



The smoke began to clear underneath the oppressive tears of a leaden sky. Small fires in the grass beyond petered out, soaked under the same constant drizzle that chilled us to the bone. I wiped blood and soot from my eyes with the back of my gloved hand and stood, exposing myself on the wall to get a better vantage onto the ruined fields. No shadows moved outside our haven, and I did not detect the creak of wood nor the scrape of metal that would betray Their presence.

“West side clear.” I tried to sound commanding, to sound like a general in the field. Between the gauzy fog of water coming from the sky and the fatigue eating at my bones, my voice sounded tired, afraid and alone. I slumped behind the wall and looked around, seeing shadows in the gloom set my skin tightening and my heart racing. Were they-? “I said west side clear, dammit!”

“East... side... clear...” Antonio limped out of the mist, his black hair plastered to his forehead, and his simple, peasant features flushed and crusted on the left side with blood. He was pale, weary. The shotgun I had loaned him from Yorik’s dead body hung loosely in his hand, nearly dragging on the weak tile roof he had foolishly crossed to get to me. I would have snapped at the boy. If I thought we were going to survive, I might have. As it was it seemed like I had sentenced him and all the rest to death. Mine was the most grievous sin here. I wrestled myself to my feet and grabbed him before he could collapse and eased him to the wet stone of the parapet. I checked his eyes, and his pulse. I know an awful lot about making live men die, but precious little about making dying men live. What I did know didn’t serve to calm me.

“Killian! Killian! Tonio’s down!”

Out of the fog I heard her voice come like a child’s in the night “Get him to me, Gunman. I’m with Jasmyr, she’s – “ There was a definite pause of finality. “She’s bad.”

I struggled with Antonio. His young frame weighing more than it had any

I’m a man, that’s all. Don’t ask me about magic. I wouldn’t know anything about that. I have never crafted the Aether, nor have I ever seen that which cannot be eaten by mortal eyes, or heard spirits sing in voices made of pure energy. I’m just a guy. A rather plain guy as it were.

I only have one talent. I kill people and I break things. Actually, maybe I do have some magic for you. Listen closely, for this is all I know of magic:

Finger pulls trigger.

Trigger releases hammer.

Hammer hits primer.

Primer fires powder.

Powder pushes bullet.

Bullet hits target.

That is all I know of magic and damn near all I know of life.

My name is Jacob Vulpis, but everybody calls me Gunman.

– Jacob ‘Gunman’ Vulpis, Mercenary and Adventurer



right to. I could feel hell dragging at him in my arms, pulling him to the turf as I stomped heavily down the ruined staircases. Sister Shelia met me and guided me to the light shed by a dozen filament bulbs laid in a careless circle at the center of the burned out monastery. Shelia laid out a pack – couldn't tell whose in the near darkness, but there was blood on it– and used it to prop Antonio's head as she went to work on him. Delicate hands moved up and down his body before pausing to move her flaxen hair from her face, hooking it out of the way over one, pointed ear. After mere moments she flashed a grim smile at me and spoke in that strange, fluid voice of hers. "He's got a concussion, but it's not bad. I can deal with it. Go see if you can help Killian."

I shuffled over to the other edge of the circle as Sister Shelia began to humble herself before Ebrigid, Elder Spirit of justice, and searched the mnemonic teachings of her order for the threads of Aether. I passed five bodies laid out in a row. Friends, all of them, all beyond this now. There was some mercy in that at least, but even after passing ten pairs of sightless eyes it was Jasmyr's crumpled body that nearly broke me.

She had been our scout. Her cat-like Avenderan body silently slipping into and out of patches of brush I swear a leaf couldn't have gone without noise. She had never held herself apart from us, as so many of her people do. Her short, golden hair had always glistened with a particularly lavish light. Her spear had always been wielded in expertly gentle hands. Her eyes had ever been sharp with laughter or wit. Now her eyes were glazed, her fists clenched in pain and one leg was a ruined mass of tattered flesh.

Casting a magical technique is not normally this taxing to someone with the Talent for it, but Killian had been up all night, running all day and fighting right next to the rest of us. Her red hair was wild and trying to escape its complicated braid, and her hands shook as little lights danced into and out of Jasmyr's wound. In the sparkling wake of the wisps, flesh followed, joining to bone and reconstructing missing meat. The mage and her charge were both lost to the rest of the world for the next few minutes, so I walked closer to the south wall and called out to Waisale and got him to come down to me. Killian was done with her healing magic by the time Waisale waddled to me, his short legs pumping more slowly than I'd like.

His leathery green skin was almost mint colored, pale with exertion, but other than a new scar on the front plate of his shell, he looked unhurt. His windy voice came from between cracked lips as he settled down on his haunches, adjusting his overalls and planting the butt of his axe in the soft soil. "Yes, Gunman?"

I hunched down to meet him, sparing my thighs but causing my calves to protest loudly. "How are things on your quarter?"

He shook his hairless head and smiled without mirth.

Waisale was always like that. How he found this in any way amusing...

He clapped his thick fingers on his natural chest plate and pointed into the gloom. "There's me, Westin and Floris. East wall has Tristan, Antonio and Killian, whenever she finishes. I see Jasmyr and Shelia are not on the north wall, so who's left there?"

