

Unlikely Rivermen

or

Two Kobolds in a Trenchcoat

by Kolik

“Whoever coined the phrase 'a man's got to play
the hand that was dealt him' was most certainly one
piss-poor bluffer.”

–Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle*

I

Gerard glanced up from his work at the stove and took another look at the curious knight who had joined him earlier that day. The knight had no squire, no steed, no standard, and indeed no money. The first three observations were plain to anyone who laid eyes on him, and the fourth was a simple deduction: no-one who could afford better would ever choose to hitch a ride on a wannigan.

The raft floated along at the tail end of a log driving train, little more than a collection of boards a few yards across nailed to some ragged logs with just enough room for a shack and a few crates of equipment. The shack contained a tiny stove and the last of the lumberjacks' food, which Gerard had carefully rationed to make sure it lasted. It was full spring in the countryside, and all around them was bright sunlight, blooming flowers, and fresh mountain air blowing down from the frigid peaks where he and the rest of the men had spent the last six months felling trees in the chill of autumn and overwintering by cramming together in pitiful sleeping bags lousy with mites.

When the spring melt had come, the men had rolled hundreds of logs into the swollen river and begun to drive them down to the sawmills which waited at the distant mouth. Several miles ahead of them was the beat crew, a group of truly fearless men who spent their days leaping from one giant log to the next and diverting them away from obstacles. The riverbanks would greedily snag any stray timber, no matter how massive, and as soon as one log was stuck it was a threat to anything behind it.

A ways behind the wannigan, the cleanup crew would get any logs that had become stuck but not caused immediate problems. This was a less dangerous job but it was still thankless, hard, and isolated, since the logs they caught were usually beached on the bank or wedged deep into an eddy. Gerard had known more than one man who volunteered for cleanup thinking it would be a pleasure cruise only to wind up with his ankle caught beneath a rock, gasping for breath through his nose.

Gerard was the cook, which was in theory the least dangerous job in the process of log driving. In practice, he had to satisfy the stomachs of thirty cold, tired, and often drunk men four times a day

with little more than flour, beans, coffee, and dried jerky. He did *not* normally have the time or desire to play host to a strange passenger.

“We have spice,” the knight had called from the bank when the wannigan had drifted near.

“We?” Gerard had called back.

“Our—my people. Lots of good spice. Taste very good! Take me and I give you some!”

That was enough for Gerard. The knight had stepped unsteadily aboard, wearing a full suit of plate mail, and produced a small clay jar. He was shorter than Gerard had estimated from the bank, even shorter than the elves in the beat crew who vaulted nimbly on their pike poles.

Gerard had expected the knight to take off his armor when he arrived, but the little man had remained clad in it for several hours now: dark, bulbous, mismatched iron plates that were arranged haphazardly, with patches of rough leather near the waist and legs where larger pieces fell short. The helmet had a small, uneven cross-slit in the front and no grille. There was absolutely no shade on the wannigan or any of the hundreds of logs surrounding it. “Aren’t you hot in there?” Gerard asked.

“Yeah,” said the knight pleasantly. He was seated next to the cook shack and seemed very intrigued with Gerard’s cooking. “What’s that?” He pointed at one of the ingredients Gerard was pouring into a rugged iron pot.

“ . . . Milk.”

“You have a cow?” The knight leaned in, helmet sliding forward on his shoulders.

Gerard barked a harsh laugh. “*Une vache? Non, non.* It’s powdered. Nearly a year old.”

“Does it taste good?”

“*Non.*” Gerard began beating the batter with a spoon. Whisks were far too flimsy for his line of work. “Blame the river.”

“What did it do?”

“It tastes awful. All the meltwater picks up dead leaves, mold, and dirt when it runs down *les montagnes.*”

The knight stood up with much clattering and scraping, then tottered over to a spot where some logs had pulled away from the wannigan and revealed a spot of deep blue river. He knelt, braced his hands, and lowered his head near the water's surface. A long, thin, forked tongue flicked out of his helmet, scooped up a few drops, then retracted. He turned back to the cook. "Tastes fine to me." A moment later, a commotion seemed to come over the knight as his legs and torso jittered.

