

Bezahltag, part II

By Chris di Donna

The room beyond was dank and poorly lit. A scant few candles sat in brackets on the walls. A number of men sat at a table, chattering away. From the sound Murich guessed they were Bretonian. He sighed. Bretonnians were notoriously difficult to work with. Always slacking off and arguing over who should do what. A little fire in their bellies and they wanted to take on the world, more trouble than they were worth.

Sitting by a dirty bunk across from the chattering group were an Elf and a Halfling. The elf had long flowing blonde hair and wore fancy, if dirty and worn, clothes. He was babbling flowery, alien words to the Halfling. The Halfling was bald and quite lean, by Halfling standards anyway. His clothes were also dirty yet much more simple. A distant look was in his eyes and he merely nodded to the elf's statements. His gaze fell on Murich and his expression brightened.

"Ho friend, come join us."

Murich no longer considered himself an Imperial, but old habits died hard. He didn't wish to get cosy with a bunch of backstabbing Brettos. He joined the two by the bunk.

"Hello there, who might you be?"

The Halfling patted his chest enthusiastically, "I am Bunt Foddefoot and this here is Zlorema."

Murich noticed how big a grin the elf had fixed him with. He decided to speak very slowly as he held out his hand.

"I am moor ick. Zlorema, yes?"

The elf grabbed his hand and pumped it firmly.

"Ya, am Zlorema. How is you bottom down with me?"

Murich became worried. He wasn't sure what the elf was suggesting but it sounded wrong. The kind of wrong that got you tarred and burnt. The elf continued to pump enthusiastically so Murich gently broke his hand away from the elf's grip.

"Yes, whatever!"

Murich's hostility was plain, it broke the elf's grin. He talked to Bunt in the flowery words again.

"What does he want Bunt?"

"Oh, don't worry. He doesn't speak man words very well. I think he is just asking how you are and if you'll sit with us. "

"Oh, ok. For a moment there I thought... nevermind!"

"Not at all, would you like some bilten?"

"Sure."

"Ya, like me the porking for my mouth. Gimme man anyday, ya?."

The Halfling shook his head and passed a strip to the Elf and another to Murich. They sat and chewed the dried pork in silence for a while, enjoying the salted flavour. The elf kept grinning and staring at Murich. A little too much, thought Murich. He was feeling very uncomfortable.

He decided to distract himself rather than leave. "So, tell me Bunt. How did you two meet?"

Bunt swallowed his bilten and shuffled into a more comfortable position. "Its quite simple really. I travelled the Empire before settling here. I was a chef in Elftown for five years, during which time I came to know Zloremar very well. He was my employer."

"Goodness, Elftown? You must have made a lot of cash!"

"Well, that's a later part of the story. As I was saying, Zloremar here was my employer. He was a marine sergeant with the merchant navy. Seems that one day there was a battle at sea and he took a nasty blow to the head. Knocked him cold and almost into the drink. He woke up ten days later, but he hasn't talked a word of sense since then. His Eltharin is alright..."

"Eltharin?" Murich interrupted.

Bunt nodded.

"The elf language, they call it Eltharin. Yes, his Eltharin is alright even though he makes no bleeding sense. His Man words are much worse, almost like he is learning it anew as he goes."

The elf piped up again, "Ya ya, am rough good. I like cats. Slender legs!"

"Okay, he is really starting to worry me. You two aren't filling me with swamp gas are you?"

The Halfling chuckled and shook his head. "Oh no. I can honestly say he has no idea how daft he sounds. I think he was saying what a good fighter he is, quick like a cat. Cause of his legs or something. He probably picked up on the word marine you see."

Zloremar cut in, "Ya ya, am rough good!"

Bunt smiled in amusement, "See?"

Murich was still unsure but willing to accept the Halfling's story for now. He had good snacks to share. "So go on."

"Well, one thing led to another with his family and they liquidated him. All his money, including the wages I had saved with him, was taken and we were turfed out of Elftown. They didn't think he would last long in this city."

Murich nodded in understanding, "So you've taken care of him all this time. You're a rare one for this city, Bunt."