I cursed myself quietly. My brain was turning to mush- no sleep, too much blood. Too much damn blood. "I still need to check."

He affixed his black, endless eyes on me. "You have not heard from Kijer?"

I shook my head and drew my sword. Waisale pulled himself up and hefted his axe. He traced arcane symbols on the haft in a certain order, connecting plates to boards inscribed with physical representations of aetherial bodies. Circuits completed and sizzled. The arcane engine in the aether melded with the physical anchor of the axe and the razor sharp head grew red hot, spitting disdainfully at the slight rainfall coating it's head. He always said it wasn't magic. Not really. He always pattered on and on about his precious science. Right now, I was glad to have it. We marched up the stairs under a starless night and came to the north wall. After a few tense moments, searching for telltale signs of our enemy, Levi came out of the darkness. I sheathed my sword and holstered my pistol. Waisale powered down his heat-axe.

Levi was an ex-Lancer, freshly discharged from the Kracian army. He was young, but determined. At least he had been determined, now he was just grim. As we approached, he struck a smart salute from memory, then shrugged and chuckled. "Gin, Marcus and Abraham are dead, sir."

Waisale and I traded glances. "What about Kijer?"

Levi shook his head and held up Kijer's sword. It was a northman's blade, the almost non-existent crosspiece and thick blade covered in the runes of those people and easy to identify even in the near darkness. Kijer had claimed it had been a priceless heirloom of his forefathers and had attributed to it many strange powers. Killian had looked at it and had proclaimed that it had, indeed been ensorcelled to deliver grave damage to an opponent, but the enchantment was greatly unraveled. Whether the prowess of the blade in battle was any magic wrapped into the mundane steel or the Hu Lenkra's massive arm, she could not attest.

I shook my head and looked around for the body. It should have been easy to spot. The monastery had not fared well over the years and with the roof mostly gone, the elements had eaten away at the third story flooring to leave only a treacherous ring around the top of the crumbling walls. Waisale gripped my arm and asked Levi directly. "Where is his body?"

"He's not dead, sir. After the attack, he gave me his sword, told me to use it well, and jumped over the side of the flooring



to the bottom. I think he opened the door below and ran off northwards. I called out to get someone to close it, but with this damned rain...”

I nodded, trying to look calm even as I was slapped in the face with the news. The Hu’Kra of the north are huge creatures, six to eight feet tall. They have powerful, bundled muscles and thick fur that was proof against cold. Kijer had been arrogant, brash and given to drink, but he had also been a faithful ally and stalwart swordsman throughout this entire disaster. If he had run... Waisale shook my arm, bringing me back to here and now. “Levi, go around the parapet and gather everyone at the circle of light.”

He nodded and held out Kijer’s sword to me, I shook my head. “Keep it, you’ll need it.”

He stopped himself from saluting, then marched off at a double-time, leaving the Thorqua and I alone, I thought for a few moments as we walked over to my spot on the west wall and I gathered my rifle and ammunition. “Waisale, check the doors and make sure that they are all fast, then join us.”

He frowned at me, his reptilian face taking on strange wrinkles that made him look like a caricature of a bald, old man. “Why do I always get the hard jobs?”

“Because you look like a damned tortoise.”

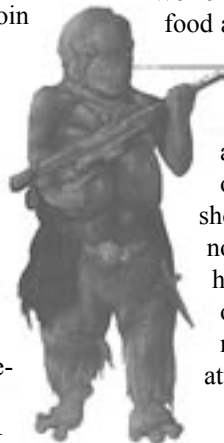
“And you, sir, are a naked ape.” He smiled again wryly. “You have any idea how to get us out of this mess?”

I forced myself to grin back and pumped my eyebrows twice. “Don’t I always?”

As he left, only I knew the truth, well truths. I sent him down because it was my job to carry the bodies of Christine and Gregory to the assembly area. They had died within a few yards of me, and there was nothing I could do but promise them they wouldn’t be treated like those villagers... There was that, and the Other Thing; the fact that we were all going to die.

I didn’t want this job. I inherited it when Dussandus, the mage that had hired us, died back in the Old Growth Forest. I’m the oldest human here, the most experienced at warfare by far and I think quickly on my feet. The others simply looked at me and expected it. Damn them anyway, I don’t want to be responsible for getting them killed. They figure none of them could do better and maybe they’re right, but I’m just not build to be a hero.

I walked into the light with one of my friends over each arm and got help from the others to gently lay them next to their fallen comrades. I opened Christine’s sightless eyes so that her spirit could see that she was being taken care of respectfully in death, and then took Killian aside to talk to her about Jasmyr. The news was much as I had feared. I sent her back to the circle and soaked in the darkness of night alone.



My guts writhed like a basket of snakes and my shoulders hunched as the pressure began to mount higher and higher. Tears squeezed from my unwilling eyes. It was many minutes before I could face the group. If they saw me like this they’d panic and run, sure as hell.

