

THE GUNMAN

A SpirosBlaak Tale

A short tale of **SpirosBlaak** by
Steven Trustrum

Illustration by **Nathan Rosario**

There is no redemption while staring
down the barrel of the Gunman's
justice.

Using the saw-like back edge of its serrated teeth, the creature tore into the dead merchant with content abandon. Flexing the full bulk of slender body, the worg ignored the rest of its pack as they likewise feasted upon other victims from the caravan. Lost to its hunger, the savage beast didn't even realize it was dead until the blood from the hole blown through its head began to pour down into its own mouth, fouling the taste of its final meal.

The gunshot's echoing crack startled the remaining pack, causing them to leap in surprise and break away from their feasts to survey the dark forest to either side of the road. Three more of the wolf-like monstrosities fell to precision shooting as a triad of gunshots boomed from concealment. Slow-witted in the best of circumstances, the murderous predators-become-prey became overpowered by their primal need to survive. Panicking, they darted into the tree line and fled with nary a .

Carefully watching the sun's light flash off the sleek, black fur of the fleeing worgs, a shadow quickly dashed from its perch into the concealing shade of another tree. The

stupid beasts thought they would be able to find safety beneath the towering pines and concealing brush that stretched in all directions for miles. Too bad the still-fresh blood dripping from their maws left a trail that a blind man could follow.

Slinking from behind the evergreen with a frighteningly fluid grace, the shadow spared a brief, parting glance for the half-eaten corpses scattered amongst the dozen or so covered wagons laying across the trail before moving on to complete the hunt.

Craning his neck while shielding his eyes against the unusually glaring sun, Dubcob watched as the lookout signaled from his high perch that there was still no sign of the relief caravan from SpirosBlaak. Damn.

Ever since Morbeed and his bandits killed most of the village's able-bodied men nearly two months previous there wasn't anyone left to work the fields or orchards. If having to live off of their dwindling stocks was not bad enough, Morbeed had returned several times demanding gold, depriving the village of its ability to purchase more food from nearby settlements. Thus were they left waiting on the fickle generosity of the far-off capital. Maybe the Shining Cavalier would see fit to send its humble servants a miraculous gift as aid.

Yeah right, and the Magi of Bones might decide to pack it in and become an acolyte scribe in Vas.

Sighing with the weight of defeat, Dubcob buried his despair and began upon the short path towards his home where most of the surviving villagers desperately awaited news of the expected relief. How was he supposed to keep up a hopeful exterior when every fiber of his soul knew the caravan and its life-giving cargo would never arrive? And worse yet, how would he face his neighbors the men and women that looked to him for leadership knowing the village wouldn't be able to feed itself for another week much less meet the tribute Morbeed would demand in just two more days.

Things just couldn't get any worse, he thought as he threw his shoulders back in the false pretense of optimism while his crestfallen eyes rose to meet the crowd gathered upon his threshold.

The bandit lord surveyed the carnage with suppressed rage, the pitch black of his broad, armored frame seeming to swallow the light shining down through the surrounding trees. Knowing the tell-tale signs of their leader's anger, the various goblins, thugs, and orcs gave the hulking werewolf a wide berth as his sheathed fist clenched in fury.

Morbeed was not happy. No, not happy at all.

"Who could possibly have slain my entire pack?" he asked the air in defiance of the dead worgs scattered amongst the packed trees. Trails of blood still soaking into the dirt served as proof that the massa-

cre stretched further into the forest. "Who would dare do such a thing?"

Unable to reply, Morbeed's horde stepped back yet farther from their enraged leader lest he switch from his human form and ravage them in his anger as he was known to do when especially piqued.

"What, not one of you can offer an answer or an opinion? Not even a guess?"

Dark eyes scanning his cowering warriors, each a beast that was itself used to commanding fear in lesser beings, Morbeed's questions echoed without answer.

"I want those responsible found and punished to the worst extent that my imagination can contrive. Bring me the trackers!"

Eager to escape their leader's explosive mood, every warrior in sight scrambled back through the trees to pass along Morbeed's orders to the kavraen.