"Oh no, he's more taken care of me. I do the thinking and he does the fighting. He may be touched but he's still a dab hand at cracking skulls."

"I see. So how'd you get this job? You meet Amon?"

"Ah, no. We actually work for Mr Johns, his first name is Jaroslav. He had us hired out for debt collecting when he said he had a big job and needed us. The pay was better and the work looked safer so I signed us up. Pity ole Zloie here didn't quite get the jist of it. When Mooks opened the door Zloie here went straight into hard britches mode, trying to force his way in. Lucky I stopped him, Mr Mooks looks pretty rough."

"Rough is right, I didn't know they stacked Bret-dung that high!"

The two broke out in laughter, the elf soon joining them. The door slamming door heralded the arrival of their taskmasters.

"Gentles, if you would calm down we can get to work", said Johns.

"Yeah, shut it gits!", added Mooks.

Quiet descended over the room. All listened intently.

Johns cleared his throat before he continued, "Very good, now. You two, move the bunk aside please."

He indicated a pair of the Bretonians. They grumbled and made a display of getting up and shuffling to the bunk. With a quick heave it was moved and a trapdoor revealed.

"Now gentles. Once we open this door you will see a set of stairs leading down. Follow them all the way down then follow the tunnel at the bottom. You should emerge in a large cavern at the end. Wait there and we shall regroup."

The Bretonians went first, grumbling and dawdling in their own manner. Some had the foresight to grab candles from the brackets on the wall. Murich quickly moved to grab some candles. He managed to grab one. He reached for another but one of the Brettos was quicker. He growled and threatened Murich, poising his arm for a back swipe. Murich just held up his hands and backed up, with a smile.

The Bretto spat at his feet and followed his friends down the trapdoor.

"Come, come now, you three, time is wasting. Move along quickly."

With Murich in the lead they entered the stairwell.

The steps were rough cut from the solid rock. The walls of the sloping tunnel were not reinforced with bricks at all. The rock was smooth and black like the surface of a still loch. Murich guessed it was once a blow hole on the Oudgeldwijk island rim. The height was

barely enough for him to clear his head. He had to stoop and hold the candle aloft several times.

The tunnel itself wound down in a direct line. In places it was quite steep. In the distance he could make out the glow from the Brettonians' candles, their chatter flitting back to him in staccato bursts, their laughter lewd and boisterous.

After a few minutes walking, the downwards slope stopped abruptly at a stone wall. A hewn passage led off towards the east. Murich examined the wall more closely. He could see the milled edges of the stones, this wall had been built. Where the stones met the blowhole wall, the joins were seamless.

"Bunt, come look at this."

"Hi Murich, what is it?"

Murich indicated the joins. "You said you travelled the Empire. Ever seen any dwarfholds?"

Bunt puffed his chest proudly, "I was the personal guest of Chief Namir Rockson at Karaz-Ungol in Kislev actually."

Murich was impressed. "Karaz-Ungol? I haven't heard of Karaz-Ungol."

"Well, it is a new settlement. Apparently Namir and a bunch of human friends did some work for the Tsar, clearing out undead from a city, killing a necromancer or something. Anyway, as a reward he asked for title to some land with an old dwarfhold on it. The Tsar granted it and he's been restoring it with members of his clan ever since."

"What? The Tsar, granting land to people? You're filling me with swamp gas you are!"

"No, honest. Apparently it's a good spot for fighting hobgoblins and raiding their trade routes. That's why the Tsar let him have it, I'd say."

"Sounds reasonable. Well then, you should be able to answer this. Does this stone work look dwarven to you?"

Bunt squinted in the dim candle light .

"No, I'd want to see more mortar for a job like this. If it were dwarven that is"

"Hmmm, that's what I thought. Oh well, lets press on shall we? No time for chatter"

"Oh, I got plenty more of that, don't you worry you're big ole noggin about that!"

The trio continued down the cut passage. The going was made easier as the floor was smooth and covered in sand. After a short distance the grey basalt walls became wet, covered in patches of algae. A soft rumbling could be heard from above.

"Say Bunt, you don't think we're going under a canal here do you?"

"Stands to reason don't it?" We were already on the edge of the island and we've been headed towards Templewijk ever since."