Twenty-five rode out to find out what had happened to the village of Culhainne Hollow. We had thought we were a mighty group; Warriors, mages, a scout, a priestess, an arcane engineer, a driver for the light cargo Phant that had gotten us this far, this fast. Now the Phant was abandoned a good day’s walk away, and we were cut off from it by...

Damn.

No sense in wasting any more time, I had to go back and face them. Quiet conversations died as I entered the edges of light. They all looked at me, hoping, hoping I could get them home safely.

Damn. Damn. Damn. “Look; here’s the situation, people. We’re cut off from our transport and supplies. Pooling

food and water, we can last about four days if we ration it. The problem is They are coming, and I don’t think they’re going to give us four days.” My throat clenched, I stuttered, coughed to cover it, and then resettled my sword in its sheath. It was only through clamping down on everything and shoving it deep could I look at them again. “If you run now, you might make it out. I’ll keep fires burning here, make them think that we’re still waiting. Get out onto the Green Sheath and keep running. You might make it, if I make enough noise and catch the attention of that mad bastard’s ‘farmers’.”

Silence settled in on all of us. I saw them look about, each individual searching the eyes of others around the circle. “It’s time to pack up and get going if you are going to make it.”

Jasmyr stepped forward. “I can’t run on this leg. I’d just slow everyone down.”

Levi stepped forward, rubbing at his elbow. “I have some tendons that are about to go, I can’t carry her.”

Waisale picked up a pebble and studied it so he didn’t have to look at me. “Nothing wrong with me, but my legs are too short. I wouldn’t run any faster than say,” He looked at me and smiled. “a turtle.”

“Stop it!” I stood and screamed, every muscle clenching, straining against every other. “ Stop it damn you all! I can’t get us out of this one. It’s done! It’s over. I did alright at the castle, but this is now-“ I turned to a piece of debris and slammed my steel-toed boot into it in time with my words. “ I! Can’t! Get! You! Out! Alive!”

One heartbeat.

Two.

Killian moved forward, collecting her hair out of her face

and shrugging. “Those things will be able to smell my Talent from a mile off. I’d get everyone killed. I’m staying.”

Sister Shelia laughed her musical, elvish laugh. “And I would offend my patron Spirit if I did not shield those in such dire need of protection.”

I felt my heart tearing inside. We had come so far – too far for all of us to die here, now. My voice could only come as a husky whisper that limped across the intervening space between us to die upon their ears. “We are going to die here. They are coming. Remember Them, those things he summoned? They do not bleed, they do not die, they do not breathe, they just run on their wood and steel legs. Blade festooned bodies cutting through the grass, scything arms decapitating plants with long, slicing swings. Do you remember the people of Culhainne Hollow?”

Waisale moved forward, hitching up his overalls, “Gunman-”

“Do you remember seeing them for the first time? Seeing what they had done?”

“Gunman-”

“Eyes hung on trees like cherries, Hearts strung like tomatoes to low clinging vines, feet nailed to trees like fungus-ears, row upon row upon row of human hands planted like grain-”

“Gunman!” I snapped out of my fugue, wiping at my eyes and folding my arms to hide the shaking of my hands. Waisale softened his voice. “We were there, Gunman. We know. You got us this far and for that, we’re grateful. But we are not willing to leave anyone here behind.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Tell us how to sell our lives most dearly.” He took the sheath off of his axe and flicked it off into the darkness with one stubby thumb. “Help us kill the bastards. Spirits willing, enough that one or two of us can slip off, but that’s secondary. We remember the people of Culhainne Hollow. We remember all those who have died so far to get us here.”

His eyes mirrored me, swallowed me, gave me some hope as he said, “We remember them all, and someone has to answer for their deaths.”

No, not hope. Courage.

I looked from face to face, and saw the Thorqua’s words echoed in the eyes of everyone there. They had known what I had tried to keep from them: we weren’t going to live through this one. They had known that and had not run off like Kijer. They had decided to die with me.

Pride is a strange thing to feel at a time like this. I certainly did not expect this mixture of grim elation and fierce, vengeful love. I took out a piece of chalk from my hip-sack and drew a map on a large chunk of table-like debris “We’re on Monastery Rock, Here’s the monastery ruins, bridges and the Gap.

“We can’t outdistance these things out on the sheath. The

four bridges to the Sheath are too wide to block and too strong to break. We can’t hold all the doors and we can’t even block off the stairs and doors on what’s left of the first floor.”

Antonio snorted, “Gunman, why do you always tell us what can’t be done before you tell us what we going to do?”

I smiled through my tears “Helps save on arguments with Waisale.”

He mimed a gun with his fist and extended forefinger and thumb. “You’re only human, Gunman. It’s my job to keep the less gifted races in line.”

A chuckle rippled through the company. I shook my head. We had looked forward and saw our deaths. All there was left to do was to make them as honorable as possible.

Then it struck me, I looked behind me, above me, at the piles of bodies and weapons the dead could no longer wield, then down at the hasty map I had scrawled. I suddenly saw everything in crystal clarity. I swept away everything I had been thinking and patched together something new on the spot.

