



TALES OF THE LOST LANDS



TALES PACK 4

Bennett, Shank, Wright

This Tales Pack is released as a companion to
The Lost Lands: The Northlands Saga Complete



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GAMES

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TEN COWARDS

BY JOHN BENNETT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Heavy

“Ten Cowards” reveals the adventure background for *NS8: The Hallburning*. It reveals the actions and identities of the culprits led by Cnut Anglison, as well as something of their motives. Players should not be allowed to read this story if you are intending to run that adventure for them if you wish for the details of this background to remain hidden from them. However, the culprits in this crime are identified at the very beginning of the adventure, so the players will know the general information provided here very quickly in the adventure, so it shouldn't affect game play to any significant degree. If you are comfortable with the players having that knowledge, then allowing your players to read this story before playing through the adventure could actually enhance their gameplay experience as they may become more invested in the story and its protagonists, perhaps even holding a more personal grudge against Cnut Anglison and his ilk. One possibility would be to allow the players to read the story only after they have started the adventure and met Runa Gundrikswif. Then the contents of the story could be considered to largely be information gleaned from talking to the widow Runa about the events that transpired therein.

TEN COWARDS

BY JOHN BENNETT



en figures strode through the snow, their outlines carved in silhouette against a dark background by the faint moonlight. Each man held an unlit torch tightly in fur gloved hand. Weapons hung from their belts along with a hollow ox horn holding live coals buried in ash to preserve their heat. The men strode forward with unwavering tread of booted feet, their faces grim with the singular focus of future violence. No one spoke or sang songs to accompany their march through the stark, night wilderness. All thoughts were on the expectation of what was to come and what they must do. The night air hung tense around them, silent except for the sound of crunching snow. These were men on a mission of deadly purpose.

The ten marched at first through a stretch of silent woodlands. Around them stood, tall pines, as straight as spears. Cnut Anglison took the lead, guiding the men along a well-trod footpath through the trees. A thin cloak covered his armored shirt of caliginous metal rings, as if suffused with shadows. A simple, wooden shield sat strapped to his broad back while his battleaxe hung in a strap at his belt. Cnut never looked back to see if any of the men lagged behind, or worse, stopped following him and let the night swallow them in anonymity. He knew they were not cowards, lacking the fortitude to complete the task before them. Cnut knew the nine others would do what needed to be done, knew it as well as he knew the handle of his axe and the honeyed taste of mead drunk in victory.

Cnut led the line men out of the woodlands and into frost covered fields. He steered them on a direct course towards their goal, no pretense of stealth in their route. A faint breeze

brought him the rank odor of Lame Ottí. The hobbled man stumbled at the end of the line, his twisted, spasmodic leg plowing through the snow like a shovel. As ugly and stupid as a winter night is long, his skin was covered in rashes and atop his shoulders stood a too-small head. These unfortunate traits were matched by an even more unfortunate odor of rank, musty sweat. That was that reason Lame Ottí was ordered to stay in the back of the line, that and the fact that he worked twice as hard to make his way through the snow as the other men with two good legs. Cnut could not afford any delays by Ottí to slow him in this task. He questioned why he had even brought the man at all but quickly remembered the reason the man was included in all his darkest tasks: Lame Ottí was completely and utterly loyal. He would not question his orders and, as long as they were not too complex, he would carry them out swiftly and well. The fact that Cnut's orders often involved the swinging of an axe with no questions asked, made Ottí particularly suitable for the job at hand in Cnut's mind.

While Lame Ottí brought up the rear, Starkathr Bloodhair and Skorrbin Dankbeard moved along just behind Cnut. Starkathr, a blond, wild-eyed, berserker, hefted his axe over one shoulder. His crusted beard, bathed in the blood of his past enemies, a personal ritual of his, stank horribly. The always man seemed to contain the coiled energy of a wolf about to spring on its prey. Starkathr was easy for Cnut to influence — an unsheathed blade constantly thirsting for blood. In fact, it was more difficult keeping a leash on the man than off, which is why most of Starkathr's payment would go towards buying enough mead to knock him into a drunken stupor afterwards.

Skorrbin was altogether a different man than the mindlessly violent Starkathr. Cnut knew he could trust Skorrbin to do the job and do it well. The two had a long history together, participating in many a raid in the past. A smart man, Skorrbin possessed a keen sense for sailing and exploring unmapped coastlines, the kind of man you wanted on a long, seaborne raid. Cnut knew Skorrbin had ambitions of his own — a longship with a reaving crew that he could sail where he wanted, instead of following the orders of whatever jarl was currently paying him.

A little further back, Júrjan Hrothspyke marched, a spear in one hand and a short sword on a belt tightened around a mail coat. Júrjan was a traveler, never staying in one place long and usually leaving quickly with a bounty placed on his head. He had a habit of attacking at the slightest provocation, usually while the person's back was turned rather than in fair combat. The label of outlaw was no stranger to Júrjan. Many times he had stood before a jarl or Thing while a death sentence was pronounced, but each time through luck and guile Júrjan somehow managed to escape, often leaving one or two more bodies behind. These violent tendencies and lack of discomfort in doing the ruthless if necessary were what attracted Cnut to recruit him. Also, as a bonus, Cnut knew that many of the bounties on the man's head did not specify that he be returned alive. Cnut knew that if it became advantageous to do so he could always collect the reward on the man himself.

Anwulf the Black, who stalked behind Júrjan, was named for his mood, a grim, dark, brooding man. Like Skorrbin, Anwulf had fought alongside Cnut many times in battles as reavers upon the North Sea and beyond. The man never seemed to raise his voice, not even in challenge to an enemy. When the shieldwalls formed and the champions hurled insults towards the enemy, Anwulf never failed to maintain his stony silence. Instead, a grimace would crawl across his face until his dark eyes hardened like two bits of iron shot. An expert spearman, Anwulf would step forward, able to drive the point of his weapon into soft flesh no matter the strength of the shieldwall before him. Like the sceadugenga and a harbinger of death, Anwulf moved through his enemies with ease, and where he moved, they died. Anwulf liked his moniker and the fear he brought to his opponents more than glory, silver, or arm-rings. Fear he surely would bring tonight.

Behind Anwulf stalked the two Skeggi brothers, Otr and Ölvir, there blond hair long, shaggy, and unwashed, their first beards little more than a soft yellow down on their chins and cheeks. Unlike the others, they wore equipment and armor in poor repair that did not fit well. One even wore thick rags wrapped around his feet rather than proper boots. The two gripped their spears and tried to scowl at everyone around them at once. They were untried

in battle but desperate to prove themselves, and they lusted after the prosperity and power that they saw represented in Cnut. The fact that he held their mother as thrall for a debt their father owed before his death only further sealed their loyalty to him. Like many men their age — little more than boys play-acting at being men — they despised the weakness they saw in their mother's sacrifice for them and scoffed at her words of admonishment to not follow the path of Cnut Anglison. Cnut allowed himself a small smile; he could not have bound them more securely to his cause had he clapped them in irons. It was a grim irony he recognized in them; the passion and violence of youth with none of the wisdom of man. They made useful tools, and like tools were easily disposed of.

Watching the Skeggi brothers suspiciously was Uverd, a strange Outlander with sallow, pock-marked skin and a thin moustache of deepest black that drooped at the corners of his mouth and ended in dangling copper beads. His armor and clothing were a mismatched mixture of that of the horse riders of the plains south of Storstrøm Vale and the Southlander soldiers of the free cities of the Buntessveldt. His mouthful of cracked and broken teeth — apparently the work of a professional torturer some years earlier — and the perpetual glare in his angry eyes that constantly shifted about as if seeking some unseen foe named him a fugitive. Cnut had no doubt that Unverd was not his true name and that the man was running from some crime or crimes in the South. He spoke little through his mangled mouth, which was just fine with Cnut who despised his Outlander accent, but he was good in a fight with his stolen Mongat saber and had no problem putting a knife into the kidney of a sleeping man, so Cnut found him useful.

Hegi Einnarrson was Cnut's last recruit, a barrel shaped man with a thick beard. Hegi could drink heavily and laugh lustily in the mead halls, seemingly not possessing the dark, natures of the other men Cnut had gathered. However, Cnut knew that to put Hegi in a shieldwall with that massive sword of his, and he took to fighting with the same huge appetite he had for drinking and whoring. For Hegi, it was about the story and relating his heroics to a wide-eyed crowd with all the gusto of a half-drunk skald. Often, these tales were spun and embellished, both to cover his dark deeds on the battlefield and to make Hegi's prowess seemingly match that of the gods themselves. And if the warrior's eyes sometimes looked like bleak, yawning pits of despair as he drank into the small hours of the night and ruminated on things best left unsaid, Cnut cared not. He was a sure sword on the field of battle, and had enough sense to know what to tell and what not to tell, even when drunk. That was enough for Cnut Anglison.

Cnut considered himself successful in gathering such a troupe, a group of men to do a task few would be able to stomach. The job of the night required people of a certain, low moral character. While many men could be violent, these particular men specialized in it, were particularly suited for the night's work. Bucking the traditions and beliefs of the North, they would not balk at doing what needed done and would see it through to the end. He had needed men who could offer the hospitality of their hall and then smother a child in its sleep. He had needed men of courage who did not fear risking the label of outlaw and the danger of being hunted in every jarldom and town across the North. He needed these brave men.

Besides, if they did the job right, no one would be the wiser.