The grumbling became louder ahead. The damp and algae completely covered the passage now. In places the water was visibly dribbling down the walls. Their footsteps sloshed as they walked through the wet sand. No sight or sound of the Bretonians could be heard ahead.

Zloremar broke the gentle rumble and dripping sounds. "Ya, me not in tunnel is good? You go in tunnel is good, me like you in tunnel!"

Murich guessed at what Zloremar was talking about. "I think he's scared, yeah?"

"Oh yes. I'd say he feels better that we are with him. He wouldn't do this on his own."

"Friendly guy, isn't he?"

Bunt sighed at that.

"Unfortunately yes. It's gotten us into more trouble in the past than I'd like to mention."

"I can imagine."

Their stroll continued in silence. Gradually the water on the walls thinned until they were walking on dry sand again. Ahead, they could make out a dim glow.

The three workmates emerged into a cavern. The height and depth of it ate the light from the candles. Words and whispers bounced back from the distance, regurgitated pieces of Breton.

They stood for a while absorbing the depth of the setting before Mr Mooks sounded behind them.

"Git out the way, snottas. Times-a wasting!"

Zloremar was shoved aside as Mooks and Johns made their way into the sandy space.

"Just another moment, sirs, and we shall be underway. Those of you that have torches set them into wall brackets please."

The Bretonians mumbled a little before complying. Slowly the circle of orange light expanded but did not reveal the whole cavern.

"Now then. Come to order, sirs, and I shall begin."

"Yeah, git yer arses and eyes front and centre, sharpish!"

Murich was starting to get annoyed with Mr Mooks. He was the kind of foreman who gets knocked under a passing barge by the cargo crane, accidentally-on-purpose. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to have one handy down here.

"Tonight we shall be offloading cargo from a small vessel and bringing it into this cavern. This should take us about a week or so to accomplish. After that, we should spend the other week moving the load hence to a warehouse above ground."

Murich had heard this line before. Smuggling. A hanging offense. But smuggling jobs were always good for pay-rise leverage once the cargo was off the boat. Smugglers needed to move their cargo fast or be sitting ducks for the Black Caps.

"So, any questions?"

Murich cleared his throat, "Where's the boat?"

Mr Johns affected a superior expression, "Cave tunnels lead from here to the boat and to the warehouse. The distance is not far."

Murich nodded, "What about rigging, I assume there isn't a dock so how do we unload?"

Mr Johns paused briefly, as if he had expected this comment. "All cargo will be unloaded by hand."

The Bretonians raised their voices in protest, babbling and waving their hands about enthusiastically. Murich was nonplussed by this. Unloading by hand was justification to take longer on a job and get paid for resting days. To let 'blisters' heal and such. These Bretonians obviously hadn't worked Marienburg docks before.

Bunt tugged at Murich's pant leg. "Is that bad?"

"Not at all. What looks like a bad thing can be turned into good thing. Just stick by me, I've done this many times before."

Mr Johns cut through the Bretonians' uproar, "Of course, if any of you are unhappy with these arrangements, Mr Mooks would be happy to escort them back to the tavern. You will receive just pay for time spent, of course."

The Bretonians muttered amongst themselves. Two stepped forward to take up the offer. Murich shook his head. They definitely hadn't worked Marienburg docks before.

Mr Mooks snorted, depositing something vicious on the sandy floor. He beckoned to the Bretonian shirkers and strode off without a word. They looked at each other for a second then gave chase.

Murich stifled a laugh in the back of his throat as he watched the trio leave. "We won't be seeing them again."

"I am thinking Mooks in bunkroom, lots of pounding ya?!" said Zloremar.

Murich nodded, "I think, this time, I know what you mean."

Mr Johns drew their attention again, "Time is limited, so without further ado, gentlemen. Please take a torch from the wall and we shall get to work."

Each man did as instructed and followed Johns along the cavern floor to a wide, sloping tunnel. As they entered, the sounds of water lapping at rock drifted up from below.

After a short walk the group could make out a long sloop in the distance. The cavern floor sloped down into the water, the tunnel itself continuing along into the dark. The boat was quite close to shore with a ramp leading from its edge to the sand.