Sister Shelia smiled sweetly and bowed her head, hands clasped. Waisale chuckled and nudged Tonio, who was shaking his head in disbelief. Killian wrapped an arm around Jasmyr’s shoulders and squeezed gently. Westin, Floris, and Tristan looked around as if a little lost, they hadn’t noticed. They were young they would learn, if I was right. Levi smirked at me with a face that said; *You’re doing it again aren’t you?*

Maybe, just maybe, “Ok, Here’s the plan...”

* * *

They took their sweet time, which – it turned out, was all for the better. The sky had stopped crying over our fallen and it was almost dawn before they came. We had squeezed every second until it bled to have our preparations complete.

They appeared at the edges of the forest, only visible to Jasmyr and then Sister Shelia in the barest of light that could fight through the clouds. After scant minutes, the rest of us could see them as well. In reality, all we could see were the ghostly outlines of their misshapen bodies, but that was enough. We had spent most of the night fighting them off of the walls at close quarters. We knew how they moved.

I looked at my team and each one nodded grimly at me. They were more than a group of strangers; now they were my family. Whatever would come, we would conduct ourselves bravely. We owed each other that. I raised my finger in the air and spun it in the military manner for a charge. Without words, they walked down the single stair to spread out through the rotting levels of the monastery.

In front of Killian and I were the assembled firearms of the group. Every gun, every bullet was arranged around us, ready to be used. As crazy as it was, I wanted to be with them down on the lower levels, but my place was here. Still, I knew what



they were doing, below me. I had come up with the plan.

They were taking their stations at the base of the remaining stairs that lead up to this level. Every so often they were coming upon the little cubby-holes we had made for our candles and lamps. They would light the candles and turn up the lamps, letting the wick burn long and hot. They would be wiping at eyes from the smell of lamp-oil that floated everywhere, and checking one more time to make sure the bundles of wood we had scavenged from the rubble were secure.

My thoughts skidded to a halt and, before I knew what I was doing, I had shouldered a borrowed rifle and fired. Down below a half-seen shape lurched a bit and then broke into the light cast through broken windows. They were here.

And they had brought friends.

Blade-festooned limbs screamed in the air as a horde of sixty of those things ran for the wall. I faltered, my mind rejecting the numbers I saw, refusing to believe- we were never going to make it out of here alive, never-

BOOM!

My finger caressed the trigger, staggering one of the wood and metal puppets, and brought me back to the here and now. I ratcheted another round into the chamber and fired again. Killian's borrowed gun spoke beside me, she worked the bolt awkwardly and I doubt she hit anything, but she cursed and tried again. I fired, cocked the lever discarding another smoking cartridge case as a full one loaded in, and sighted, found a target and fired again. I began jacking rounds as fast as I could, watching splinters fly from those... Things. Sight, acquire, BOOM, jack-lever... Sight, acquire, BOOM, jack-lever, Sight-acquire-BOOM-jack-lever-Sight-acquire-BOOM-jack-lever-SightAcquireBOOMJackLever- SightAcquireBOOMJackLeverSightAcquireBOOMJackLeverSightAcquire-Click!

I tossed the rifle aside and grabbed the next. Some, the ones who were here before I think, started climbing the walls, forcing their metal appendages into cracks and crevices in the walls to get purchase. The others did the same thing their wiser companions had last night- they went to the door. They banged, they pounded, unlike last night, there was a creak, a cry of stressed wood. I prayed to whatever Spirit was listening that Waisale had weakened the door enough. A splinter, a crash, and the sound of Westin and Floris yelling a challenge.

They were in.

The creatures on the wall dropped down and swarmed into the open doorway, the easy way to escape my lead rain. Down below, one of them was silhouetted in the light coming out of the broken door. It was a scarecrow made of parts and pieces

of farm tools. Bladed instruments and blunt flails, bloody wood held together with barbed wire and twine. Death and evil seethed within its eyes; two almost animated whirls of wood where a man's head would be. Cutters and shears, all collected together into a sickening parody of a human being. They were the 'farmers', the ones who planted the people of Culhainne Hollow like they were crops. These were demons born into living blades. They were the Harvesters.

We reset the remaining rifles around and a scream echoes up from below. Voices called up, the message being conveyed like a bucket brigade -"Two!"

They had reached the second floor.

Killian threw her hair from her face and set before her little ritual circle, made from a trail of gunpowder, lumps of wax and bits of brass- tiny parts of each of the lamps and candles below. She began to concentrate on her Talent.

I could hear the ringing of steel below and my palms itched for action. I picked up a rifle and slung it, snugged the scattergun on my back down into its holster, taking an extra second to make sure the thongs were tight on my pistols. The last rifle felt cold and leaden in my hands.

"Three!" four voices shouted, one after another.