Skorrbin noticed it first with keen eyes trained in scanning the horizon during the ship-board watches of the night. Ahead the moonlight faintly caught the trail of lazily, curling smoke. A simple grunt from him was all that needed pass between them, and and Cnut quickened the men's pace. Hegi adjusted the harness carrying his naked greatsword on his back, the tip of the heavily notched blade almost touching the ground. Behind him, Lame Ottí hurried to keep up, one hand on his unlit torch, the other hand holding a large, poorly balanced axe over his shoulder, the man's legs moving haphazardly as he shuffled onward.

The smell of a wood fire soon drifted over them, followed faintly by voices raised in laughter, toasting, and song. The tension of the still night air that had dogged their very

steps seemed to collapse under that release, filled with a feeling of home and inviting the ten men to rest, raise horns of mead, and share tales of past raids and plunder. More than one ragged figure paused a heartbeat as the portent of what their dark errand claimed them. But the spell was soon broken, Cnut raised his hand in signal. Shaking off the moment's hesitation, Skorrbin turned with the soft clinking of mail and let out a short, low whistle down the line. The men stopped their frantic pace, and began a slower, deliberate creep forward. All was lost if the alarm was raised.

A few small huts and animal pens stood like sentries around the hall, their darkened windows and doorways watching as the men slipped past. Skorrbin took point and was joined by Anwulf and Júrjan, who crept quietly among the huts, inspecting them for signs of life while Cnut held the others back. Behind him, he could hear the creak of Starkathr's crude, animal hide armor, frozen near solid by the cold night air, as the man shifted restlessly, barely controlling the blood frenzy welling up within him. In the back, Lame Ottí short-hopped forward to regain his precarious balance, his legs working awkwardly as he fumbled with his ox horn to ensure its coal hadn't been lost in the journey and almost spilling it in his inspection.

Satisfied that the huts were empty of watchers who might raise a cry, Skorrbin nodded to Cnut who motioned the men again moved slowly forward, the sounds of merry feasting ringing in their ears with its song of hot, roasted meat and plentiful drink. They ducked around the remaining huts, keeping low in case any sentries stood guard outside the hall. As they advanced Uverd paused to peel back an animal hide window cover and look inside one of the huts for any possible valuable that might be easily lifted. Hegi's thump on his shoulder with a callous-hardened palm encouraged the man forward again. Cnut winced and the hollow clap that the blow made, fearful that unseen eyes or perhaps even the spirits of the guardian landvaettir might have heard or given warning to the household within, though from the noise coming from ahead, it seemed unlikely. Uverd gave Hegi a short, murderous glare before moving on.

Cold torches gripped even more firmly, the men strode forward, their footsteps now padding over well-trod ground, brushed free of the snowfall by the daily activities of the busy village. On the hard-frozen ground, their footfalls hardly made a sound. Starkathr lightly spun his battleaxe between his palms in anticipation as he moved with the group.

Their destination loomed ahead; the large mead hall built of stout timbers and a freshly thatched roof, the home of Jarl Gundrik Arison of Vestfælmarken, the jarldom in which they currently traveled. Thick double doors, expertly carved with fantastical creatures and the gods, barred entry. Smoke from the fires inside poured out of a central smoke hole in the roof. Stray glimpses of firelight shone out on the cold ground from between a few narrow gaps in some of the timbers. Inside, Cnut knew, dozens of people gathered around cooking fires or sat drinking mead on long benches, the sound of their revelry carrying outside to the ten men approaching like silent shadows slipping through the night.

Cnut approached the hall, stopping just short of the door, cocking his head to listen. After a few moments, satisfied that no sound of alarm came from within, he raised his fist in the air, in the prepared signal to the others. Quickly, the men begin sifting the ash out of the horns they carried to retrieve the glowing coals within, and within moments, each one held a burning brand in his hand. Ottí sucked burned fingers where he had managed to spill his coal out on the ground and then quickly picked it up without thinking. But his torch was now lit along with the others, even if his abused fingers throbbed with the flicker of the burning brand he held.

The men spread out on either side of their leader, taking up position as they spaced themselves around the front half of the mead hall. Cnut nodded to his left and then to his right. By old habit he slid his waraxe from its strap and into his left hand and felt the familiar smooth wood and rough wrapping of its handle. He strode up to the door, Lame Ottí and Starkathr flanking him, and there he paused.

Cnut leaned his head back, taking in the view of the flawless sky of the winter night and the brilliant stars it displayed. Were the gods watching? Could they even now see the courage that it took to do what he now did? Any common criminal could steal from a man or slay him. But only those with a heart bold as thunderous Donar would dare do so in a way that risked the ire of all people everywhere. He shrugged. He was satisfied; let Wotan judge him for his deeds, for he surely would. On whatever day Cnut fell, he knew it was his wyrd to do so with axe in hand so that the valkyries would bring him to Valhalla to stand before the All-Father. Let lesser men quail before the laws of Things and jarls, when the One-Eyed God peered into Cnut's heart, he would see the heart of an aurochs, unbroken and unafraid before even the gods themselves. Wotan needed such men for Ragnarök; Cnut knew he would be welcomed well.

He briefly closed his eyes, taking in the smell of the cold night air mixed with the smoke from the mead hall, laughter and singing washing over him. It felt... invigorating. Skorrbin noticed a small secret smile play briefly across his lips and wondered at its portent.

Cnut Anglison, master of his own wyrd and thrall to no man or god, took a deep breath and opened his eyes in time to see the first torches arc through the sky in a trail of red light and land, FTHOOM, FTHOOM, FTHOOM, almost gently, on the thatched roof.

FTHOOM. The torches spat and hissed, as if channeling the spite of the men below. FTHOOM, flames crawled out from the torches, spreading as they ate through the damp outer layer of thatch and bit hungrily at the old, dry layers of thatch below. FTHOOM, FTHOOM, more torches joined their brethren on the roof, mingling as if dancing. FTHOOM. Cnut tossed his own torch, targeting a section of the roof directly over the doors. Flames came to life in the night air, crawling outward and upwards as they gorged themselves on a feast of tinder. Their light washed over the men waiting inside, casting them in a lurid pallor and reflecting redly over the metal of their armor and weapons. The hall alight, the men rejoined Cnut by the door.

The mead hall, as was customary in the North, had only one way in or out, the solid double door. The better to defend against attacks by raiders, cattle thieves, or trolls. This arrangement had long provided the Northlanders with a more defensible arrangement for protecting their homes and hearths, but just as it created a bottleneck for attackers trying to gain entry so too it did for defenders trying to get out. For this reason — the mutual survival of all — the unwritten code of the North forbade the burning of a hall with the same condemnation and revile as one who would break the laws of hospitality. There was no respite of forgiveness for a hall-burner. Such a one was to be hunted by all to the very end of his days until dragged before a jarl or Thing to receive the just punishment for such a deed. Though many a war could have been won over the years with a hallburning, normal men of the Northlands feared the consequences too much to even entertain the notion — normal men, not the nine courageous men that Cnut had brought with him. He and these men were not normal men; in his mind they were exceptional men. Men with the courage to break from the old ways as a means to the ends. Let Valhalla and Niflheim both tremble before men such as these.

The roof fully ablaze, smoke would quickly be filling the mead hall, more than could escape through the hole in the roof which was designed for cooking fires, not major conflagrations. Anwulf, Hegi, Júrgan, and Lame Ottí flanked the doors on either side while Cnut stood in front, shield strapped to his arm and battleaxe at the ready. Skorrbin and Starkathr stood just behind him with the remaining men. They all could hear the shouts of dismay inside: fear, confusion, and outrage replaced the sounds of celebration from before. Those inside would see the smoke and hear the flames crackling in the thatch. They would immediately know what was happening and all that it meant. The ten men outside likewise knew what was coming and patiently waited for it.

The doors swung suddenly outward, and smoke washed over the men arrayed around it, stinging their eyes and briefly setting them to coughing as it filled the air around them.

They recovered quickly, as the first shape loomed in the doorway, a shadow within the gray, choking cloud of smoke. This would be one of the jarl's mightiest huscarls, his elite warriors. The man's job was simple: break a hole in the enemies ranks so the people trapped in the hall could escape. This was the only way out and the only option available to those inside.

The warrior stumbled forward, his eyes trying to adjust in the smoke and sudden of the night darkness and focus on the foes he knew would be lying in wait. He had had no time to don armor but carried a round wooden shield with iron boss and a short sword for close quarter fighting. The huscarl squinted, eyes running from the sharp smoke, and took a step forward, shield and sword held defensively. He played for time, waiting for the enemy to strike and show his position, so he could make his counterattack. The other huscarls were assembling behind him, but he would be first and bring glory to his name. The skalds would sing of his heroics around warm hearth fires.

A pain blossomed in the warrior's side before he could even step out of the doorway, as a spear slid easily into his flank, just below his ribs. Before he could roar in pain, from his other flank a greatsword, thrust and tore into his upper calf, hitting bone. Smoke clogged his throat as he gagged and stumbled. The sounds of chaos behind him seemed to ring louder in his ears then even his suddenly pounding pulse, spurring him on despite the pain. He must, he knew, clear the doorway and take the battle to the enemy to give his people a fighting chance. With a sudden surge, he lunged forward. His vision cleared just in time to see Cnut's advance. A battleaxe seemed to hang in the air, edge-on, electricity curling around its blade, and then it descended with a whistling cut. Before the injured warrior could raise his shield, the axe carved downward into his throat and through, into his breastbone. The arcs of electricity humming on the blade's edge leapt off, coursing through his body setting his nerves alight in the spasmodic twitching of his entire body.