Dubcob's interlaced arms rested on the lip of the parish belfry as he stared off into the dark expanse of the grassy flats beyond the village lights. The sun had just set, marking the beginning of his turn at watch and leaving only the spindly light of the moon to see by. He was already feeling the weight of boredom pulling down on his eyelids.

Unfastening the lid of the canteen upon his hip, the village's elder—recently elected after Morbeed killed the previous elder in his first attack—took a long pull of whiskey and smiled as its pleasing warmth fought off the rising chill. Lazily, his eyes scanned the darkness once more as the tension of the day's toils and worries became lost in the serenity of the moment, not to mention the false sense of safety brought on by the alcohol. His next sigh was one of contentment.

Dubcob lifted the canteen to take another drink when a flash

in the moonlight caught his attention, some hundred yards or so to the south of the outmost building. Straining his eyes, he waited as his aging sight adjusted to the distance. Eventually he could distinguish the various shades of black from each other, allowing him to discern the vague outline of something stumbling through the long grass towards the village. Another few moments and he could make out the edges of a cloak billowing around the figure. His legs trembling, he rushed to the belfry's opposite edge and signaled down for a passerby to run to Bill Podder's home where the remaining village patriarchs were likely to be. His duty performed, the elder returned to his post and waited.

Raising his musket from where it leaned by his side, Dubcob wiped the sweat from his brow before sighting down the ancient gun's length. As though the void between the brackets of the weapon's simple sight were a window across the space between he and the oncoming figure in the dark, Dubcob began to notice more details about the stranger. Of roughly average height, the man's (for that is what the figure appeared to be) dark cloak was pulled tight around his upper body but fluttered loosely around his legs. The garment's hood was pulled low over his stooping head, entirely dropping his face into blackness. But the two things that most attracted Dubcob's attention were the man's staggering gait, almost as though his own weight was a terrible burden, and the musket stock that protruded from his back, rising from behind the man's sinking head.

Unsure of what the armed stranger's intent might be, and none to willing to risk his life on faith this far out in the wilderness, Dubcob pulled back his time worn musket's hammer and nervously scratched at the trigger. Not known for his accuracy in the best of conditions, he hoped the man would at least step into the moonlight if and when the time came to fire.

The stranger passed the village's dying crops and stumbled through the outer circle of buildings into the central square, not concerned or unaware of his audience in the nearby belfry. With a silent heave, the stranger finally stopped, swaying slightly. Bill Podder and five other men rushed into the square to form a semi-circle about twenty paces from the cloaked man as they leveled the village's six remaining muskets to fearfully await Dubcob's arrival. For a moment the intruder teetered on the apparent verge of toppling over, and it was then that the approaching elder noticed the dark patches on the earth trailing back across the stranger's long path.

Blood.

As if Dubcob's discovery was a cue, the bundled man toppled over, heedless of the six muzzles that suspiciously trailed his uncontrolled progress to the ground. After a surprised moment in silence, Dubcob forced the courage from out his throat and slowly approached the man's crumpled form where it lay bathed in the stretched light of a distant, open doorway. The barrel of his musket shaking in an exaggerated echo of his wariness, he moved to stand over the immobile shape. He waited the span of a few breaths before lowering his weapon and commanding the others to do the same.

With a few patient words, the elder calmed the villagers and convinced them to help carry the wounded stranger. This unexpected situation was the last thing his people needed, but the gods know that he didn't have it in him to turn away someone in need. Silently cursing, Dubcob tried not to think about Imalla's annoyance at having to share their home and precious supplies with an unknown man so obviously near death.

The werewolf grinned behind the black carapace of its boiled leather mask. Reaching two fingers into the

blood trail that he had found across the maple's tangled roots, the rider sank his nose down further into the gore to separate its scent from that of the forest floor's musk.

As though struck beneath the chin, the creature's head whipped around to howl its success towards the vaulted sky. The beast licked the blood from its fingers before loping over and leaping astride his worg mount, the scent of near-death strong in its flaring nostrils.

The hunt was on.

The voices had awakened him shortly after the light filtering down from above had penetrated through his closed eyelids. Judging from the sun's gentle warmth and the way that its light shyly crawled across his face, he judged the time to be early morning. Careful to keep his breathing shallow and regular, he kept his eyes closed so that whomever the voices belonged to would think he was still asleep while he listened.