"No, st—" was all he managed to say before collapsing. One hand went splashing into the river as the other slapped onto his helmet and desperately tried to keep it from falling off while his upper body rocked and quaked. His tongue extended a second time, frantically lapping up water as though he had been dying of thirst. His legs were completely motionless, bent in a heap at odd angles.

Gerard flipped a pancake nonchalantly. "Are you alright, *mon ami*?"

The knight's tongue finally retracted again, and his armor rattled in reverse, going from his chest down to his boots. He staggered to his feet, legs working like rusty springs, and paced nervously back to the cook shack. "Y-yes, we—I just had a little, uh . . . s-sort of . . ."

"You do not need to be so brave, *petit bonhomme*."

"What?"

Gerard cracked a rare smile as he slapped the knight on the shoulder. "I know us lumberjacks are pretty tough, but you don't need to do all that just to fit in, eh?"

"Uh . . . do . . . do what?"

"Drink straight from the river like a dumb wild dog!" Gerard cackled. "Here, here." He rummaged around in the back of the cook shack for a minute before presenting a small vial of purple-red liquid to the knight. "You better drink this quick or you'll be *très mal*, and I don't feel like cleaning up whatever you had for breakfast."

"Uh, thanks." The knight held the vial up to his helmet curiously. "What is it?"

"Medicine. I really should save it, but I've been eating bread and jerky for so long I'd kill a man for a fresh pear. Consider it icing on the cake."

The knight began to put the vial away in his pack. “Oh! Well, thank-you-thank-you! Thank you twice! If I feel sick, then—”

“I’m not joking, *mon ami*. If you don’t drink that up now then you’ll regret it once the water gets down to your guts.” Gerard cocked an eyebrow. “You do *have* guts, don’t you?”

“Ha ha! Of course I do!” He slapped his belly hard enough to make a deep gonging sound. It was immediately followed by angry-sounding whispers from about where his waist should have been. He swiftly cut them off with another slap. “*One* set of guts just like everyone else! Ha ha ha ha!” Gerard continued to stare, stonefaced, as the knight tipped the vial’s contents into his armor through the helmet and made conspicuous slurping sounds.

There was a long, awkward silence. The knight stood with his hands on his hips, looking nonchalant from the waist up. Gerard leaned forward slightly over the stove, his face as blank as a sheet of paper. Ugly curls of smoke crept up from the burning pancakes. He had been ignoring them for several minutes now. He continued to do so.

The knight coughed. “What did you say about cake?”

II

The afternoon passed lazily. Smoke drifted up from the cook shack to be grabbed and toyed with by the breeze. The knight was eager to look around at every minor detail around the riverbank, infinitely amused by every plain tree and field.

Dinner came shortly before dusk when a gang of wet, haggard-looking men pulled themselves up onto the wannigan. Each carried a pole with a metal hook on the end, and there were metal spikes fastened to the bottoms of their boots. Everything else on them was cheap and threadbare, including the wool sweaters that tried to keep them warm. Tried.

Shivering and swearing, the men stowed their hooks in a pile near the equipment crate and got out their pipes. The smell of cheap, tobacco leaves quickly surrounded the little raft. The knight wasn't sure how to introduce himself – these men seemed much more surly than Gerard, and they were almost dead quiet except for a low chorus of regular little *fffp-huffs*.

“Ain't got a pipe?” one of the men asked the knight.

“Uh, no.”

“Ain't got no tobacco?”

“Sorry.”

“Shame. Tough out here w'thout a little smoke.”

“Mmm-hmm,” the knight nodded. He had absolutely no idea what the man meant by that.

Gerard strode to the center of the raft and placed a large plate of food onto the floor. “Speaking of *une tête claire*, you have our little friend to thank for tonight's meal – he bought his passage with spices, you know.” The meal was several heaps of pancakes that looked like hockey pucks, next to a smaller pile of the most grizzled, overcooked bacon anyone on the crew had seen (since yesterday, anyway). A light dusting of some reddish powder was the only indication the meal was in any way different from the last several hundred the men had collectively eaten.

The man who had been speaking to the knight pointed at the powder. “That from you?”

The knight nodded. “Yes-yes! Tastes good!”

The man smiled a little. “Mmm. Have a puff, friend.”