The huscarl died before he even hit the ground, falling backwards into the doorway. His lifeless, still-twitching, body landed at the feet of his comrades behind him. Motes of electricity still crackled around the blackened edges of his horrific wound. A moment of stillness froze the terrible scene, the cries of the jarl's family and guests momentarily silenced in their frantic for escape from the burning death trap. The sudden ending of the jarl's most valiant warrior gave even their own struggle for life pause...but only for a single breath.

The remaining huscarls readied themselves to burst out through the doorway, and the ten outside waited, their weapons steaming with the first blood. The huscarls knew failure meant the death of not just themselves and their jarl, but for everyone in the mead hall — their wives, their children, their servants. The entire village of Vestfellmarken was present in the hall this night for the jarl's name-day feast. Whoever these foul hallburners were, they knew the jarl and his ways. They knew this attack had to be personal and that the men outside were not here to take thralls or plunder. They knew that their only goal was murder and that unless they fought a path free, that goal would be fully realized.

Stumbling through the smoke, another huscarl hurled himself forward, leaping over the body of his slain brother-in-arms, swinging his greataxe in rage, his fury lending him strength. He cleared the doorway, coming down with an overhead chop deflected by Cnut's shield with a splintering of wood. Cnut's shield arm momentarily paralyzed by the ferocious blow, he hopped back, and the deflected swing struck the shoulder of Otr Skeggi who cried out at the sudden pain. Lame Ottí stepped in, nimbly for one so graceless, wielding a greataxe the size of a small man. Ottí batted away the huscarl's next blow as if the other man were a petulant child swinging a stick. His own axe head found purchase across the haft of the huscarl's axe, and the warrior cried out as three of his fingers flew free and his grip slipped on the wooden handle. With a guttural noise, Ottí pressed the advantage, striking again and again in a mindless fury until the huscarl slumped forward, dead, with his remaining numbed fingers still wrapped around his shattered weapon — the hope of all Northlander warriors in death. At least he would have the chance to see Valhalla.

The next huscarl quickly took his fallen comrade's place, catching the shaft of Anwulf's spear with a free hand while his own broad sword parried Hegi's greatsword. Júrgan leaned

in hard, the point of his short spear stabbing the desperate man through the shoulder. Taking the opportunity with the huscarl off balance, Uverd maneuvered around beside the warrior. His short saber flashed like in a blur as he struck fast, targeting vital spots in a quick succession of pinpointed strikes. The huscarl quickly joined his fellows, though this time, sword fell from lifeless fingers. No valkyries would greet him.

The ten attackers fought in tandem, creating a choke point. None could deny the bravery of the huscarls as they fought to escape, but what choice did they have? Only a pair of the doomed warriors could fit through the doorway at a time and each of those times, they were met with a wall of steel, striking from all directions. It did not matter what strategy the huscarls employed; every time one of them stepped through into the doorway, he faced certain death. Yet still they tried and the men outside cut them down like wheat before the scythe, their bodies stacking in the doorway like fallen sheaves until they had to be pulled away by those inside to allow the next pair of huscarls to emerge. Each dead man dragged within seemed to stare up at his fellows in hopeless appraisal of their struggle. Even the gods had turned away from Jarl Gundrik in his most desperate hour.

The heat inside the mead hall felt like the furnaces of the Dvergar where the forged weapons of legend from the very fires of the earth. Smoke filled the entirety of the central hall causing those inside to resemble ghosts, perhaps an omen of the wyrd that the Norns had laid for them. The fire, started on the roof, was now eating its way downward, slithering along the rafters and climbing down walls. The crackle and hiss of the flames and the ear-splitting pop of splintering wood, promised death as surely as the monsters waiting outside in the darkness. Rich tapestries hung on the walls to ward against cold drafts burst into fire, shriveling to ash as they fell on those trapped within the hall.

While the huscarls fought and died to try and allow the others to escape, others ran about consumed by a madness brought on by panic, smoke inhalation, and rapidly spreading flames. Some clawed and scratched at the wooden walls as if the stout timbers would give way, charring their hands on the intense heat radiating off of them. As burning thatch rained down around them, others sought shelter by hiding under the long feasting tables as if the flames working their way down the walls would not be able to find them. The screaming of the doomed within and the dying cries of the huscarls without echoed inside while the fire roared louder as if in competition with the noise of the helpless folk.

One older man crawled along the floor, trying to stay under the smoke, searching for a way out, maybe in the back, though it was pointless — one way in, one way out — the way Northlander halls had been built for centuries. Coughing, vision blurring, he moved past bodies of those who had already succumbed to the heat and smoke, easily as deadly as the murderers' steel blades. He searched frantically for someone...who? It was too hard to think with the screaming all around him. Or was it he who was screaming? His mind muddled by smoke and fear, he could only move forward, his clothes stained with ash and falling embers. He clambered over a woman's fallen body, her lifeless eyes locking briefly with his. Was this who he was looking for? She seemed familiar... Grasping her hand, he half-dragged, half-pulled her along behind him as he pushed slowly forward.

His grip began to loosen on the woman's hand and he looked back at her, again into those cold, staring eyes as if remembrance could bring salvation from this nightmare. With a thud, he pushed up against a wall, though what wall he could not tell. By now, there was too much smoke to see anything in front of him. He could have gone in circles for all he knew. He pushed up against the wall again, trying to will it give way beneath his strength as the heat smothered him. But Northlander halls are built to withstand the blows of giants, their timbers carefully chosen for strength and thickness. There was no escape here. Weak, dizzy, and nauseated he leaned back against the unyielding wall, scanning the fiery gloom once more for the woman...one more time, trying to remember her. Was she his wife? His

daughter? His air-starved mind struggled to remember. One more time he looked...before the darkness claimed him.

The huscarls all lay dead in and around the doorway, and the last few householders still capable of bearing arms continued the fight, though the slaughter had slowed. Enough bodies clogged the doorway to make it difficult for both the men outside as well as in to get at each other. Bodies were pulled away on both sides of the doorway as they fell, making room for more but it was getting difficult to find places to put them out of the way.

Despite their skill at arms, the huscarls had been unable to penetrate the half-ring men that awaited them. The last remaining householders fared no better. The heat made them swoon, made their legs sluggish, and their sword and axe swings clumsy. These householders — hirthmenn all who had faced raids by giants and worse things from the mountains over the years — these men now flailed like feeble old men rather than experienced warriors, only the strongest amongst them able to hold onto their weapons as they died. As each one fell someone, whether friend or foe, would drag the body aside so the killing could continue.

A few people hiding under a feasting table heard the rafters of the mead hall rattle, the timbers groaning as the flames ate away at them. The death throes of splintering wood sounded as a section of the roof crashed through a table as if it were a clay pot, crushing the lucky ones beneath it and burning the others alive. A woman, her dress torn and hair smoldering from bits of thatch, gazed at the scene of destruction around her, her mind and senses addled. Next to her, she could dimly see her husband through the smoke. The fallen rafter lay across his shattered legs, while burning thatch made his tunic smolder. He repeatedly spasmed weakly, as if trying to get up, not fully realizing that he was trapped. The woman, in her grief and madness, turned away from him. Fighting her way to her feet, she stood up.

The woman pushed her way forward, knocking down others in a blind, desperate bid to escape. The burning roof fell all around her. Unable to see, she clawed and punched at anything appearing out of the smoke. Another rafter collapsed in front of her, barely missing her. She stumbled over it, half falling and half crawling, tearing her skin and burning her flesh. She couldn't even scream for all the smoke searing her lungs. Her vision swam before her in the shimmering waves of heat. The woman collapsed to her knees and slowly sank to the floor. Just ahead of her, she saw three figures: Jarl Gundrik, his son Egill, and his wife Runa. Booted feet stampeded over her and her final thoughts fled with the last of her life. It was a scene repeated throughout the mead hall; the smoke and heat did the murderers' work for them and the people died, cursing the men outside for the sin they were committing and themselves for turning even from loved ones in a desperate bid for escape. It was one thing to die in battle but like this, in a burning hall, this was an act against the gods themselves.

Another householder fell, this time at the feet of Jarl Gundrik. He, with wife and son clinging to him, had carefully made their way through the inferno towards the hall's entrance. With them was his last huscarl, the elderly Végestr who had served Gundrik's father before him. Once the strongest and most skilled of the huscarls, Végestr now spent his days dozing before the hearth and telling tales of old to the children. Now he stood with his jarl, naked blade in a hand trembling with age and eyes rheumy with age.

Gundrik, face and beard stained with soot and ash, fiery thatch burning holes in a once rich cloak, let out a roar despite the smoke threatening to suffocate him. His battle cry re-

juvenated the old Végestr, who raised his sword in feeble arms strengthened with renewed purpose. They moved forward along with Egill who clutched a fine sword of his own, masterfully crafted by a dwarven smith in Trotheim. The three men — one bent with age, one at the end of his prime, and one still in full flush of youth — pushed forward, silver arm-rings clicking together softly as they pushed through the bodies of friends and family. Runa remained a few paces back at the word of her husband. He would see them free he had promised, even if his shade had to hold the center of the shieldwall. She hated that he talked like that; she loved that he talked like that.

