

Eldritch Moon - Sample

Beneath the solstice moon, during the hottest summer on record in a century, twenty-one doomed men entered the Fylan Wetlands. Weeks on the road had led them north, hoping to make enough at the market to endure the winter's foretold harshness. The route was well traveled but ill-maintained, and they had only managed one hundred miles. At the convoy's lead, a self-proclaimed artist teetered on the edge of the bank, squinting through the bright lunar rays to follow a flash of movement amidst the greenery.

"Orsin, get back with the group!"

The flustered youth pushed strands of tawny hair from his eyes, looking back at the driver before stepping away from the shore. Like a wet woolen blanket, the air hung heavily over the marsh long after the sun had vanished below the horizon. Shallow pools of moss-lined water teemed with insects along either side of the well-worn road. Wheels sloshed through the mud, and the creaking bump of shifting cargo mingled with the constant whine of mosquitoes and the drone of gnats.

Long legs brought Orsin swiftly back to the wagon with a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry, Pa, I thought I saw a deer." He replied, "How far are we from Corfinus again?"

"We can be there just before midday," Liam answered in exasperation, fingers tightening on the reins until his knuckles turned white. "Provided we clear the wetlands without stopping to rest."

Looking at them both, it was impossible to tell they were father and son. The younger man's untamed brown hair starkly contrasted with the short-cut black curls and dark eyes rimmed by decades of sleepless nights. Where Liam was stocky and thick as an oak with muscles forged through years of hard labor, his son was lanky and reed thin. Their manner of dress made the differences all the more apparent. Liam favored the brown traveling cloak over the simple, loose-fitting garb other merchants wore. His son had swapped the hooded garment for a wide-brimmed hat topped with a peacock feather above a bright blue button-up jacket.

"The same as the last time you asked me. Get your mind off the wildlife and back to the trail. These lands are safe enough, but an injured leg or broken axle will put us hours behind." He pointed with the end of his unlit pipe towards the shadowed path, twisting its way like a serpent through the pools of plant-choked water.

Liam had only offered to take the boy at the behest of his wife in the hopes that learning a trade may quiet his wanderlust. Orsin would disappear for days, returning reeking of paint, drink, and women. Usually, following one of his absences, he'd return with some new overly priced and foppish finery. The latest was an old signet ring from some noble family that proudly adorned the lad's middle finger. Of all the promise the boy had shown in his schooling, everything he did now brought complaints of laziness or abandonment.

Orsin gave a beleaguered sigh. Walking toward the front of the caravan, he scanned the rutted path and absentmindedly slapped at the endless army of blood-hungry insects. The trek from his home in the small town of Rhuiz had taken them an entire fortnight, and he was tired of watching the train of wagons cut through the countryside. There was only so much gently rocking cargo that one man could watch without succumbing to madness.

The worst of all, he decided, was the smell, a problem exacerbated by the ridiculous heat. Spending two weeks on the road in a desperate hurry to pawn off their wares, the merchants seemed to lack the desire to bathe. He spent each day surrounded by the rank, sweet smell of sweat that seeped into everything. Then there were the oxen and their seemingly deliberate need to shit wherever Orsin's expensive, doe-skin boots were destined to step.

More than anything, Orsin wanted to be back home. Why his father had chosen the hottest week of the summer to take him along escaped him. The young man had just passed his twentieth winter and fancied himself an artist rather than something so banal as a merchant. Thus far, his paintings had not been the rousing success he knew they would be, but certainly, that was his parents' fault for always calling him away to work on this or that job.

Still, he had to admit that if it weren't for the miserable heat and never-ending assault from vampiric insects, it would have been quite the picturesque locale. Copses of white Aspen trees dotted the marsh beside the winding road while the sounds of frogs and various birds formed a pleasant din. Long stretches of still water were broken up by mounds of earth covered in vibrant moss, surrounding the slowly rolling wagons. Overhead, he could see the moon hanging low and pregnant in the sky, lazily casting its white glow in a shimmering pallor over the world.

He barely noticed the rut in the trail, stepping down and jerking to the side. A loud splash broke into the humming quiet when his right foot plunged into mud up to his knee. He shouted a curse, followed by the customary "Hold!" call to signal the wagons

to stop. Liam jumped down from his seat and moved towards his son. Pulling against the sucking mud, Orsin's boot filled with the greasy liquid. He swore again at his luck. It took the both of them to remove his foot from the grip of the swampy muck, and when he finally came free, he toppled with a bone-shaking thud on the road.