“Thank you.” The knight took a long drag from the pipe and erupted into a series of coughs. His armor creaked and groaned as he nearly doubled over, helmet askew. At length, he came up for air. “Wow! Was that a super-strong—*krfff!*—kind of smokeweed?” He tapped his collarbone, displacing a puff from the side of his neck.

“Weakest tobacco I got, and I smoked it twice.”

“Oh, well,” was all the knight said before another coughing fit came over him – or rather, came over his legs. The knight seemed just as surprised as everyone else as he rattled and clattered in place, motionless from the waist up and nearly losing his balance below that. There was a long silence. He looked up at the generous man with the pipe.

“Y’know, I’ve *smoked* tobacco twice, but I don’t think I ever saw anyone *cough* it twice.”

The crew roared with laughter. The knight joined them nervously.

With the show over, dinner began. The men arranged themselves in a loose oval, with the knight squeezed between a large man on one side and a much smaller one on the other. Utensils and etiquette were simple: each man had a greasy, dirty plate, and a greasy, dirty fork, which he would use to serve himself as much of the greasy, dirty food as he could before the greasy, dirty rat bastard next to him took it all for himself.

The knight managed to get himself a few pancakes from the dregs of the pile – black, tough, barely any spice – and only a few scraps of bacon. Each other man had managed to get at least twice as much food. He looked around and found Gerard, who had taken the best portions for himself.

“Gerard, can I—”

“*Non.*”

“Right. Right-right. Okay.” The knight began the arduous process of cutting his food into small pieces and fitting it through the front of his helmet. He had to be careful not to stab himself in the eye.

A voice came from the small man to the knight's side. "Don't take it personally. Everyone is selfish out here."

When the knight turned his head for a better look, he was surprised to discover an elf seated next to him. Even sitting down, the elf was notably shorter than the knight. His hair, eyes, and skin were all a healthy gold but the look on his face was sour. "You work with humans?" the knight gawped.

"Yep."

"Why?"

"They pay me."

"Why?"

"Because the big lumbering oafs can't jump across rolling logs in whitewater rapids like I can—oh, don't sulk like that, Ed; you only missed two jumps today; that's got to be a new record . . . what? Ah, shove it up your ass if you think so."

The knight interrupted. "How much?"

"Hmm? Not enough." He yawned. "Beat crew is rough work, but at least I'm not on the night shift."

"What's a night shift?"

The elf looked sidelong at him. "Ah, I'm Arric. What'd you say your name was?"

"Oh, I didn't."

Half a minute passed. Arric patiently sawed at his pancake. ". . . Wouldya mind *telling* me?"

The knight positively glowed as he sat up straight and cleared his throat. "*Sir Draco of the Really Bright Fire.*"

Arric stopped with his fork less than an inch from his mouth. His eyes slowly fixed upon Draco. "You . . . mean like 'of the blazing flame' or something?"

"Of the really bright fire, yeah."

"Never heard of that order. Where'd you get the title?"

Sir Draco pointed off into the mountains. “Oh, uh. Way up there. Far away.”

Arric followed Draco’s arm and did a quick bit of mental orienteering. “The beastlands? Nothing out there but trolls and ko—”

“No! Not there, not that place. Over there!”

“The Charred Woods? That burned down just two years ago. Everyone living there died.”

“I meant over *there!* Sorry, the river’s got me turned around.”

The elf looked up and down the river, which was as straight as an iron bar and had been for the last ten miles. “. . . Right. So you’re from the Crystal Peaks—”

“Yes!”

“—which are the last remnants of a duel between two wizards, turned to sheer glass from magefire and crackling with arcanowaves so raw that no living thing can pass through?”

“Give me one second,” Draco said in a very small voice. His helmet went motionless as his shoulders shuffled, then his torso. Whispers bubbled up from deeper within his armor. Arric took the chance to finish his plate and ruminate on how much he absolutely despised pancakes and how truly dreadful this spice was. Draco’s helmet perked up again as he glanced around. “N-no. Past them, over to the left . . .”

The elf peered out. “Oh, I know that place!” Draco winced. “You must mean the nice little farming village of Azure Valley, nestled between Goldleaf Meadow and the Emerald Taiga.”

Draco heaved a great sigh. “Yeah. That place.”