Gundrik met the assault at the door with his own steel, a heavy sword which had tasted battle many times before. He hacked and slashed at the weapons greeting him: spears, axes, and swords. Ancient Végestr stood to one side, expertly parrying the blades aimed at him with a skill not seen since his own prime, while Egill squeezed through the doors to his other side, using his smaller stature and dwarf-forged blade to protect his father's flank. Blade strokes fell all around the three warriors. Roaring again and again, Gundrik fought with the desperation of a cornered boar. His sword spat sparks again and again as it met those of his foes, staving off certain death.

The ten men smelled victory and pressed their attack. Cnut shoved Skorrbin back as Gundrik's sword shattered the man's shield into pieces. Egill's sword came perilously close to Cnut himself, who delivered a back hand swing in answer. The blow sank deep into young Egill's side but only delivered wound, not a killing stroke. Cnut then attempted to engage Gundrik, but the taller man had reach and desperation on his side, slowly forcing the men back with his wild and reckless swings.

The mead hall's roof shuddered suddenly and loudly as if to accompany the noise of the battle below. From inside, Runa could see it sagging over the doorway, the burning hell of flames that awaited above, separated from those below by only the thinnest remaining layer of thatch. She desperately pushed against the backs of her son and her husband, trying to force them farther out with what little strength remained to her.

Blood-spattered Starkathr bounded forward, cleaving into the old huscarl's neck and hooking the man with his axe. In a berserker rage of near inhuman strength, Starkathr yanked hard on his axe, pulling the now-dead man towards him. Howling with evil glee, Starkathr lifted the corpse of old Vegestr, dented blade still clutched in hand, over his head and with a mighty heave threw it at Gundrik and Egill. The body did no hurt but rocked the both of them on their feet, knocking them off balance and causing them to falter in their attacks. The ten hand-picked men, sporting no more than minor nicks and cuts themselves, closed on the pair like wolves on a wounded hind.

Exhausted and broken in spirit, Runa stepped back from the doorway and gazed at the floor. She summoned all that was left of her strength and courage for one final push. As she looked up again, her eyes widened in horror as she saw blade after blade strike home on her husband and son. Their shields and their own blades were insufficient to parry them all, and both were soon frozen in place where they stood in the doorway, pierced many times by the steel of their foe. As the blades were withdrawn, the paralysis that had seemed to hold them aloft was suddenly gone, and for a second that seemed to stretch into eternity, Gundrik and Egill stood upright and motionless. If she squinted just right, Runa thought to herself, she couldn't even tell that they were injured — perhaps just standing in the doorway as they returned in triumph from a day's hunt. But the illusion — of her mind as much as of her eyes — could not last. The pair's limbs contorted at angles speaking of intense pain, and knees sagged, as suddenly all strength fled from them. Then, ever so slowly, together they crumpled forward onto the ground. Jarl and heir. Father and son. Brothers in arms, they lay together on the blood-slick earth. Runa saw it all, and she screamed a crying paean of horror and loss that threatened to burst her lungs.

The mead hall shuddered like a dying thing, its death rattle echoing through the skeleton of its charred timbers. Runa, enraged, clawed her way into the doorway, ripping away an obstructing body with a strength not her own. She stood tall, the daughter of Erik of Roskilde, breathing labored, body heaving with anger and exhaustion. She locked gazes with the ten men, her senses fully focused by her hatred for them. She drank in the sight of

them, reveled in the clarity of ever nick and hurt they carried, gagged on the foul miasma of their fetid murderers' breath. She affixed their appearance in her memory, for all time, to spread before the seat of Wotan himself. She stared unflinchingly as they advanced on her. They would show her no mercy, she knew, but at least she would join her husband and son in the afterlife. Her wits were quick enough to pick up a dropped sword from the ground. Gundrik and Egill had died with sword in hand as men of courage, men of mind's worth. To join them she too must feast in Valhalla, she knew.

Cnut reached her first, blocking her untrained and clumsy attack and then callously giving her a slap that sent her spinning but not down. Smiling grimly at his own unexpected cruelty, he moved in for the kill. With a final shriek like its own anguished cry of defeat, the front of the Jarl Gundrik's hall collapsed. Cnut and his men were forced to scramble backward as timbers fell to avoid them. More timbers joined the cascade, and then the rest of the roof gave way, falling into the smoking hollow that was less than an hour earlier a joyous mead hall. The walls soon joined the collapse, completely the destruction.

Coughing from the effluvia of debris and dust thrown up by the hall, the ten men looked around and at each other in stunned silence. Where Runa Gundrikswife had stood a moment before was now nothing more than a heap of burning rubble. Even they had not expected such a gruesome finale for the jarl's wife.

Flames still raged but their work was done. The destruction was complete; nothing but a pile of burning timbers remained of Jarl Gundrik's mead hall. In the flickering light of the fires, the men scanned for signs of movement or other telltale signs of any survivors. Nothing but the roar of fire answered them. No one could survive in that crushing inferno. Of Runa there remained no sign. A pile of burning timbers lay where she had stood over the corpses of her husband and son, a fitting barrow for the dead buried beneath.

The day was theirs. Now was the time for strong drink and soft women. The courageous few who had dared challenge the laws of men and even the gods had prevailed. Not a witness remained alive, so no wergild would be forthcoming, no pronouncement of outlaw would be laid against them. Theirs was a complete and total victory. Ten brave men stood in mute witness to their handiwork. Suddenly the night didn't seem quite so empty, the cold air of winter not quite so refreshing. The shadow walkers — *sceadugenga* — were known to wander the night. A darkened forest could hide a thousand eyes; the chill of air could be the deadly gaze of the dead lingering on the living. The oldest races of mankind had forbidden hallburning as an affront before the gods... they must have had good reason.

The smoke-stained, blood-spattered men gazed at each other and at the carnage they had wrought — the wyrd they had crafted for themselves. One by one they quietly backed away before turning and going the way from which they had come, until only Cnut stood beside the burning pyre. His mind snapped from dark contemplation with a start. He looked around and realized that he stood completely alone. A timber in the fire popped in a sudden shower of sparks. The night wind moaned through the boughs of a nearby tree. A sudden chill traced its way down his spine. Cnut Anglison quickly turned and retraced his steps as fast as his cold-numbered feet could carry him.

Ten brave men fled into the night.

As dawn neared, a fresh snowfall blanketed the massacre in a merciful burial shroud. The thickly falling flakes caused the lingering fires to hiss and spark until only steaming, smoldering pockets remained among the pile of charred timbers. From the pile near the former front of the hall a few of the timbers shifted slightly to reveal a pocket in the rubble below, a pocket formed by the side-by-side corpses of an older warrior and a young warrior, both still clutching hilt of sword in death. A narrow sheltered space, liberally covered in smoldering ash but clear of crushing debris, remained between them. From this sheltered hollow a trembling hand extended upward and pushed away another small piece of debris to enlarge the opening it had made. It was a hand horribly burned and bloodied. A hand hanging with ragged, charred strips of its own flesh. It was a woman's hand.

THE ENDLESS ICE

BY NATHAN SHANK

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Endless Ice” tells the tale of one of the Nûk, the tribes of elves that inhabit the frozen wastes beyond the North and her journey to save her son from the wendigo. It gives some details on the ways and customs of the Nûk. It does not tie in with any of the adventures in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path* and is safe to read for players who will be playing through those adventures. For a player who intends to play one of the Nûk elves, it could even prove useful in providing some insight into the character.

THE ENDLESS ICE

BY NATHAN SHANK



he spirits would guide her.

A movement at the edge of sight caught her attention, and her legs instinctively locked. Her dogged facial expression sank into a camouflage of lifelessness. She resembled a tree or a fallen log. In her thoughts she faded from herself and slipped into the practiced immobile state of invisibility.

The movement flickered again. She resisted the urge to run. She remained frozen.

Don't move! Is it a wolf? A bear? A snow raptor?

The possibilities were many, all promising death. She willed herself to not turn her head to glance. Slowly the glimpsed blur came into focus before her as it crossed into her line of sight, and it resolved into the harmless piebald tern. It limped and fluttered across the ageless tundra sky with a lamed right wing. Relief flooded through her.

Eyes-of-Fire left her statue, returned to herself. The bird's omen meant Ragnarök, the Truth That Comes at Twilight. And yet, as it was injured, its presage was uncertain. She knew the lone tern was not lost but only delayed a few hours behind its flock. Still, it would lose its power of flight in a day, would hobble for an hour afterward, and would die or be eaten before the next hour closed. The tern opened its mouth as it passed above her, but its cry was carried away by the tundra's immensity. Eyes-of-Fire knelt, pressed her lips to the icy earth, prayed without words.

The tern was the only sign of life she had seen that day. The frigid tundra hid some and deterred most.

The changing light through the blowing clouds revealed the tern's right wing was nearly frozen stiff. Its delicate feathers could not extend on the downstroke nor fold on the upstroke. It had become a seal's flipper with its injury. The creature's tiny feet pushed and the left wing fluttered unhelpfully. If it knew how slow it was crawling by land instead of its peerless sky route, it did not show it.

Eyes-of-Fire was hungry. She doubted the bird would survive. It could her give the strength needed to go just a bit farther, maybe even just far enough. It might stretch her own life a day. If that day meant meeting a spirit or crossing over the edge into a pocket of hope, then—

Embersæge.

Mission.

Death.

She passed on without looking at the tern.

Eyes-of-Fire had been traveling long enough to forget the glow of a hearth fire, but cold was no longer a problem for her. Cold was habit, a part of her routine: Breakfast. Cold. Check bundle. Cold. Push the ice for ten hours. Cold. Break for dinner smaller than the night before. Cold. Bow low in thanks for the food. Cold. Seek a safetree. Cold. Sleep. Cold.