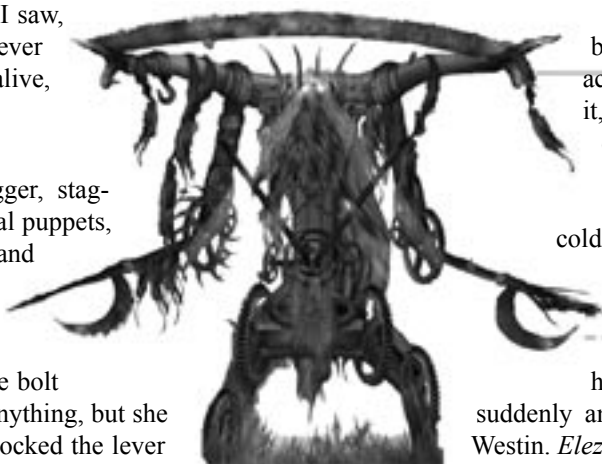
I moved down the stairs and heard a wounded cry that was cut off suddenly and completely. It had sounded like Westin. *Elezabeta, be kind to him, please.*

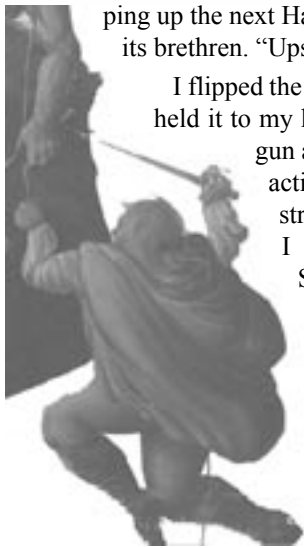
"Four!" they were moving too fast, just below us, now. I finished the stairs in one jump and turned to find Tonio, Shelia and Floris breathing heavily, and all bearing nicks and scars from battle. Waisale and Levi were on the next downward set of stairs, slinging about their steel with fading vigor and determination. They were backing up, slowly, but were wearing down quickly.

Levi tripped backward, his opponent loomed over him. Pent up rage and fear rippled up my chest and out my throat. "Down!"

The Thorqua dove over Levi, trusting his armored shell to protect them both in case of a stray shot as I rammed the trigger of the .35 Marov 7 rifle home. The greased bolt slid back and automatically shot forward, tossing winking brass into the darkness. Iduum, the Elder Spirit of Storms seemed to laugh in the shots, roaring in amusement as flashes of light licked out to shatter through the ranks of my enemies. Skill had nothing to do with the way they went down in tangled heaps of wood and iron, they were so tightly packed that a child could have hit them.

Instantly, Levi was up, dragging Waisale with one arm as he sprinted up toward me. I tossed the rifle behind him, trip-





ping up the next Harvester skittering over the pile of its brethren. “Upstairs! Everyone! Now!”

I flipped the other rifle off of my shoulder and held it to my hip. My hands began running the gun all on their own, making the lever action sing like a roiling kettledrum struck by a thousand padded sticks. I flipped that one at them, too. Someone called from above, I can not remember who; “They’re in, Gunman, They’re all inside!”

Turning, I sprinted up the stairs- a sharp tug at my pants cuff told me they were right there – **right there** – at my heels.

I clawed the custom 1.13 Wallgar repeating scattergun from the back-sheath, spun and fired, and turned away from the Harvester that had been transformed into a spray of splinters by the round. “Killian do it! Do It!”

At the top of the stairs I held my ground, my friends – my team – was climbing down the ropes thrown over the parapets as quickly as they could. Killian was lighting the gunpowder trail to the first set of lamps, then ran to join them.

As the first wax puddle sizzled above, the candle on the first floor burst into flame, all of the wax searing at once and puddling onto the old, rotten wood we had set up as tinder for it. As the first bit of brass was enveloped in fire, the heated oil from the over-wicked lamp spurt forth, coating more prepared faggots on the opposite side and severing the rope holding the deadfall in place. The only door not blocked by rock was sealed, and the monastery was now on its way to being an inferno.

Still, out of the darkness they came. On long, spindly legs made from logs and tied bundles of sticks they ran like a bladed wind. I waited, listening to my heart slowly beat in my ears. The world had turned into molasses, trapping everyone and everything in a crystal where time distorted, dilated, compressed. Oily orange light winked through the rust on cold, hard metal. My finger jerked.

Finger pulls trigger. Trigger releases hammer. Hammer hits primer. Primer fires powder. Powder pushes bullet.

One hundred round, gray wasps slung from the barrel of the scattergun, each one shredding through wood as it went, caroming off of old steel, and clearing a path a quarter of the way down the stair. I fired again and again, but they kept coming.

More wax on the power trail of powder caught, more candles blossomed like dying stars. Lamps burst with flaming oil and coated the floors below in laughing, mocking tongues of orange and red.

More rounds heated the gun. I could feel it burning my hands where I gripped the stock near the barrel. The gun kicked and bucked and I growled at it to keep in line. Tamed it like a stallion to make it kill who I wanted it to kill, make it not waste a single, precious piece of shot.

It clicked empty before I was ready. I tossed it down at them, then pulled the pair of huge, Morrison .40 revolvers and let them speak as well. Bullets smashed and cracked at things that felt no pain. Still they came.

My pistols were empty.

“Gunman!” Levi pulled at me. He was supposed to be gone, supposed to be safe. “Go! I’ll cover you.”

He drew Kijer’s sword from his belt and backed toward the ropes. Holstering the pistols with practiced hands I dove for the ropes, sliding my body over the broken tops of stones and going down, hand over hand. Four ropes were next to me, but they were all empty.