Arric tossed his plate and fork back onto the rapidly growing pile. “But I thought they were all monks who had forsaken glory and grandeur.”

“W-well, that’s . . .um . . . that’s why I had to leave.”

The elf nodded sagely. “I see. It must have been hard.”

Draco carefully threaded a crisp of bacon into his helmet. “You have no idea.”

III

Night fell soon after, and the men wrapped themselves in their tattered blankets one by one. The night crew Arric had mentioned were far up ahead, having dammed a section of the river such that the logs would accrue gently on the water's surface while the majority of the flow was unobstructed, letting the wannigan come to a gentle stop. Gerard had been unable to provide a blanket for Draco, but the little knight was unbothered. "*Mon ami*, will you not even take off your armor to sleep?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine," said Draco from his spot on the edge of the mass of prone, snoring bodies. Gerard muttered something to himself and shook his head before turning over. Soon enough the cook was sawing logs just like the rest of them.

A few minutes passed. Draco was lying down, looking up at the sky. As before, there was a strange incongruity between his motionless torso and his legs, which were tensing and shuddering. A few minutes more passed.

"That's *it!*" came an angry whisper from Draco's form. "Lemme out!" The knight's body heaved, his gut bulged outwards, and finally one of the patches gave way. A gasping, panting figure sat up from the knight's motionless armor. "G-gotta . . ." The figure wobbled to its feet and over to the edge of the raft. Another figure emerged shortly and followed it.

"I told you it was a bad idea," whispered the second.

"Shut up," whispered the first, clutching its belly. "Was thirsty."

"Didn't you drink before we hailed the cook?"

"Not enough. Being legs makes me tired. *Nnh*, guts hurt bad."

"You should have said something. We could have—"

"*You* drank medicine! Medicine for me! Now . . . now . . ." The first figure made a retching sound as its head hung over the side of the raft. There was the wet plopping sound of half-digested pancakes and bacon hitting the water's surface. It wiped its mouth. "Hoo-mon cook can't cook."

The second figure knelt and grabbed the first's shoulders roughly. "Gerard was *very* nice to us. You're vomiting because you drank all that dirty river water."

The first figure was sulky. "I drink river water lots. Never get sick."

"This isn't our tribe's river. You don't know what's in that water. All kinds of dirt and—"

"*Never* get sick," the first figure said again before upending another portion of his dinner. "Not before you make friends with hoo-mons."

"Keep your voice down. I *had* to—" the second figure glanced back over his shoulder. All quiet. The suit of armor was still motionless where they had left it. He lowered his voice even further. "I *had* to because Gerard was getting suspicious."

"Easy for you to sa—*HRRK!*" The first figure's stomach was now completely empty, which replaced his sickness with hunger. "And *you* got best food at foodtime!" it whisper-shouted.

"Keep your voice down!"

"*Mon ami?*"

Both figures froze. Slowly, they looked to the center of the raft. Gerard had raised his head a bit, looking blaringly in their direction. The only moonlight that pierced the gloom was obscured by clouds and fog which crept over the water's surface. The figures could barely see him, and he them. "*Qu'est ce qui se passe?*"

The second figure hesitated, which gave the first a chance to speak. "We're fine, dumb hoo—"

A small, muffled commotion erupted in front of Gerard. He struggled to focus on it; there was a grunting susurrous near Draco, who was still lying motionless on the raft and unfathomably managing to sleep through it all. The cook hated having his sleep interrupted, but the only reason for anyone to speak or make such a racket at night was usually bad.

By the time Gerard had unwrapped himself, grasped an unlit nearby lantern and sat up, the leathery bustle gave way to the metal rasp of the knight's armor, then the clatter of him getting stood

up. Gerard wiped the last remnants of sleep from his eyes and found the knight in front of him. “. . . Ah. There you are.”

“Y-yes.”

“. . . Is there . . . ?”

“No. No problem.”

Gerard blinked slowly. “Well, if you’re sure.”

“Yes, we—yes. Good.”

“. . . Alright.” Gerard flicked a match and lit the lantern dimly. “Oh, I see.”

Draco gulped, shuddering in the pale yellow light. “S-s-see?”

“*Mon ami*, you did a good job hiding it but I think I know the problem.”