"You alright?" Liam looked down at his son with concern and annoyance.

"I lost my boot." He pouted.

"I told you to watch the damned trail. I can't believe I have to repeat myself a third time. I wish that you would take this seriously..."

The man's stern tone faded when he turned back towards the road. They both felt it simultaneously, the hairs on the napes of their necks rising in alarm. Silence fell over the swamp, and the air grew thicker until it felt like they were breathing water. Their eyes were drawn skyward, and the pallid white of the moonlight changed to a sickly, unearthly green as if someone had put a few drops of colored ink into a glass of milk. Slowly, tendrils of emerald gnawed and fed upon the remaining white until none remained. The other men in the caravan stopped, staring until, finally, the silence broke.

Rustling sounds came from all around them, trees shaking and bushes quivering with sudden motion. Animals bolted from the trees to flee the wrongness that Orsin felt settling in the pit of his stomach. The oxen began to bray and pull, twisting in their yokes. A large deer crashed into the side of one of the carts with a resounding thud. Scrabbling to try and regain its feet, the animal's eyes were wide with terror, its mouth open and panting. Orsin opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a gasp, the weight in his belly hardening into a lump of lead. Above them, they could all see a large droplet forming below the hanging rim of the twisted orb.

A pulse of greenish energy swelled below the dangling celestial body, building and surging upward like an overfilled pot of boiling water. Speechless, Orsin watched the crackling aether with wide eyes. A few of their fellows turned to run, abandoning their cargo to splash into the mud. Without warning, the wave burst outward, surging over the swamp to cover everything Orsin could see before vanishing. The well-polished silver ring on his hand began to burn against his skin. Crying in pain, his gaze fell on the rune engraved on its surface, kindled with the same hideous green glow.

For a moment, deathly quiet settled uneasily over the swamp.

“Pa!” His breath caught in his chest. The young man struggled to get to his feet when the cracking of bone caught his attention.

His father stood with his head hanging down and eyes staring blankly. His muscular arms spasmed with another deep pop. The snap of breaking bone cut through the newfound silence before the man began to scream. Others in the group joined in the wail until the young artist had to cover his ears to shut out the chorus. He watched with his mouth agape while Liam and the other men moved like broken dolls, contorting into impossible positions. More snapping and popping noises echoed inside his head.

Liam turned to him, reaching out with both hands to catch him by the shoulders. His father’s mouth was still open in a scream, and his eyes were impossibly wide. Those arms stretched as they held him in their grip, the skin slowly ripping into bloodied ribbons. Ragged arms grew longer until Liam’s knuckles would have scraped the ground if he had been standing. The caravan master’s head began to twitch in sharp, frantic motions, the flesh of his cheeks tearing, his jaw widening and jutting forward. Veins stood out beneath rapidly whitening flesh, the grizzled man shaking violently with foam-flecked lips. A symphony of cracks cascaded down Liam’s spine, twisting him until he looked like the hunchbacked old Declan in Rhuiz.

Orsin screamed, eyes locked on the atrocity before him, and jerked himself backward. He felt claws tear open the back of his jacket before he splashed into the mud with his heart pounding. Thin lines of blood welled up on his shoulders, the obsidian-colored talons that Liam’s nails had become glinting. With his heart racing in his chest, he scrambled backward, trying to escape, and noticed the other men had transformed the same way. He did the only thing he could, scrabbling and digging his fingers into the muck until he regained his feet and ran.

The pumping of his heartbeat in his ears drowned out the cacophony of high-pitched screams coming from what had been his fellow villagers. He felt himself slam into something solid, crashing to the ground. Orsin looked up in horror at what had become of one of the pack animals. The oxen’s lower jaw had split in half to form two curved mandibles lined with sharp teeth above a slaving, pointed tongue. Its legs had withered, and thick ribs jutted from its sides to create new spider-like appendages. Each shuffling step it took made it teeter on blood-soaked bones while empty eye sockets stared at him above a drooling, bifurcated maw.

Mud caked under his fingers, the youth clawed toward the trees on shaking limbs. His bare foot slid into the muck, causing him to fall face-first into one of the still pools. Ripping his face out of the brackish liquid, he felt something crawling on his skin.

Reaching up with trembling hands, he grabbed it and pulled. It came away painlessly, but he felt the tearing when a large, ragged chunk of his cheek came away with the creature. Looking downward, he could see the bloated body of a leech, but it was unlike any he had seen before.