They were soon at work, the ramp making easy going of the job. Piles of boxes, as long as a man and thick as a large poplar trunk, were neatly stacked inside the sloop.

Murich tried to guess at the contents. He wouldn't be caught trying to open them. For one, it wasn't good manners to do such things when working aside of the law. For another thing, they were held shut by steel belts. Smithing marks indicated they would need sufficient violence to be opened.

He knew they were heavy. Very heavy. Each box required at least three men to lift, the ramp bowing if more than two groups traversed it. For Murich and his companions it was all the more difficult. Bunt could just manage to stand under the box to offer support, but could not provide enough leverage.

As they bounced and toiled up the soft sand of the tunnel, the contents of the box made no sound. Not even so much as a rattle. Murich was thinking all the while. If he could find out what was in the boxes, he might be able to find a way to lever more pay from the job.

After an hour and with only four heavy boxes carried by the thrio, Murich stopped thinking about much at all. He was too distracted by the screams of pain from his body.

The work had been long and tiring. After lifting so many of the heavy boxes, Murich still couldn't guess what was in them. His back felt like his head from the previous morning, throbbing and painful from all the lifting and bending.

The Brettonians seemed not to notice the stress of the work themselves. They were stooped long before they came here. Murich had heard that most Brettonians were farm workers anyway. No better than slaves, supplying the rich with all they desired through back breaking labour. Murich mused on how uncivilised they were. At least the Empire had guilds, a great social advance in Murich's opinion. Marienburg's guilds were the best example. Many a poor man had risen to wealth because of them.

His musings were cut off by a hearty slap on the back. The odd elf, Zloremar, was grinning from ear to ear.

"In food we mingle together, ya?"

"Err, yeah... sure?"

Bunt appeared from underfoot, "He wants to go eat, he would like you to join us, but he wanted to ask you himself."

"Oh, supper sounds good. Haendryk knows we can afford it huh?"

The Halfling nodded in agreement. "Yes, back in the Moot I could eat for a week on this pay."

Zloremar watched on with a furrowed brow, trying to pick up on the words. His efforts were made more difficult by the difference in accents.

"Ha, a week? My old Mama could get me several weeks worth of meals on this pay."

Bunt shook his head, "No, I meant eat for a week, not a weeks worth of meals. Eat for a whole week, nonstop."

Murich understood and half smiled.

"Okay, I see. Halflings have winning ways when it comes to food, all imperials should know that, eh?"

He winked at the Halfling who nodded back.

Zloremar's grin returned, "Okie, I too could eat, your mother, for a week in winning ways. She worth the pay, ya?"

He pumped his elbow at Murich and winked his eye enthusiastically. Murich was slightly confused by the elf's bizarre and bawdy display. "Look, just what are you playing at, pointy?"

Zloremar stopped grinning. he turned to Bunt and rambled in his flowing, flowery tongue. He then gave Murich a meaningful look. Bunt shrugged, "He says that he was trying to say, he would be honoured to meet you mother and share a meal. He also said it would be worth paying for. I think he is just trying to be friendly or flattering or something. Maybe it's an elf thing?" "A bit too friendly, I think!" Murich's mood dropped, the explanation made him think of home more than he would have liked.

"Yeah well, he uses a lot of formal speech so I don't think he has much of a clue about life. I think you should just ignore him."

Murich nodded and looked at the elf. His expression hadn't changed, he was obviously waiting for a response.

Murich raised his thumb. "Okay, if you think its worth doing we'll do it some day."

Zloremar look quizzically at Murich's thumb, then back to Murich, then his own thumb. He stuck his thumb out at arms length.

"Okie, doo-doo."

The grin returned. Murich just smiled back and nodded slowly.

Bunt shook his head, "Well, it's some sort of progress. I've been starving for hours now, let's go eat!"

He started rubbing his hands together enthusiastically.

"Yes, let's go. I know a nice little place over in Guilderveld. It's calm, the liquor isn't watered down and the girls are clean. Now we can afford it, we might as well enjoy it."

Bunt nodded in affirmation as Zlorema grinned in his charismatic way. Murich just sighed and the trio shuffled out of the cavern.