Levi? The sound of steel batting steel ricocheted over the walls as the damp rope began slipping through my fingers. I tried to climb up - tried to reach him - to help him. All the while thinking: *You can’t have him, dammit, you can’t have him, you took the others but you can’t have him.*

“Le-vi!” More powder sparked and coughed, and more bits of brass and wax popped and smoked, setting more blazes among and around the Harvesters and now Levi. I gripped the rope harder to slow my decent, but I couldn’t pull myself up, no matter how I struggled.

I felt something crack deep inside. He was supposed to make it. I was supposed to be the one up there. The roar of fire and the night seemed to swallow my voice. “Levi!”

And then, there he was, looking over the lip at me, smiling. He looked so fulfilled, triumphant, at peace.

“Levi! Come on!”

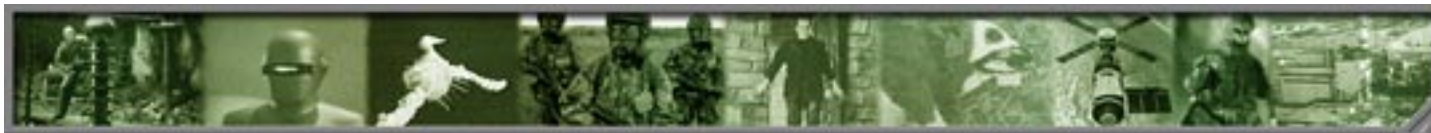
Still, he smiled, but his eyes lost some of their focus. He lurched and Kijer’s sword flew over the side to land on the rocks below. Blood began to trickle from his lips. A warm drop hit me on the cheek.

“No!”

A skeleton of wood and metal loomed over him and severed his head with one stroke from a scythe. His head fell free, and tumbled like a child’s lost ball. I watched it tumble by slowly, so slowly...

The sound of an explosion brought me out of my trance. Killian was lobbing small sparks at the Harvesters above, knocking them off the walls where they were trying to chase me. I took my pistols by the barrels and used the grips to hold the rope as I slid down. The shock of landing echoed up my legs, but I managed to grab Kijer’s sword and stagger away from the building growing blaze.

Killian looked down at me, her eyes as deep and pained as I had ever seen. “Gunman-?”



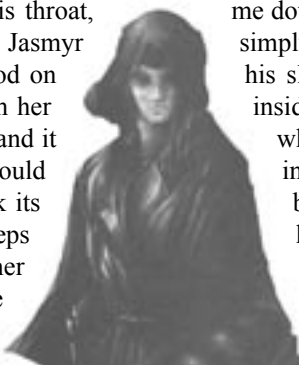
My voice was harsh and bitter even in my own ears. “**DO** it.”

She turned to the monastery and concentrated, feeding the flames with magic, turning a simple house fire into a firestorm to rival the burning of Vergisal. The flames danced and ate, splitting wood and parting twine, warping steel and cracking the wet, mossy rocks of the ruin. It built into a fitting funeral pyre for our dead. We seven survivors stared into the flames, hoping that the nightmare was finally over. The flames were mesmerizing, separated from nature by Killian’s orderly guidance. It drew us in and held us raptly – then she gasped, and the flames were only flames once more.

A voice with the tone of liquid oak shattered the spell that held us entranced. “I still say that you move more like a swordsman than a gunman.”

We spin- the darkness converges- five Harvesters- moving like the wind.

One pinned Waisale, knocking his pyrotechnic axe off into the darkness. One clubbed Killian on the head with a wheat flail and impaled Sister Shelia with a long, rusty blade, lifting her up by her intestines before smashing her into the ground. One tripped Tonio and knocked his blade away, extending a whirling, gnashing metal contrivance next to his throat, threatening to grind his flesh into hamburger. Jasmyr leapt at another, to only be batted aside. It stood on her wounded leg and drew mournful wails from her that she could not stifle. Floris raced to her aid and it spun to face her, twisting its torso in a way that would break a normal man’s spine. It lazily drew back its arms, as if a patient parent welcoming the first steps of a toddler. Scythe and sickle arms shredded her before my eyes. The last loomed over me. Its face of whirled wood seemed to smile as my guns clicked on empty chambers like malicious crickets. It would kill me a hundred times before I could reload even a single round.



Fifty yards away he stood, illuminated by the roaring death of the holy place behind me. Barabas Sheathwalker, the man who killed Culhainne Hollow.

I felt like screaming, like crying, like tearing out my hair and beating myself to death on his pet golem. We had come so far, we had trapped his creations, we had survived such odds, only now to die. As quickly as it came, the urge went, and I felt the icy calm of the doomed rush in to fill the void.

I would have felt better if he had an air of malevolence, of death and despair, or if he looked like a specter or killer or madman. He didn’t. He was fit, gnarled, in his upper forties, with a long beard and the robes of a priest of Rutana- Elder Spirit of the Wilds.