This was her new life, for however many days it took. Eyes-of-Fire no longer shivered. Each portion of life was its own time. Eyes-of-Fire no longer counted the days. Now was a time of need, and so it would also be of Cold.

But Cold was not an oppressor. Cold was detailed into the skin of Eyes-of-Fire and her tundra elf kin of frozen Nûkland. It slowed the body, made it stiff, like armor on the smallest scale. It gave its own sensation when holding a block of ice or patting out the fire with

bare palms. It was a perpetual thaw. And somewhere, back in lineage and time, it still bore an ache; but otherwise, it was sight. To the Nûk, Cold was the only companion, the dull solace in times of need. Even the spirits could not be so loyal.

Weeks before the great beast had risen cackling from the fire. She had been out on the hunt. Longer and later than usual, the hunters had stayed poised in the trees until the elk trusted that their scent was part of the sunless groves. When they returned in joyous spirits carrying the fat carcass and with fresh wine frothing in their horn casks, the fire-circle held sober faces. All of them — Embersæge, his brothers and sisters, the Old One and other elders, and winking Ønnok — had seen the spirit take form. It grew, they said, from the fire before them: great antlers, unlike any won from a hunt, clawed outward unnaturally. An equine snout followed, leading to a long, emaciated and torso with taloned forelimbs and ending in charred, birdlike stumps of legs. But if it was the spirit of their long-stalked dinner that had just been brought into camp, it had emerged in retribution rather than sacred remembrance as had sometimes occurred in the past.

Ønnok cracked his crab-like arms and smacked his flapping lips. “Not a kind spirit,” he rasped, “willing to give when it takes. No, all of the mouth it was. Teeth tore at us. Fire and lashes. I blessed the sand in my hand and thrashed it with whips of the sacred grains. It reared in fear and slipped away into the blaze.” Whether in fear or disgust, the spirit beast had left the Nûk fire-circle in body, but its chilling image had sunk deep into their stomachs, the seat of their thought and being. It would not soon be forgotten.

The planned celebration feast interrupted by the strange visitation, they buried the fresh elk carcass far from camp and ate the winter’s frost-burnt meal instead. Ønnok said they had reached their arm out too far, taken more than their fair share. Too many hunts. Too much waste. The clan was not safe. Penance would be their master until fear consequences had been fulfilled. Ønnok drew in his piles of sand and pounded the ground in front of Danut, Eyes-of-Fire, and the other Nûk hunters. They had behaved like those our fathers had left so many years ago, he had said. Like those who still remained in their endless pursuit revelry and meaninglessness. The Nuk were lucky yet to not all be buried in the snows of their iniquities. The spirits had been quite clear, Ønnok decided. Prayer would heal.

But the spirits do not trust mortal promises. Neither do they mind mortal wishes. No one was safe. Embersæge was not safe.

This land was unlike any other clime known to the Nûk. It went on. Sometimes it declined, other times inclined. No safe hills of trees protected. The expanse was vulnerability. Occasional clumps of stunted, wind-battered trees were the only distinguishing relief from the endless open drifts.

Everywhere the land reflected the cold and the icy, mirroring clouds. Even the smallest life became immense in the space that was otherwise void.

She heard a scramble. Hooves shook the permafrost. Antlers cut through the cold mist from the nearby dusky trees. A massive elk, its fur coat covered in ice, strode into Eyes-of-Fire’s presence. His proud breast rose and fell, steam challenging the frosty air cooling his skin. He looked at Eyes-of-Fire as if to speak, and a hushed intelligence articulated his face into an expression she recognized somewhere in the back of her memory.

Eyes-of-Fire held her breath for a moment, cleared her throat, and started to speak—

The elk cut her off by smashing his teeth into the crippled tern. All she could see was the churning of horns as it bent to its task. The elk snorted and huffed and bustled as the tern’s bones snapped like sticks and her feathers shredded.

For the first time, Eyes-of-Fire was afraid. And she ran.

Eyes-of-Fire approached a frozen pool surrounded only by more miles of endless tundra. Her wind-burned and bleeding likeness gazed up at her. Wrists and brow showed the skin peeling apart in dry curls. Worst of all her trials — more than the cold and hunger, cuts and blisters, fear, and even the ultimate uncertainty of her journey — was the isolation. Eyes-of-Fire had never been alone before. Elk-Soul had been her hunting companion since they were children who threw spears at seals that surfaced in the Three Rivers, stealing those young kills on the weeks filling their clan's yearly route to the coast. Sæt, her great-grandmother, had raised her in the family tent amid brothers and sisters now long lost to disease and disaster. Always, her family was her spear. The Nûk did not abandon each other, and seeing this, the spirits had always guided them. In spite of their retribution, they would now accompany her in the absence of mortal shoulders.

In a moment of indulgence, Eyes-of-Fire let herself see her family brace her wrists and ankles where her thick leather jerkin met her mitts and where her boots tugged close with each step that made the skin more raw, swollen, and split. Her grandmother would fire an elixir from sacred blood and mix it with wine and dark spices to poultice the wounds. They would harden stronger than before. And the same was true if one of them died. The others would bind tighter or birth a new link that would solidify their strength. Perhaps, with no Nûk to save her from exposure, she would be that passing bond. But none were here to even know this thought.

The pain was getting worse. Eyes-of-Fire needed help. She could not hunt alone.

To be alone is to die.

Yet in this chafing silence, the sky spoke. It told of the next day and sometimes the next stretch of land. And the land replied. It told of the day before and sometimes the years before. It told Eyes-of-Fire that some of her people had once passed this way. She was not alone in her march north. Though none knew what lay beyond the taiga and tundra, a syllable dip in the flat plain spoke of a huddled trudge through the listless land, movement that had disrupted the uniformity of the basic landforms that rose and fell before Eyes-of-Fire. There was a speech there that she knew and could interpret into life.

Eyes-of-Fire continued to gaze at her sullen likeness. She saw the Nûk in the rosy ice.

The Nûk always care for themselves.

She was so tired that the land danced before her. No comfort, though, could be spared. Spots in her eyes became blinking clouds in a distance of vague white and blue rocklike wisps. The day had fallen in on itself without her realizing. Nameless movements flushed her vision from the sides inward.

Death is a long ways off. A mother's errand always triumphs. Fire is stronger than ice... isn't it?

Eyes-of-Fire paused and collected herself. The unshifting distance had left her soulless and alone. The shapeless vertigo in her eyes now migrated to her thoughts. Her short shanks tightened. Her neck begged to rest against something solid.

But how far is it? Where is it? A blurry distance is no sign of reaching the end. Survival is certain, but the destination may not be.

His curse must be cured. That's all that matters. Crossing these barren ice fields draws near the promise of hope.

Or is it hope of promise?

The distance dipped, as though following the world to its end did not arrive in a hill or a wall or a misty barrier like all the stories foretold, but instead in a downward, gentle incline, forever. The frozen ground listed like a lone windswept tree.

Embersæge depends completely on Eyes-of-Fire.

Eyes-of-Fire is Nûk. The Nûk are strong and have overcome much worse, have made journeys to make this tundra trek seem a hike. Some have called the Nûk the steadiest of the Alfar.

Yes, north, north. Go north. North or nothing. No more than north. No less than anything. That is the journey. Giving up is unsayable, unthinkable.

Her thoughts had become jumbled. The ice glared at her and made her forget what was what. And it all stemmed from being upset about the tern. Or from unimagining her son back to who he was. He was not that creature with the aloof eyes and nubby legs. He strode like the breeze, could notch an arrow as easily as a mother brings a babe to breast.

Three things always triumph: the returning wind, the diurnal sun, the layering of snow.

Motion seemed to take focus and then still. The day sun was unmoving, but the earth tilted.

But death slips upon the unwary... And the wary as well?

Every part of her ached. Eyes-of-Fire scoffed at her weakness and continued on.

Or then again, maybe the destination is known. Where does that leave survival?

Embersæge had heard the howl. He told it all to her in a blubbing fit when he returned, before his body began to change. It was the middle of the night. Eyes-of-Fire had no idea he had even left the tent. Even Ønnok on his pallet in the center of the sleeping band did not catch the fateful bay that roused her son.

Embersæge went out to it. The world to him became a snow tunnel, and he could no more imagine running another course than leaving the safety of the snow-packed passages amidst a blizzard. He approached it. The mournful cry was muffled. Its wapiti net of horns was all that could be seen as its flat enamel teeth chomped through the skull and sinews of some small unidentifiable beast. Incapable of a human smile, the creature's spattered mouth stretched at the ends and, as Embersæge panted with fear in its presence, its eyes grew into a terrible, omniscient knowing.

Shriveled legs touching lightly as a dancer's pivoted the fulsome nightmare of an elk with three quick swivels until it towered over Embersæge. He could feel its hot breath from the fresh blood and smell the cold sweat on its wooly coat. *It was one of our spirits*, Embersæge swore to Eyes-of-Fire, his fever burning badly. It was an Elk-god.

The Nûk have no gods but the souls of the trees, the beasts, the land. The Nûk have no god above all. All spirits are holy, none most holy.