The knight began to breathe hard. “P-problem?”

“The food, she does not agree with everyone on the first time. No shame in it. You didn’t have to hop back in your armor like that.”

Now Draco’s armor rattled. “Hop in? I . . . I wasn’t, uh . . . why would . . .”

“*Mon ami*, your helmet is on backwards.”

Draco instantly screwed his helmet a half-turn clockwise. “No it’s not.”

“*Mon ami*, your legs are on backwards.”

Draco looked down at his leggings, or the collection of plates that had been melded together in a crude facsimile of pants. Sure enough, toes were pointing away from Gerard. “That . . . oh. Oh!” The knight’s legs began to rotate, remarkably going counterclockwise. Even more remarkably, his torso did not rotate with them.

Draco slapped his hip. “Other way!” His legs stopped, then ponderously began to rotate the same way his helmet had. After a second of grinding metal he was properly aligned. He looked at Gerard. “See? Nothing wrong.”

Gerard stared at the knight for a minute, trying to decide if he wanted to wake up fully and consider what he had just seen. In the end, he decided not. “*Tabernac*, a little bit of spice and I start seeing things.”

IV

Morning arrived with a splash. A man from the night shift had vaulted across the sodden logs and leapt onto the wannigan hard enough to briefly submerge one corner. The men were tossed like sausages on a hotplate before flopping back down, which nearly woke up one or two of them. The night crewman sucked in an enormous lungful of air. “LOGJAM!”

Every man was immediately on his feet, slapping the sleep out of his eyes or grasping for a boot. Draco woke up just in time to see Gerard and the rest of the men gathered around a prone form on the raft and muttering darkly. Draco hustled to his feet, pushing his way through the throng to the side of the cook, who was kneeling down.

The man on the floor was Arric, completely motionless.

“Is he—” Draco barely managed to ask before Gerard shot back up to stare at him. The knight felt Gerard’s wizened old hands clasp his shoulders firmly. “Uh, G-Gerard?”

“‘Ow did you come to get that spice, Draco?” The cook’s face was about an inch away from the front of Draco’s helmet. The knight tried to squirm away but Gerard held him fast. “Tell me, ‘ow?”

“Traded for it,” Draco stammered.

“Traded from ‘oo? Where did it come from?”

“Uh, a m-merchant . . .?” Draco craned his head past Gerard’s. “What’s wrong with Arric?”

Gerard shrugged. “‘E’s dead.”

“*WHAT!?*”

“Well, for an elf, anyway,” mumbled one of the other men. “He should be right as rain come suppertime.”

Other voices joined. “Will it really take that long for him to regenerate? It only took half a day when he drowned last time.”

“That was *after* you fished him out from the lakebed.”

“And he’s not had breakfast today, either.”

“Neither have *we*, jackass.”

“Terrible thing to die on an empty stomach.”

Draco could no longer contain himself. He bowled past Gerard and the rest and knelt down by Arric. “Wh . . . why . . . how . . .?”

“Ain’t you never seen an elf die and come back to life before, Dray?” asked one of the men. “They’re immortal, after all. Practically make a habit of it.”

Draco was too stunned to say anything. Gerard stepped in. “Remember, our friend here has come from *un petit village* up in the mountains. Probably never even *seen* an elf before yesterday.” There were nods and *ah, rights* from the rest of the men.

The sole exception was the night crewman, who was still catching his breath after his sprint back to the raft. He leaned heavily on his cant hook, puffing and pointing downriver. “Without him, we might be the ones dying, you know.” The men turned to look at the logjam, which was clearer now that the morning sun had begun to burn away the mist clinging to the water’s surface.

For about half a mile everything looked normal, before the placid congregation of logs abruptly turned into a massive, twisted pile near a narrowing in the river. Logs of every shape and size were crammed together, pressing inwards in a vicious snarl driven by the rush of water and their own weight. Pieces of timber that would take days to hack through with axes strained and groaned under unimaginable force.

As the men watched, a tree trunk that must have weighed three tons was pushed forward by the implacable current. It flexed and wavered before the combined pressure of all the logs behind it popped it up like a toothpick. The log went tumbling onto the top of the jam, forcing the whole wooden mass deeper into the water. The pile of timber gave a ripping, ominous groan that rumbled through the air and water hard enough for the men to feel it in their chests.