Whatever his past calling, he worshipped only himself, now. Somewhere along his career, he had begun to think of mankind as a blight, and he had begun his battle to retake the

Sheath from the Dreaming Races with Culhainne Hollow. In the Maze of Ophides, in his oversized ruin of a castle home we had once faced him. Dussandus the master mage, me, Killian, all twenty-five of us had tried to face this one man down and only half of us had escaped alive. He lazily drew forth his broadsword, tapping the flat against his robed thigh as if in contemplation. “You know, I am sure you lied to me. You are a swordsman. I used to be quite a sharp man with a blade myself.” He chuckled quietly at his own pun. “Why don’t you come over here and show me what you can do.”

Glancing at my friends, all on the brink of death, I didn’t have to ask ‘or what’. He’d kill them one at a time, slowly. He’d make me watch them die and then fight me anyway.

I dropped the guns to the turf and picked up the long, dark blade Kijer had left behind. It felt good, too good, in my hand.

“Come now, I have come all this way to find you for a friendly sparring match, the least you could do is show a little spring in your step.”

Behind me Tonio yelped as the Harvester that trapped him grazed the skin with its thresher. I quickened my pace to a trot, discarding the holsters and belts that could only slow me down. He smoothly came to *en garde*, as if he were simply an instructor in some fencing academy, and I his slow and truculent student. Memories welled up inside me, times past and wished forgotten. The wind whipped the acrid char of wood and smell of burning flesh over us as I gripped the oversized hilt in both hands and felt old ways returning. Hands that lovingly handled the butts of guns remembered their old ways, their old life, and molded to the sword as if born there.

He smiled, a bit of his feral nature peeking through. “See? I told you, a swordsman.”

I struck.

It had been years since I have plied blade to flesh. Years I have tried to put behind me. But at the first shock, the first meeting of metal, it all came back to me. I was going to make him pay for bringing them back.

His sword hissed in the air, and I met it full on. Instructors, long dead, whispered lessons in the back of my brain. They told me; Too close, Too far, Don’t over extend, Balance, Ferocity, Timing. I whirled forward like a man possessed. Barabas wheeled back, slapping aside every attack, countering every ploy. I was a talented youth with steel, but he was a man who had studied its use as a matter of survival and vanity. He slapped away my defense, taking bits of blood away with layers of skin, avoiding killing strokes like a cat, so as to make his game last all the longer.

I reached into my core, building up the rage, the hate, the raw need to survive into a hammering storm that spoke through my sword. I felt everything I was, everything I am or

ever will be, balanced on the edge of the blade as it cut and turned in the air. Kijer's sword flicked out, and came back stained with blood.

Barabas kicked my feet out from under me and leapt out of reach, feeling at his face, tracing the stinging cut I had given him. The ground dug into my back and blew out my center, leaving me tired, empty and useless.

He considered his crimson fingers, his eyes darkening like a coming quake. He hissed through clenched teeth. "You bastard. It is The Master of Rutana you have made bleed. Now I will be your master as well before you die."

I had no poetic words, like the bards like to recount, no bits of wisdom attributed to wizards or rogues. So I uttered a vile bit of profanity linking his mother with a barnyard animal.

It was the best I could do under the circumstances.

He went *en garde*, and prepared to kill me. Far away, there was a distant sound that might have been thunder –

But wasn't.

He attacked like a master, taking off a strip of skin from my left arm as I parried a strike that wasn't there. He danced around me, ripping open my shirt and lopping off my right nipple with his sword's tip. I screamed at the pain and dropped to my knees, he kicked me over and backed away shouting "Come on! You've got more to you, don't you, boy!"

The sound grew, almost constant, almost irregular it could have been my heart beating raggedly in my ear.

It wasn't.

I managed to get to my feet but couldn't lift the heavy blade in my hand to stop him from marking my cheek the way I had done his. I felt the blade nick the bone beneath my face and send me sprawling again.

"Get up! You're not done learning WHO YOUR MASTER IS!"

The sound. The sound again. I got to my knees, but had to use the sword as a cane to stand. Barabas flipped my weapon end over end with a deft maneuver and set the point of his weapon at my throat. His smile smoothed over the mask of madness and he leaned close to me, very close, gazing into my eyes like a lover. My hands, hidden behind my body, worked feverishly.

His voice was light, taunting. "Who is your master?"

Almost there, but that sound is closer.

He increased the pressure, leaning forward scant inches. "Who is your master?"

Working with slippery fingers, moved away the pants, prying at the top of my boot.

Closer, closer he leaned in. The point of his sword dug into my flesh and blood began to trickle down the groove in his blade. His smile cracked, his voiced hissed. He was not going to ask again "Who. Is. Your. Master?"

The sound, like wooden logs being beaten as Luparathi drums, but it wasn't.

Barabas turned toward it, toward one of the bridges that arced off this island of rock and onto the Green Sheath. In the slivers of dawn that made it through the clouds, you could barely see the spidery cracked windshield and dented paint that marked two tons of angry shadow.

Barabas pointed and his minions ran toward the beast as it broke through the cover and made the run for the bridge.

It was covered in dings, scratches and dents. The olive paint and been marred with the green of crushed foliage. The headlamps were shattered and useless. The engine, though, was the best that money could buy, freshly installed and the solid rubber tires gripped the ground like dragons' claws to pull itself forward.

It was our Phant.