But Embersæge was in earnest. He spoke in feverish bursts, and his eyes became distracted, not quite Nûk. It was most likely from the long run to confront the beast, leaving him flustered. Over days his arms swelled and grew brawny and coarse. Eyes-of-Fire had not noticed how the hair manhood had taken upon him. No, Eyes-of-Fire had been so sure he was still a child only days before. Then, hideously, his legs had started to shrivel. After that, the transformation came quickly.

She had stared in horrors at his mouth now spouting gibberish, at his teeth that were no longer his teeth. They widened and smelt of a blood not his own. It was horrible. It was her flesh, her face that grew the ragged bumps and had the tawny horns protruding through black curls. Her legs stretched and shrank, her organs changed. She felt it as her own body. Seeing and feeling and being became one.

Eyes-of-Fire gazed lastly into her son's eyes and told him, "My final breath with you, my son, lest my final breath save you."

And she had run.

Its jaws clamped around her arm before she could react. Faster than any gray wolf she had ever seen, it cut the distance between horizon and presence. The white land erupted

in noise, and her body erupted in pain. Her hide coat seemed thinner than skin in trying to block yellow fangs.

Kill it!

She screamed inside, she pushed fear away, she stilled her soul — all in an instant. Throwing her weight toward her head, Eyes-of-Fire flipped her small, squat frame and sent the wolf scabbling over the bumpy ice, taking her flesh with it.

She regained her feet, the wolf already charging at her with teeth bared.

Run! Run, you fool!

Eyes-of-Fire jumped headlong into the timberwolf. Their bodies collided in a stiffly-frozen mash of fur and nail and skin. Eyes-of-Fire might have had some wolfblood in her, to see the ferocity and aim of her blows, the complete trust when she used her teeth as weapon, the yellow fire in her own eyes.

For a moment, the rough-and-tumble battle was an equal match. Two similar foes tore at one another.

Its throat! Bite its throat!

And then the deed was done. Blood-soaked, Eyes-of-Fire loomed like a sorceress over the carcass in front of her, and she raised an ear-splitting cry into the heavy skies.

An echo — or a voice — answered.

While her rage still held, she threw together a fire. She heaved the wolf on top. She ate its scorching meat. The only trace of sentience left in her was the gracing of her mind with the image of a poor, deformed son.

Night passed over the tundra. There was no safetree. There were no more trees at all. Eyes-of-Fire had been marching for a long, long time. Her stomach felt like that of a wakened bear in spring. Her feet were worn bare as ice. She feared the next season like a tree in autumn's prime. She was falling.

Gradually but perceptibly, the ground beneath her ceaseless feet began to slicken. What spirit knew the kind of land she now tread? No stars lit the sky. Land, sky, and Eyes-of-Fire were one night. Wind bore with flat line force around her. Eyes-of-Fire pressed forward against it.

She heard a prolonged, low, ratchetting crack. She froze. Though she could see nothing in the pitch black, in her mind's eye the path was vivid. Her solid ground had become ice. The ice had become thin. The thin ice had begun to break.

Good comes to those who pass a test of pain and courage. Danger and fear must befriend those whose eyes gain the creases of wisdom. But death severs some. Not all gain aged truths.

Yes, nothing was certain. The separated ice branched out in her imagination, set her in a slow, sink to a lightless grave. But this was worth resisting.

But Eyes-of-Fire is nearing death.

But Embersæge.

But her feet.

But his face made a horrid mask.

But her strength-less limbs.

But the cries in the wild nothing.

But the certainty of danger made flesh.

But she was Nûk.

Is the risk of your life worth the chance of changing his? Is your death equal to a baseless hope?

Not all baseless. Ænnok had prophesied that the spirits dwelled beyond the tundra. That in times of desperation, they were a salve, waiting to be balm to the wounded hand in need.

There is no cure for the curse of the wendigo.

What? Eyes-of-Fire did not know “wendigo,” but as soon as it sounded in her head, she did know it. The hind skin, the branching antlers, the terrible and lifeless legs. Wendigo.

A brush of light signaled the return of day. She could see little more than a formless landscape under the moonless sky. The cold rushed around her. Her legs burned. Her eyes begged sleep. But another part of her soul awakened, quickened by fear and new knowledge. She was not alone.

She was seven. Lost in the Wyrn Fang Peaks. She hadn't eaten for three sunrises and two sunsets. Her attempts to spark a fire with flint had winked out fruitlessly. Her knife had broken when sawing at a stony tree trying to make a shelter. She was called the "soft girl" and even thought of herself as soft, like gypsum.

Night was cutting in over the peaks quickly and, having waited with all her will for as long as she could in a shallow shelf along a mountain rise, she had felt the first terror of true despair. Then broke into the gray light the proud silhouette of a bull elk. It hadn't spied her, but she knew her scent was a giveaway. Besides that, her knife broken, she was weaponless, and her perch was no safe haven. She was a soft, hungry, weaponless, vulnerable girl. She even felt the cold that her people had learned to ignore.

The bull gave a heave and collapsed.

Eyes-of-Fire felt a thrill of energy and a fear of the unknown. She poised herself on the edge of the shelf, scanning for the source of danger.

But whatever enemy had injured the elk had gone. Its legs too weak to rise from the ground, the bull lifted its eyes toward her perch. It asked.

No, no, no. This was not her role. She was to come to the mountains and kill and win her victory and so gain her name among her people, or else salt the peaks with her fleshless bones. She was to be the hunter. Hers was the kill.

But the soft girl went down to him. There she saw the four slashes across the bull's breast. A residue from the talons that tore those gashes webbed dark purple and green.

She knelt and dipped her head, releasing her guard. "Dear spirits," she prayed, "here lies a noble beast. I have not seen what thing would kill and not eat, or attack without blessing, but I submit this soul to be safe among yours." She ripped a strip from her essential cloak and bound the garish wounds, knowing the dressing would not heal. She dribbled water out of her thin waterskin into its parched mouth. A silence passed between them.

"Now forgive me, father."

Then the soft girl broke her softness as with rock for mallet and broken branch for chisel she wrenched the noble beast's towering antlers off his head. Ribboning her cloak, she bound the antlers to her wrists. She took off through the trees. She hunted as the bull. She let out a howl.

The seer who had been silently watching her woman journey from hiding, bored and worried a moment before, could now barely keep pace with the soft girl who was starving to death. New life filled her veins and reshaped her face. When he finally caught up to her, he found her straddling the wolf carcass, bearing the bloodied antlers before her, eyes blazing.

The seer approached her confidently, then cautiously. "You are no longer the soft girl. You are the hunter. You are Eyes-of-Fire."

"I am Eyes-of-Fire. Who are you?" She bore no doubt, only daring. The thin ice around her could shatter at any moment. The wind pushed from behind.

Your weary thoughts. Or what happens when you are truly alone. Or your imagination unhinged.

"But you said a name. The name of the creature that transformed Embersæge. Wendigo. The claws and the stumps. I saw it true in my mind. How could I know that?"

Since you saved me that day, I have been part of you. But so has the fearsome beast that tore me down. Wendigo.

“No — it can’t be. No — I freed you that day.”

You tried to save my mortal body. And I have sought to save yours in return.

“For these years, since I hunted for the family, since I birthed my son, I have always known that you, in my memory, were the true Ragnarök, the truth that comes at twilight. How can you not be this when you were the truth that came to me and became me at twilight? How can you be the Angrök, the troubled dusk?”

I am not truth but loyalty. And I am both. In that, I am like you. And if you trust loyalty, I can take you beyond this cracking ice.

“But how can I trust a being both good and evil?”

All beings are both good and evil.

A tension-filled silence huddled over the black tundra as Eyes-of-Fire considered her fate. She still could not make out the sunrise. Perhaps she had stolen so far north the sun no longer rose. Perhaps she would span the tentative ice and with this spirit’s aid meet a being that none had ever seen. Perhaps he would give her the knowledge to save her son. Then again, perhaps his home, like hers, would be among the icy depths.

“You have seen the being that my son is becoming?”

I have known it worse than you have.

“And you have lived as both an elk in the Wyrn Fang Peaks and the wendigo beast who haunts the Nûkland?”

I am the bloodshed of both. The land from this tundra to the North Sea has been my tent.

“But have you loved Embersæge?”

A faint light filtered over a distant incline onto the frozen pier on which Eyes-of-Fire stood. A water smell lingered in the air. The tundra rumbled with a vibration deeper than thunder.

Eyes-of-Fire stepped forward, and the brittle ice gave way some, the water pooling around her feet. Hope so recently blossomed now withered. She stepped forward again, and the ice verged on cracking, but held yet another moment. She closed her eyes and looked ahead. Eyes-of-Fire took a deep breath, thought of Embersæge when he was a newborn babe, and took another, resolute step forward toward a frozen glade that held her salvation.

THE SWORD OF KINGS

BY KEVIN WRIGHT

GM Note

Spoiler Warning: Light

“The Sword of Kings” is a fable familiar to all children of the Northlands. It tells the story of how the first and only High Køenig of the Northlands, Kraki Haraldson came into possession of the legendary Sword of Kings, *Kroenarck*, and was launched on his path to destiny. While several of the adventures in the *Northlands Saga Adventure Path* adventure path relate to the long-dead High Køenig and his fabled sword, allowing your players to read this story will not spoil any of the encounters in those adventures and will, in fact, serve to represent the knowledge that their characters would likely have already from their childhood if they were raised in the Northlands.

THE SWORD OF KINGS

BY KEVIN WRIGHT



In the darkness before dawn, Kraki Thrallson slipped out of his father's hovel and stalked silently past several other hovels every bit as ramshackle as his own 'til he found the edge of town. From there he then strode bravely and foolishly into the long-accursed wood of Garmrdress.

