar.

Mirt gave him an old man's vague peer and quavered, "I-I know not, saer! They all got up and started shouting at each other and suddenly collapsed. Mayhap it was the eels they were eating; I know not, I can't abide eels, myself."

"What?" The Black Wyvern's men were glaring around as if any eel they found they'd dice on the spot.

"No bowls," one of them growled, noticing the utter lack of anything eels could have been eaten out of except at the table the cheese-fanciers had been clustered at.

"Oh?" Mirt asked, peering across the room. "Did they eat the bowls, too? That might have done them harm, to be sure . . ."

"Old man," the foremost of the Black Wyvern's enforcers growled threateningly, advancing on the table, "I think you're lying to me."

Mirt reached for his nigh-empty tankard, drawing together bushy brows in a frown. "In my day," he grunted, "such words were a battle-trumpet indeed."

"Oh? And just how long ago was your day?" the bullyblade sneered, looming up on the far side of the table. "And who are you, anyroad?"

"I," Mirt told him happily, "am the King of Taldathia. You may bow down."

Nine men stared at him in slack-jawed surprise. Giving Mirt plenty of time to pluck up hand-wipe linens from the table, wrap a silver shard for weight and a walnut from his pouch for dooming in each, and toss them at the faces of the massed Black Wyverns.

Who all struck them aside with ready hands and even swift-drawn daggers. Filling the air with pepper and themselves with sneezing helplessness.

"Why, you—"

Whatever curse the bullyblade was going to favor Mirt with was lost in his sudden snarl of effort as he plucked the table up, in a surge of powerful

shoulders, and flung it aside, removing the barrier between them. “Now, you *die!*”

“W-w-w-why, saer?”

“You harmed my men, and that means death! You’re in the Border Kingdoms now, old-lard!”

Mirt gave the furious man reaching for him a bland, bleary-eyed old smile, dashed the dregs in his tankard into the bullyblade’s face and smashed the man’s fingers aside with the tankard itself—and with that vacant smile still wide across his face, kicked up, sudden and hard—lofting the stool his boot was under full into the lout’s face.

The man’s jaw broke with an audible crack as his head whipsawed back, teeth flew, the stool tumbled on and up towards the rafters . . . and the man went over backwards, out cold and limp, spilling onto the floor in a confusion of loosely-splaying limbs even before the stool struck a beam and glanced back down again, heading for a second collision for the same unfortunate lout.

“Really?” Mirt asked the senseless, lolling head mildly. “Well, that’s good, because that *was* where I was headed for. Nice to know I’m still young enough not to get lost on a clearly-marked wagon road.”

He selected two needles from his bracer this time. Just one might not suffice for nine men.

It was best to take care.

After all, he was in the Border Kingdoms now.

The End

LORE NOTE: THE EFFECTS OF ADDERSLEEP

Addersleep (Injury). This translucent, viscous light brown liquid is a blend of two snake venoms and a common broadleaf weed (otherwise harmless) known as groundgreen. A creature subjected to this poison must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature suffers 10 (3d6) poison damage, or half that if the save succeeds, and instantly falls unconscious, this “sleep” lasting an hour. On a successful save, the creature falls unconscious, suffers 1-2 points of poison damage, and loses all memories of what happened for the previous 1d4+4 hours.

An hour after the first save, creatures affected by addersleep awaken, but a second save must be made ere they regain consciousness; if successful, they suffer no additional effects, but if it fails, the creature suffers permanent, random memory loss, and momentary bouts of disorientation and confusion for 4d10 days.