The Harvesters leapt at it and Barabas began making motions in the air. I jumped forward and planted my boot knife in his thigh and limped off toward the rest of the team. Whatever magic he had tried to work failed instantly, and the Phant rumbled on unimpeded to crash into the ranks of the Harvesters and grind them into confetti.

I heard Barabas crying out in rage behind me. I glanced behind as the Phant ground forward. It's multi tonned body shook the very ground as it's grill seemed to yawn to swallow the rogue priest whole. Barabas removed the knife from his leg and tossed it aside contemptuously, then lifted a single hand –

- and the truck halted.

It did not skid, did not slow, it simply stopped, as if the world and begun moving too fast for it to catch up. Inside my soul, I knew – **knew** that it was still moving, but it wasn't. Barabas began to dust himself off. "Must you people break my toys every time you come over to play?"

He raised his hands to form another magical technique.

"No!" called a defiant voice behind me. Killian was on her knees- focusing all of her energy on the rogue priest, her hands pointing at him like claws. The truck jumped, as if wanting to move, but chained, unable.

"No." a weaker voice whispered. Sister Shelia, sitting up, head bowed in prayer. Tonio was dumping packets of Filidian regeneration powder into her wound and supported her as she focused as well. The gaping gash in her abdomen was slowly closing.

The truck rumbled, it grumbled, it bucked back and forth.

"No!" Strong and proud, Waisale ran forward and arced his pyrotechnic axe at Barabas, chopping deeply into his thigh. Barabas struggled, staggered, the Phant leapt forward five feet, then froze.

I calmly retrieved a pistol, went to my belt and recovered a single round. I could feel the forces at work here, the strain



building as Barabas focused his titanic Talent against all of the stimuli seeking to overwhelm him. Though his blood pumped away he showed no fatigue or pain, only the discomfort of a man on a high wire in a breeze. I had seen him impaled, cut, hacked and burned, but nothing had stopped him. He was more than simply a man now, he was a force of nature. A dark force bent of the destruction of any person he came across.

But I was betting I knew his weak spot.

I loaded the Morrison pistol carefully and set the cylinder so the shell was next in line to fire. I took a deep breath and worked the kinks out of my neck. “Barabas!”

He looked at me. Confidence and strength were flooding back into him as he mastered the distracting cut and the power of the lesser magic that constrained him. Then I leveled my weapon at him.

“My name... is Gunman.”

I pulled the trigger and blew that vain bastard’s face off, snapping his control on the aether.

The Phant leapt forward, crushing his body and reducing it to a fine paste. It reversed, engine roaring, and set its wheels on his chest. With a screech and a spray, the rear wheels fought for traction on his gory remains, and spit bits of bone and flesh in a shower of blood before moving off him. The only thing left mostly intact was his head.

The Phant trundled over the rough ground to deposit its hulking body right by us. The engine roared, whined and then settled down to sleep. The door opened up and a huge, furry head peeked out.

“I **told** you dese tings here didn’t looks so hard to drive.” Kijer said in his singsong accent. “Now where’s my damnt sa-word?”

* * *

We burnt our dead in the pyre adding Floris’ corpse to the blaze, as well as what we could find of Barabas. Sister Shelia was a little offended to have his ashes mixing with those of our friends’ but Kijer insisted it was necessary. Their ghosts and ashes, he explained, would watch over those of Barabas and keep him dead forever. It seemed fitting.

Watch over his spirit, my friends. Make sure he never comes back.

No one much said anything after that. The seven of us that survived that night, survived to make it home. We had been changed by what we had done and what we had seen, except Kijer of course, who claims that such horrors are common in the Northlands. He says stories of them are used to comfort timid children. I’d call him a liar, but we owe him our lives and as such would seem rude.

He had run all night to get the Phant and drive it back to save us. The weird thing, he said, was that the forest kept opening up for him, as if showing him a clear path to the Phant. Then, on his way back to us, the trees seemed to bend out of the way whenever the old path got too narrow. Well, mostly out of the way, the truck did take a beating. Shelia had just nodded sagely and murmured something about Rutana’s will.

We made our report to the Lord Marshal, got paid and drifted apart for a few weeks. I thought things were going to get back to normal, though I’d miss them. I went back to my mercenary for hire business (Hire the Gunman, no job too small, no gun too big!) and I figured everyone else went back to their lives, too.

A few days ago they came knocking on my door. All of them. It seems that, yes, I could make a living as a gun-for-hire, but there are things that need doing, things that need investigating. People are willing to pay to have them done and the work is not bad. Seems we already have a reputation as ‘The Survivors of Culhainne Hollow’.

Some guy actually has a map to this lost city in Lysirial that supposedly has some pieces from the national treasury of Salino in it. We get equal shares of the estimated value, we just have to go and get it and return it here. I’ve heard stories about Lysirial, and all the damned things that live there. As much as my head tells me to walk away and live a quiet, safe, uneventful life (well, quieter, safer and less eventful), I know in my gut that the last few weeks have been kinda pale, colorless, flat.

I may be mad, but if I don’t go back out there, I don’t know if I will ever feel alive again. Besides, they need a team leader they can trust, and I just can’t let my people down. Rest well, my fallen comrades, we remember you fondly. Though we go forward we think of you often.