Word had come to his small village that a battle had been waged in the forest the previous day: a troop of Jarls-men had finally caught up with a band of wild berserkers who had been terrorizing the countryside. The battle hadn't been large by any standard — no more than thirty combatants on either side — but it had been bloody. Only a handful of survivors had escaped the carnage to find sanctuary in the village and bind their wounds.

"Why has no one gone to despoil the fallen?" young Kraki asked when he heard the news. "Surely there lay on the battlefield many fine axes and shields, torcs and arm-rings and other bright treasures. Will no one brave the woods and claim them for his own?"

The elders of the village shook their graying heads wisely and breathed deeply from their long clay pipes.

"No, young one," they said, "None shall enter the darkened eaves of the Garmrdress and loot the dead. For the battlefield is claimed by the Lord of Crows and none shall draw from that dread one's talons what he calls his own. The valkyries claim the souls of the brave, lifting them to Valhalla on wings of finest gold, but the rest belong to the Crow-lord and his feathery horde. That blood-soaked field is his domain.

Nay, lad," they said, chuckling at his ignorance. "None that love life shall set foot on that battle ground, lest the Lord of Crows claim him as well."

Kraki pondered this wisdom in silence for a good, long while. Eventually, he decided that it was dross and that he was going to ignore it completely. He wanted weapons and armor, to take his place in the shieldwall and to hear the maidens sing a paean in his name. But he was young yet... and the son of a thrall. None was there to gift him blade nor byrnie as a father would, much less arm-ring and honor. For too long Kraki had waited. He would wait no longer. Somewhere on that blighted battlefield lay a sharp spear or a burnished greataxe and they were going to be his no matter what some crow-thing might think of it. Like as not, the old men were full of wind about the whole thing anyway.

Now he found himself picking his way through the leaves of that darkened wood with only the flickering of a pitch-soaked brand and a wan moon to light his path.

Despite his earlier confidence, the ever-deepening gloom and the forest's dire reputation gnawed at him. Misgivings grew in his heart. Perhaps there were no Crow-lord, but what if he should encounter a wolf? He knew that he would fight it with torch and fist, but he had once seen the remains of a family that had been caught and eaten by a wolf pack. Their eyeless sockets haunted his dreams. He would fight, but he had no illusions that, weaponless, he could prevail against even one of those gaunt, gray-furred beasts. What if he reached the field of battle and one of the berserkers, revived from some stunning blow, caught him there? Could he escape one of those blood-mad warriors? What if he found a field full of bodies...bodies that were not alive, but also not dead? The lore of his people teemed with tales of wights who rose to slake their inhuman appetites on warm human flesh, of unliving

draugr who roamed the desolate places, hungering for cold vengeance on those who would dare to keep breathing when they could not. Before long, Kraki couldn't tell whether he shook more from cold or from the fear blossoming within him.

Fortunately, he reached his destination before his courage failed him utterly. He came upon an open meadow, awash in a somber pool of moonlight. Corpses of men were strewn across it like scattered leaves fallen after a storm. Among the slaughter lay an abundance of sundered weapons, shattered standard, and broken bodies. Nothing moved except for a solitary black bird that glided from the shadows of the forest to land and peck at an eye in a heedless face.

A shuddering chill entered Kraki's body as he surveyed the carnage. In that moment, all the boyish fancies he had about war and battle glory seeped from him only to be replaced by a curious certainty that he would see more scenes like this in his lifetime. That he would stand on battlefield after battlefield and that, each time, he would emerge the victor. Unbeknownst to him, Kraki's wyrd had roosted full upon him.

The youth walked across the meadow, picking his way cautiously through the dead, keen to find weapons and armor that were whole and still serviceable. But his search seemed to be in vain. Everything he found was useless: here was a shield with no handle, there a sword with the blade snapped off. The best he'd found was a dented helmet and a spear with its shaft splintered off a foot beneath the spearhead. Muttering darkly, his fears forgotten, he roamed among the dead, continuing his quest.

Without warning, a violently fluttering, inky black mass seemed to congeal from the very air itself and overwhelm him; it was a sharp-beaked, harshly cawing murder of crows flown from the nearby forest eaves. Kraki squatted low, buffeted by a whirlwind of shadowy wings and slashing talons. He covered his eyes and lashed out wildly with his broken spear. The tumult created by the crows was deafening. The boy screamed a hoarse, panicky war-cry as he fought, fearing that he might lose his hearing as well as his eyes, but the dark swarm dispersed almost as quickly as it appeared.

Kraki huddled low, panting deeply. A score of tiny scratches covered his hands, neck, and face, stinging souvenirs of the murder's swift attack. For a hundred racing heartbeats, nothing stirred on the lonely battlefield. Kraki stood, his hands shaking, and wondered what had just happened.

From the night air above, three dark figures swooped down and lit on the fallen bodies that lay before him. The two nearest him were monstrous crows, large as mastiffs and stinking of offal. They hopped from corpse to corpse, their black beaks tearing through armor, skulls, and rib cages to glut themselves on the soft viscera they found beneath. But ever their strange heads cocked in Kraki's direction. Ever they moved closer and closer to him, unearthly malevolence darkly radiating from every move they made.

The third figure had landed behind them and stood utterly still. It took a moment for Kraki to give it heed while faced with the avian monsters that drew ever nearer him. It was man-shaped, seemingly cloaked and hooded in a mantle of glossy black pinions. A beak extended from the front of its head, but Kraki caught sight of a pale, human face within its maw, its eyes black as midnight and its expression devoid of any human emotion. The words fell numbly from his freezing lips, "*The Lord of Crows.*"

As if his words were a signal, the monstrous birds leaped toward him with piercing cries and outstretched wings. Reacting more from fright than from courage, he struck out with his spear-shard at the first crow that came within reach. His aim couldn't have been more perfect, the spearhead shearing through the monstrosity's eye socket and into its brain. Kraki was knocked backward by the death-throes of the crow, losing his grip on the spear and his balance in at the same time. He fell over something in the dark; whether the body of a Jarlsman or berserker he could not say.

He struggled to rise, but the other fiendish crow flew up and upon him, stabbing its deadly beak into his brain-pan. That dented helmet saved him, turning the blow from his skull but directing it down his neck and into his shoulder. Kraki collapsed with a pain-filled shriek. With a strength he didn't know he had, he shoved the creature off of him. It beat its wings and rose, gathering power for its next lethal strike.

Kraki felt around on the ground for something — anything — to ward off the blow he knew would kill him. As the crow descended upon him, he grasped the handle of he-knew-not-what and slashed upward as he rolled to the side. That time, the bird shrieked, its feet hacked off by the axe in Kraki's hand. The beast rolled awkwardly on the ground and Kraki leapt to his feet and swung the axe again and again and again into the twitching body of the monstrous crow.

When, finally, it lay in an unmoving, ruined mass of bloody feathers, the boy rose shakily to his feet. His head swum uncertainly and his quivering legs felt as if they couldn't hold him up. The white moon seemed brighter, the details of the gory battlefield appeared sharper to his widened eyes. He breathed in deeply. Frigid air revived his burning lungs, and the pounding in his head ceased. Looking down, he saw that his torch lay practically at his feet, its flame nearly smothered by feathers. Kraki picked it up and with a breath, gently coaxed its embers back to life. He sighed and looked around him.

From across the corpse-filled field approached the Lord of Crows.

With quirky, bird-like motions it hopped and fluttered toward him. He couldn't rightly tell whether it seemed more a man in a crow-suit or bird with a beak-enclosed face. Either way, it horrified him.

The boy stood paralyzed as the thing approached. When it came within two spear-lengths, it stopped, cocked its queer head and peered intently at him.

"Hast slain my servants, booooooy?" it croaked.

"Art a doughty warrior, hmmm?" Its voice held overtones of mellifluous Asgard and undertones of guttural Niflheim.

The Lord of Crows hopped to the side, circling Kraki. The boy turned, facing the crow-thing, his ax held at the ready.

"Knowest who I am, do yooooooooo? Knowest who standeth before thee?" It stopped its movement to stoop over a cadaver, rip off an arm with its beak and hurl it into a nearby tree.

"Y-y-y-yes. I know who you are. You are the Lord of Crows," Kraki said. In horror, he watched the severed limb dangle from a branch.

The creature seemed pleased. "Awwwwk! So. My fame precedeth me. My name is still heavy on the tongues of men. That is well." It leapt onto a stump and preened itself, glimpses of its inhuman face peeking every once in a while from the depths of its razor beak. It spoke again.

"If thou knowest who I am, then thou shouldst know that thou standeth within my rightful domain. The valkyrie have claimed their own. The rest belong to meeeeeee. Why," it croaked, fluffing out its wings, "wouldst thou endanger thy body and soul by intruding here? Art thou mad with grief or head-wound? Seekest thou the long sleep?"

Kraki calmed himself as best he could. "No, Lord. I am neither mad nor do I desire death. I have come that I may find a weapon with which to do battle." He gestured with the axe in his hand. "No one will grant me weapons. My father was disgraced in battle and lost his rightful name. He is now a thrall in the jarldom of Snorri Fairbeard. I would become a man of mind's-worth and so restore unto my father his name and his honor." His face burned at this confession for he was telling the dearest desire of his young, fiery heart.