The thing squirmed in his hand, dozens of long hair-like tendrils sprouting from its swollen body. Feelers grabbed and tore at the skin of his palm while its wide mouth chewed on a chunk of his face. He tried to throw the thing, but the tendrils had burrowed beneath his skin, and he had to rip it free. He slapped his bleeding palm to his chest and bolted for the trees. Screams echoed around him when he crossed the scabby brush at the edge of the wood and threw his back against one of the tall Aspens. He tried to calm himself amidst the nightmare.

There was no way this was happening.

Panting, soaked in mud, blood, and grime, he peeked around the tree back to the road. He saw them in the horrible green glow of the tainted moon, hunched over on arms and legs that were too long to be human. Eyes that once came in various colors now shone only with the hellish light from above. They scanned the swamp, looking for something, drool dripping freely from grossly extended jaws. Orsin's heart nearly stopped when he realized they were looking for him.

A growl came from the thicket next to him, and he froze. His eyes slowly moved, head tilting toward the source of the noise, only to find something looking back. What had once been a deer stared eerily at him with eyes that sought to burrow into his soul. Its mouth opened to reveal human teeth on a muzzle twice the length it should have been. Moving in an arc around him on too-thin limbs, its forked tongue flicked beneath bright incisors. Flesh stretched like fresh hide on a tanning rack clung to elongated fore and hind legs. Two red tentacles squelched, reaching for him from the thing's gore-stained belly above a sharp black beak.

It lunged at him with a childish giggling noise that was more human than animal, moving impossibly fast on awkward limbs. Hooves battered the Aspen, the creature rearing to allow the rubbery tentacles to catch his arms. The strength in those appendages crushed his wrists. Its beak snapped with loud, wet clacks, the thrashing limbs pulling roughly to draw him in. Despite his best efforts, the creature's grip was too tight. It continued to pull him closer. Thrashing forelegs scored lines in the blood-slicked bark at his back and tore open his brow.

“Gods!” He shrieked, “Gods, please save me!”

White-hot pain flooded his senses when he felt the beak close over his hand. The wet snap of it severing three fingers muffled by his agonized scream. His blood ran cold, the thing tittering with a very high, manic laugh. He let his legs drop, using his weight to slip from the constricting grip at the expense of the skin on his forearm. Orsin crawled below the stomping stilt-like legs, keenly feeling the leaves and mud against his freshly amputated hand. There was nowhere to go. He had gotten turned around in all the confusion and pain. Blindly, he lunged away, his lungs burning and heart feeling ready to explode.

He could still hear it behind him, laughing and crashing into trees. Branches whipped at his face with each step. Orsin flew through the tightly clumped trees, keeping to the thickest growths to avoid his pursuer. Panting raggedly, he broke free of the brush into the open air, scrambling over the wet ground, half-blinded by blood.

Above him, he saw the droplet hanging from the moon continue to descend. It stretched lazily toward the wetlands until the thin thread finally snapped. Terror-stricken eyes beheld the fall of the perverse orb, a second moon lazily settling to the ground. Panicked voices in the back of his mind told him to flee, to run in any direction other than towards the falling mass, but his feet kept him moving closer as if under a siren’s spell.

Behind him, he saw the aberration stop at the edge of the copse of trees to stare blankly at him. It wouldn’t, or couldn’t, follow him in his frantic flight toward the center of the swamp. He splashed through another shallow pool, his eyes growing wider until they mirrored the swollen moon above. The falling celestial body came to rest on a platform of weathered brick jutting out of the water. Orsin didn’t feel the lashing vein-like arms of the leeches on his bare ankles, and he couldn’t feel his severed fingers nor the wounds on his face or brow. The youth walked forward in a trance, the ring on his finger growing hotter.

The green blob of light landed on the cracked and blasted stone beneath it like sap dripping down the bark of a tree. Without realizing it, Orsin had begun to wade through waist-deep water in his unstoppable journey towards it. He climbed out of the fetid pool onto the cold stone. Before him, the glowing liquid began to slide down, spreading over the weed-choked bricks. His chest ached, forcing him to let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. Desperate gasps suffused his fire-filled lungs while shaking steps brought him nearer the object.

At the core of the strange, thick resin rested a skeleton clad in a black cloak over dark, elaborately tooled armor, curled up like a babe in the womb. Pinpricks of malevolent green appeared, sunken deep within the empty sockets. They grew brighter and stared straight at him. It began with one skeletal digit - twitching.

Then another.

And another.

A curled fist formed.