The night crewman looked around. “Well, any volunteers?”

A lumberjack lightly kicked Arric. “You *sure* he’s not just asleep?”

Draco stared numbly at the lifeless face of a man he had thought of as a friend less than a day earlier. “Arric . . . fixed problems like this?” He looked over at the logjam, mystified by its sheer size.

“Yeah. Most crews have an elf to crawl around underwater and fix things. A problem like this would be sure to kill him.”

“He would *drown*?”

“Nah. He wouldn’t be able to undo the jam if he was drowning. That’s what his water breathing amulet was for.”

“Oh.”

“He’d die when the logs crushed him to death. Absolutely mangled him.”

“. . . Oh.”

“And where do you think *you’re* going, *frère*?” At the far end of the raft, Gerard had grabbed the wrist of a man who was reaching into the cook shack.

“I’m going to get breakfast and then start running for my life,” the man spat. He jerked his free thumb over his shoulder. “That’s the biggest logjam I’ve ever seen, and no way in hell we’re gonna get it broken up with a dead elf.”

“Oh, thought you’d help yourself to the good *saucissons*, did you?”

“If ever there was a time for that black heart of yours to *share*, Gerard, now’d be it!”

The attitude on the raft quickly sank as the men began to bicker and argue with each other. It went without saying that not one of them was brave or selfless enough to risk his life to save the rest – every one of them owed money or a favour to someone else – but even if that were true, how would he do it? The water breathing amulet was one part of the solution, but “an immortal elf who handles this stuff” was the other.

The night crewman, far too tired for all this, glanced down at Arric. “Ironically, you’re the only one who isn’t bothered by all this. You and that fancy . . . hang on, where’d it go?” A quick survey of the raft made him fear the worst, and a quick glance around the field of logs confirmed it. “Fellas,

we've got a graverobber!" The men instantly hushed and followed his pointing finger, which was trained firmly on a figure dashing from one log to another in a wobbly sprint. The figure was none other than Draco, and even from this impressive distance the men could clearly see a glittering blue gemstone swinging wildly on a chain around his neck.

Most of the men were speechless. Gerard was not. "That *fiels d'une pute!* I invite him here, I give him food, and zis is 'ow he repays me? I'll kill him! He's dead! He's . . . he's, uh . . ." The cook rubbed his eyes. "Is he spanking himself?"

Out on the logs, Draco slapped the seat of his pants again. "Left!"

"Stupid, stupid! Biggest stupid you ever did!" came an angry, panting voice from below the knight's waist.

"Don't care, because we aren't turning around! Right!" Another slap, and his legs wobbled sharply to the right, narrowly missing a log that was slick with moss. "Right again!" Slap.

"Stop hitting! Me hear you!"

"Nearly there! We've almost made it!" A gleeful tone crept into Draco's voice, the same voice that had spent the past day talking to the lumberjacks and assuring them he was an eccentric but otherwise perfectly normal knight. "Ha ha! We're gonna make it to the logjam!"

"What we do *then!*?"

Draco's upper body stopped moving. He was briefly lost in thought. "Um . . . well, I—" the knight's boot came down at a bad angle on a log, slid horribly, and sent him tumbling ass over teakettle at sprinting speed towards the deadly mass of wood. Shrieks in duet came from Draco's form as he bounced from one log to the next, his cheap patchwork buffeted until he finally came to a rest on his battered back, bent into a C shape with motionless feet and fingers touching the treacherous waters. The buckles and straps keeping his armor together strained.

Draco raised his head an inch. "Legs?" The armor straps snapped, sending the knight's leggings into the water on one side and the rest of him on the other.

A red-scaled, lizardlike form about three feet tall plummeted into the river, dragged down by half a suit of metal. He struggled as his air quickly dwindled, squirming out of the helmet and breastplate before grabbing the shiny blue jewel he had risked so much for. His lungs filled with air as soon as he put his hand on it. The water was dark beneath all the timber crowding the surface, but the red lizard could see his green twin being dragged down by the other half of the suit.