"Awwwwk! Honor. Mind's-worth. The priiiiiide of men. These things hath served to fill my gullet these many centuries. But as often as I feast, the burning hunger always returneth. Always, always. And there are always boys just like you — foolish and brave — to rise up and feeeeeeeed it.

Tell me, boy," it croaked, stepping from its perch and hopping uncomfortably nearer. "Thinkest thou that that rude bit of iron in your hand wilt bring thou unto glory?"

Kraki retreated a step. "I...I don't know," he said, looking down at the axe. "I only know that if I do nothing, then I will be nothing." His jaw set as he glared at the crow-thing. "And I will *not* be nothing."

The Crow-lord peered down at him, only two steps away. Through its blood-slimed beak Kraki could see that the eyes in the stark white human-like face were deepest black from pupil to sclera. That blackness sucked in the meager light from stars, moon, and torch and utterly devoured it. Kraki felt as if those eyes devoured him as well.

“Nooooooooo,” the Lord of Crows said quietly. “No. Now that I seest thee I know that thou wilt not be nothing.”

Kraki stood stock-still, feeling like a mouse frozen by the gaze of a hawk.

The Lord ruffled his feathers and stepped back.

“But thou wilt not achieve the fame thou desirest with so crude an instrument. I knoooooweth where lies a blade beyond compare, wrought of divine metal and forged in dragon-fire. *Kroenarck* she is called, Icemelter, and strong as Garmr’s bonds are the runes that lieth upon her. But hidden she is, yes, yes, hidden away from mortal eyes, and I alone know her resting place. ‘Tis a shame for her to lie so lonely, lost from world of men and useless, buried in the damp clay.”

Kraki said nothing as the Lord of Crows hopped back onto the stump and resumed his preening.

“Thinkest thee that thou art worthy of such a blade, boy? Wouldst thou claim Icemelter as thine own?”

Kraki tried to speak, but could not. At the word ‘*Kroenarck*’, he felt as if a bell had been rung deep within him and that every member of his body resounded with its deep and thunderous call. When he gained control of himself, he said, “Lord of Crows, I say not that I am worthy, but I would give my life and fortune to claim such a sword. Tell me where it lies and I will claim it though I must climb Yggdrasil and plunder the Nine Worlds to call it my own.”

“*Awwkhaaaawk!* Such fire! I like thine heart. One day, I’ll likely eat it. If truly thou pinest for *Kroenarck*, then I shall tell thee how to gain her. Yet why shouldst I gift such a treasure and gain naught for myself? Wouldst this seem just in the eyes of god or man? Nay, boy. Nay. ‘Twould be foolish of me. And the Lord of Crows is no fool.”

Still reeling from the madness of his recent battle with the monstrous crows and heart aflame with desire for the sword, Kraki spoke without thinking.

“Please, Crow-lord! I would give my soul for such a blade! Tell me where I may find it!”

And for the first time, the youth saw an expression steal over the slackened face of the carrion-lord, one of exultation quickly tempered. It left behind the filthy residue of an oily smirk. Bodies and blood the fey creature had aplenty. Yes, fresh meat and muscle, mushy brain and unctuous entrails were his in abundance. But the souls of mortal men were a precious delicacy that rarely he feasted upon and ever strove to gain. Moreover, the crow-thing sensed that this soul might be the tastiest treat of them all.

“As thou hast spoken, so shall it be. Thus are the stakes: if thou canst answer my riddles three, I shall gift unto thee the blade *Kroenarck*, called Icemelter in the Northman tongue. With it, thou shalt become a warrior without peer and a leader of men unlike any other that have come before. Power, glory, and fame shall all be thine.

However,” he said, stepping down from his perch and stalking toward the boy, his feathered head weaving back and forth predatorily. “However. If thou failest to answer any of my riddles, then thine soul shall I claim for mine own, the loot of this, our own personal battlefield. Have we an accoord?”

Kraki knew that he should refuse this contest. Young as he was, he still sensed that the crow-lord would not enter into a competition that he thought he could lose. But beneath that fear and trepidation, like a strong, warm river beneath a sheet of ice, he felt a certainty unlike anything he had ever known. Everything in him shouted *yes!* to this game, even though the stakes were higher than his young mind could fathom.

“Yes, Lord of Crows. We have an accord.”

No triumphant *squawk* did the being make, but its black eyes gleamed exultantly.

“*Awwwk!* That is well, booooy. Let us begin.” And it squatted on a nearby corpse. Kraki made a seat of the stump it had vacated and settled his mind to think.

Without preamble, the carrion-thing said, “Who is the great one that glideth o’er the earth, and swalloweth both waters and woods? The wind he feareth, but wights nowise, and seeketh to harm the sun. Aright guess now this riddle, mortal man!” Long hours had Kraki sat at the hearthfire, listening to his elders play at words and conun-

drums, yet never had heard this one. Fortunately for him, the cold air frosted his breath as he pondered the enigma, and his quick mind struck upon the answer.

“Good is your riddle, Oh Master of Carrion and guessed it is: that is the fog. One cannot see the sun because of him, but he disappears when the wind blows, and men can do nothing against him. He kills the light of the sun.”

The fey creature only shuffled its taloned feet in the earth and posed his next question. “On the way of a miracle: water becometh bone. What is’t? Aright guess now this riddle, mortal man!”

Kraki hardly had to think about this one. The words tumbled hurriedly from his mouth.

“Ice! Good is your riddle, crow-lord, but the answer can only be ‘ice’. Winter grips water in her frigid fingers and hardens him to bone, as you say.”

For long, breathless moments, the Lord of Crows was silent. For a moment, Kraki dared hope that his quick response had befuddled the creature. But soon, in that field fertile with the unplanted dead, the fey being spoke again, its voice low and menacing in the gloom.

“*Awwhwwk*. What marvel is’t which without I saw before Delling’s door? It lights for men, and swallows up lights and wolves seeketh ever to win it. Aright guess now *this* riddle, Food for Worms.”

Young Kraki was at a complete loss. He’d no clue what Delling’s door could be. Wasn’t there a man named Delling in the village down the valley? Or was Delling the name of a dwarf from childhood nursery rhyme? He thought that a torch could be what ‘lights for men’, but what wolves ever sought to win a torch? The only wolves he knew of were the ones who came down from the mountains in the harshest winters, consuming sheep and shepherd before them. Those wolves he knew. Well, them and Skalli and Hatti, those wolves whom the tales said lived in the sky and...he had it!

With a trembling sigh of relief, Kraki said, “Good is your riddle, Eater of the Dead, and guessed it is: that is the Sun. He lights all the world and shines on all men; but there are two wolves, Skalli and Hatti they are hight, one of whom goes before and the other follows the sun.”

The crow-thing *cawed* and *awwked* so loudly that Kraki had to press his fists against his ears to drown out that hideous cacophony. With its beak, the carrion eater shredded bodies and hurled the pieces into the new-dawning sky. Kraki was caught in a rain of blood and severed extremities. The thing stopped its gory tantrum and turned on the youth.

“Wouldst best me, booooy?” it cried. “Thinkest thou to be my master?” And hopping eerily from one sharp-taloned foot to the next, it advanced murderously upon him.

His fear melting away to rage, Kraki stood and shouted, “Fog, ice, and sun your answers be, dread Lord of Crows, and to fog, ice, and sun you shall answer. Fog shroud you, ice freeze you, and sun scorch you should you break faith with me and shatter our accord! By the most ancient laws, you know that my curse rings true. Now. Tell me where lies the sword that is mine by right of conquest?”

The crow-thing halted its fell charge, trembling from beak-tip to tail-feather.

“Thou hast the right of it, booooy. Thou hast fairly won our riddling. Bend thine head close and lend an attentive ear to my words.”

Casting aside his fears, Kraki listened to the crow-lord, and his eyes grew wide in wonder at what he heard.

A year of long nights later, Kraki stood atop a long, stone barrow somewhere deep in the Waldron Mountains. He was no longer the boy who snuck out of his father’s house and into the woods. Bristles of whiskers shadowed his long-jawed face and a welcome growth-spurt added inches to his height. Kraki was now broad-shouldered and rangy, not yet come into his full strength, but nonetheless one to be reckoned with. Moreover, the trials of the past year had hardened him. It had been no easy task to come to the resting place of Icemelter. His path from battlefield to mountain barrow had been by no-ways straight. Time and again in his quest to claim his prize, he had faced hardship and danger and bone-chilling terror,

but now that he had arrived, he had no desire for delay.

He looked down upon the stone slab. Its surface was covered in deep-struck runes, hoary beyond reckoning. He could feel the power lying restless in the barrow, a power that he felt in himself as he spoke the words given him by the Lord of Crows.

By water, stone, and open sky

By Garmr's howl and Serpent's lie

By Ymir's death and Ragnarök's field

I command that Icemelter stand revealed!

With a resounding *crack!* the lid of the barrow burst asunder along its length. The sun caught on something bright within the fracture, and Kraki plunged his hand into the gap and grasped the hilt of the most beautiful object he'd ever seen. It was a longsword, shining bright as new-minted silver. Its quillons were thick with interlocking runes, and its pommel was formed in the image of a wolf-head gnawing on a chain. He swung the sword through the thin mountain air. It felt alive in his hands and he laughed as the blade caught sunlight and shone it back to the sky. He gazed out over the vast, untamed land below him and brought *Kroenarck* up to his eyes in a solemn salute.

"Now," he said, an immovable certainty settling into his words. "Now shall they know the name of Kraki Haraldson." And he started the long trek back to his father's home.