Slowly, the armored corpse began to stand, shadows rising from the surrounding gloom to coil and writhe around the bone. Orsin watched living darkness stretch over the withered husk, an unseen taxidermist pulling an ethereal hide over it. Eyelids of living shadow opened upon a sea of green flames, the specter turning its gaze first one way, then the other.

Finally, those hellish lamps fell upon the battered young man. A nearly transparent shadowy jaw worked slowly to force itself back into place. Palpable hatred, anger, and sorrow flowed out from the specter in a wave, crushingly cold and full of a malevolence he could never have imagined. Orsin could feel the frigid air creeping into his bones, his breath puffing out visibly before his face at its approach.

The way it moved was unsettling. Each time the creature took a step, it happened twice, as if the shadow wrapped over the bone couldn't quite keep up with its movements. One ethereal hand lifted, and its fingers spread. Orsin heard it speak for the first time. The words echoed in the still air, bouncing within the addled man's skull. It was not a tongue he knew, and he wasn't even sure it was a language. However, he felt the power in that word when it slammed into him.

Ancient magic took hold of him, and his whole body was caught in an invisible vice when the grip of the spell tightened. The injured young man felt the incantation lift him slowly from the ground until he was forced to stand rigid on the tips of his toes. His eyes widened, fear cutting through the trance. Orsin tried to move, but his body wouldn't obey him. The blood drained from his face, his body rising until his eyes were level with the ghoulish knight's. Green fire stared through him. Madness licked at his mind, spreading like flame from an overturned candle amid scraps of parchment.

"What year is it...?" the voice cut through his mind like a sharpened razor.

He struggled to speak. His throat was tight and swollen under the grip of the foul magic. The aspiring artist tried to look away but found his eyes fixed in place, staring into the green fires of the hells. He tried to run, but his body wouldn't respond. Orsin knew only terror, the cold of its body juxtaposed with the wrathful inner fire he could feel in its gaze.

"What is the year, whelp?" it asked again in a tone that pierced his skull.

The boy couldn't do anything but stand there, his face pale and eyes wide. Death held him helpless in its grip. Hissing with irritation, the specter reached a hand forward and placed it on his forehead.

Orsin screamed.

He felt the creature inside his mind clawing with icy talons. Every private thought he had laid bare before infinite biting maws and slashing claws that bored their way through his memories. Each agonizing heartbeat spread out into what felt like days. It was as if a swarm of maggots was devouring his mind from the inside out. Flashes of his dalliances with local maids came to his mind. Memories of each time he had been too deep in his cups and done something to bring his parents' shame resurfaced to mock him. Orsin felt their anger and disappointment. It threatened to crush him, leave him naught but a shattered husk. The fiend before him pried the information from him like a morsel of food from an overly ripened fruit.

The specter's hand pulled away, and he felt the magic holding him unravel. Dismissively, the creature waved its hand, letting Orsin crumple to the floor. Moving away, the abomination paced on staggered double steps. A shadowy hand rose to its face to tap on a chin that wasn't there. The cloak dragged on the ground behind while the specter mulled over whatever information it had ripped from him.

"Fifty years... She sealed me for fifty years!" it shrieked, and the shocked man had to cover his ears to shut out the sound that rattled his teeth. *"It's not too late! I can still fix it!"*

It turned back towards the pathetic, bloodied man. Orsin tried to crawl away, desperate to flee now that his limbs were his own again. The two remaining fingers on his injured hand closed on the remnants of a wall, and he bit his lip to quiet a scream. He didn't hear the specter move, but he knew it had when he felt the chill seep into his flesh anew. Shadowy fingers lifted him with ease. He couldn't even turn to face it before

he felt the stabbing pain in his back. His eyes widened, a deep red foam escaping his lips when he tried to cry out. Looking down, he saw shadow-wrapped fingers sticking out from the center of his chest where his heart should be.

A look of confusion spread over Orsin's face.

"I will also need this back... and don't worry. I'll be sure to visit the thief who sold it to you."

With a wet, squelching noise, it withdrew its hand from his back and let him collapse to the floor like a sack of rotted grain. Kneeling, the specter pulled the signet ring from bloody, grime-stained fingers and slipped it on. The twisted abominations formed in the wake of its revival gathered, staring expectantly. Lifting the bloodied hand before them, the creatures knelt on misshapen limbs. Transparent lips slid into an easy half-smile, the moon above shifting back to its usual white sheen. They knew its will without words, and they would perform it until their bodies unraveled and fell to pieces.

For he was the Lord of Horrors, and they were his.