The red one surged down to the green and extricated him, then looped the amulet's chain around both of their wrists. There was a brief moment of tranquility as they caught their breath and watched their hard-won and handmade suit of armor drifted down into inky blackness. But they had no time to mourn, for the current dragged them ever closer to the enormous snarl of logs. It looked even more massive beneath the surface.

"What now?" asked the green lizard.

"Hang on," said the red one. He scanned the logs up and down, looking for some linchpin that held them in place. He pointed. "There, near the bottom!" A particularly long log had split open nearly all the way down the middle. One end of the split was lodged in the mud at the bottom of the river, leading up and up until it disappeared into the underside of the jam.

"Everything caught on that one! If we can get it unstuck, the rest will fall back into place!"

"Me hate this," the green one grumbled, but he followed his red twin down to the base of the split log. The two of them planted their feet in the mud and heaved against the pillar of wood, but even bisected it was larger around than their combined armspan. The trunk was simply too massive for their scrawny arms to move. As they adjusted their position, another horrible groaning sound came from the main mass, and the split log sunk another few feet into the riverbed.

"It too big!" the green one said. The red one braced himself on the split log and looked up. There was a small, dark opening where it joined the rest of the logs.

"Alright, swim back to shore."

"Yeah, we swim back! Then the hoo-mons kill us! Stupid, st—"

The red one grabbed him. “No, *you* swim back. Return the amulet. Tell them sorry.”

The green one was stupefied. “What about you?”

“I’m going to fix this.” The red took a deep breath and kicked off but stopped abruptly. He looked down to find the green one had grabbed ahold of his tail. “What are you doing?”

For once, the green one didn’t look annoyed or upset or impatient. He pulled the red one back down and hugged him. “*You* take water-air stone. I tell hoo-mons you did brave.”

Red was surprised, but he smiled and returned the hug. “Thanks. Our journey is up to you now.”

“Me know. Can do it twice as good without you being stupid.” Green’s voice, even muffled and distorted by water, couldn’t hide his sadness. “Bye.”

“Farewell.”

They split off, green swimming towards shore and red shooting up the split log. There was another frightful cracking shift from the main mass that sent a pummeling wave of water at him – but he still kept his grip. With fresh air fueling him, red climbed and climbed until he reached the main logjam and pressed inside.

If the outside of the logjam had been an intimidating mountain of wood, the inside was that mountain pressed together into a hellish pandemonium of crisscrossed beams, splinters, and grinding wood chips. There was barely enough room for red’s torso to squeeze up into the dark, creaking monstrosity that was going to kill him, but he made it at last with a final deranged pull. Just as his tail followed him the entire structure creaked yet again, and the entrance closed.

Red looked up. The problem should be nearer the middle. He started to climb again, this time going much more slowly as he had to press between enormous trunks and scrabble for every inch. The logs around him were constantly shuddering under pressure that would tear him limb from limb if he ever got caught between two of them, but his limbs were much better suited for this kind of work. Nimble, he moved up and inwards, always trying to get towards where he thought the split log would

end. One instant of time passed interminably to the next with a flow as mellow as the river's current. He could barely think except to find the next handhold.

Finally, he poked his head through a tight bunch of timber and spied it: the split log that had caught on a larger one and started this whole mess. Red was at the very core of the logjam now, with so much wood and water around him it pressed in against every part of his body and made it hard to breathe, even with enchanted air filling his lungs. The brighter heartwood that lay exposed from the split was bent in a wicked curve, with the intact part of the log hooked around another large trunk somewhere above him.

As red doggedly pushed his way into the center, he got a closer look at the split log's wood fiber. It was waterlogged and pliable, which was probably what had stopped it from snapping off by now, but it was still the rough, splintery edge of a hewn tree. There was barely any room to move here, and certainly not enough to get another vantage point. This was it.

Red put his fingertips against the rough surface. Even that gentle touch was enough to make the wood wobble dangerously, and everything above him creaked and lurched in response. The previous creaking sounds had been loud enough he could feel them, but these ones were so loud they bashed against his thoughts.

Red's eyes darted around and he realized he had less than a second before the timber bashed against his brains. He braced his finger claws against the split log, then *scratched* across it as hard as he could. There was the loudest snap he had ever heard. It was the last thing he heard before a thousand tons of timber fell onto him.

“Mnnh?” Everything was blurry. His arms felt like lead.

“I said ‘are you alive,’ but I guess that answers that.”

Blinking, he looked up. Slowly a colored blob came into view and coalesced into a face he recognized against a dusky sky. “Arric?”

The elf grinned. “In the flesh. Good to see ya, Draco. Or at least the half I was talking to yesterday.”

Red coughed up a lungful of water and sat up with great difficulty. He had washed up onto a bank along part of the river he didn’t recognize. “Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t enjoy lying, but we—” he looked around. “Where’s . . .?”

“Your other half is alive. The boys are keeping him company on the wannigan, which is that way.” Arric pointed downriver. “As if the logjam wasn’t enough, for a kobold to poke his green head up onto the raft and start telling all the *stupid hoo-mons* he was actually the legs, and that the head had gotten the stupid idea to crawl into the heart of the timber like he was some kinda elf . . .” Arric trailed off, looking out over the water. Red realized it was completely clear.

“So, did it work?”

Arric nodded. “Not the smoothest way to clear one, but yeah.”

Red patted his limbs. “Then how am I alive? There was so much and it all crashed down.”

“This little beauty.” The elf reached over and plucked the amulet from around the kobold’s neck. “You’re lucky you didn’t lose it.”

“I thought the amulet let you breathe underwater.”

“It does. But the *real* magic is an ancient elven healing spell. Oh, don’t look so surprised. Did you seriously think I’d tell that group of thieves that I had an amulet that could bring me back from the dead? It’s worth more than they’d make in a lifetime.”

“Oh.”

“Why, I’m so happy to see this thing, I’ll even forgive you for poisoning me and nearly dooming us all – did you know that most kobold food is poisonous to elves? It’d been ages since I tasted it so I didn’t recognize the flavor. The amulet is what let me survive it.”

“Uh, no. Sorry.” A pregnant pause. “Are you happy to see me alive?”

Arric thumbed the amulet around his neck absently. He stood up and offered the kobold his hand.

“On the whole, sure. But tell me, is Draco your real name?”

Red grabbed Arric’s hand and pulled himself to unsteady feet. “No. I come from a tribe in the beastlands. My real name is *Turrak-Rado*.”

“Red lizard?”

“Stupid lizard. I’m not a good kobold by kobold standards. That’s why my brother and I built the Draco suit and set out on our own.”

“Hmph. Not right to call someone stupid in his own name. I’ll stick to Draco. What’s your brother’s name?”

“*Turrak-Zazo*. Green lizard. He’s more of your typical kobold.”

Arric laughed. “I’ll say. Never been called stupid so much in my life as when he was trying to explain everything to us.” He started walking towards a small canoe on the riverbank. “Come on. Everyone will appreciate having you back.”

The kobold hadn’t moved. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. Why wouldn’t they?”

“Well, we lied about who we were. Our gift nearly killed you and could have hurt other people.”

Arric furrowed his brow. “Right. Well. Look, it all worked out in the end. Minimal loss of timber and no major damage to the river or to any crewman.”

“And you’re *sure* the men won’t be mad?”

Arric chuckled. “If they were, they would have strung up and skinned your brother instead of just keeping an eye on him. Working men are harsh but they’re simple at heart.”

Draco had been drawing closer as Arric spoke, and now he stepped into the boat with the elf. They pushed off, and the kobold took the opportunity to get a good look at the river. The peaceful blue surface reflected the setting sun like a mirror. “So what do you think I should do now?”

Arric set his paddle down and let the current carry them. “Well, if I were you, I’d cash in my reputation for the choice cuts at supper – don’t worry, the secret of your seasoning is safe with me, as long as you keep it off my plate – and then get a good night’s sleep. In a few days we’ll reach the port town where all this lumber is meant to be delivered and then you can go wherever you like.”

Draco looked down. “It’s a human town, right?”

“Yes, but I think they’ll make an exception for heroic knights such as yourselves. Who knows, maybe they’ll even want to thank you.”

Draco was quiet as he watched the lush forests and meadows scroll by. It was very wide here, and much shallower than the other parts the kobold had seen. Thin slivers of bright green plants waving up from a sandy bottom, almost close enough to touch. Something occurred to him and he turned back to Arric. “Do you think they have cows?”