"I don't care about any of that" the female said in a voice that got squeakier the more excited it became. "You saw his ... his ... face beneath those wrappings. That horrible face, by Spiros' Grace, what could do that to a man? It's not natural. It's not anything that He would allow to happen to a good man. You should have left him!"

That clinched it; they were definitely talking about him.

"And you think that Spiros (may his Light shine) would judge me fairly if I left a wounded man to die?" He could almost hear the desperate sigh from the second voice. A man's voice.

"Yes, by the gods, we've enough trouble of our own with Morbeed and his bunch, do we really need to ask for more?"

"What makes you think he'll be trouble?"

"You saw all those guns he was carrying." The female's tone became hard and unyielding. "Dammit, you helped carry him so you should know more than I he was a walking arsenal. And no insignia or badge to mark him as a Sentinel or anyone else of proper standing, for that matter! For all we know he could be a damnable mercenary or worse, some traitor slime who's signed on with Morbeed. And his entire body wrapped in bandages beneath his clothes; it's just not right!"

There was that name again, spoken with shaking terror. Morbeed.

"Or he could be an advance outrider for the caravan, or maybe even an innocent traveler on his way to SpirosBlaak."

Even to his ears the unknown male's words sounded less than convincing.

"Don't feed me that load of kava crap, Dubcob D. Pius" she screeched, "you may have everyone else fooled but I know as well as you there will be no caravan, just as I know that no 'innocent traveler' would be carrying enough guns to field an army! And what of his body, all wrapped up in bandages from head to toe? You saw what was underneath as well as I."

Again, that same sigh of a man used to fighting a losing battle. The stranger had a feeling his host was accustomed to receiving such screeching hysterics.

"Dear" the man began, his low tone obviously trying to find some way to placate the woman's anger, "we can't just bandage him up again and turn him out of the village. Spiros would never again shine upon us if we became capable of such dishonor."

There was a stiff silence followed by the angry clomping of small feet making a big noise on their way out of the room. The man muttered something to himself but the wounded stranger couldn't make out anything other than a single name.

Rolling his thoughts back in upon each other like waves cresting over his subconscious, the bandaged man forced himself to fall back asleep so that his mind could better work upon the matter.

Dubcob turned away from watching the faint twist of dust to the west and whistled down to a passing villager to fetch the old man. Billg, a former Sentinel, still possessed the sharpest eyes around despite his considerably advanced years.

By the time Billg arrived and had been helped up the belfry's wobbly ladder, the black dots at the head of the dust trail had become much larger. Refusing Dubcob's steadying arm, the old man impatiently pushed the other man aside and stared into the distance, lifting one hand to shade his worn eyes. Time was measured by the fearful pounding in Dubcob's chest as Billg squinted as though confirming what his eyes had already told him. Lowering his hand, Billg leveled a blank, matter-of-fact look.

"Wolves 'n riders. Six of 'em."

The warmth of the glaring sun drained from Dubcob as the sweat running down his neck turned cold. Wolf riders could mean only one thing: Morbeed.

But what was he doing a day early? In the three years the bandit lord had been extorting tribute from Dubcob's people, the evil bastard had always been on time, right down to the hour, let alone to the day. This did not bode well. With nothing else to be done for it, Dubcob warned the village and awaited the riders' arrival.

Not fifteen minutes had passed before the towering worgs came bounding in past the fields, their blackened tongues lolling out their mouths from running in the summer's blighted heat. Pulled to a halt in the village's center by their near-naked riders, the worgs panted and

brayed in chorus as the pack's leader began to sniff the sun-baked ground where the stranger had fallen the previous night.

The lead rider reached forward over the massive shoulders of his beast to peer at the earth. Seemingly satisfied with his examination, he straightened and turned in his saddle to shout something to his companions in a barking speech that seemed foul and alien coming from between a man's lips. Kavraen, Dubcob thought to himself with carefully hidden disgust.

"Some of you have broken faith with your benefactor, the great Morbeed" called the kav in thickly accented common as he rose up in his stirrups to be heard. "Some of you have dared to defy the pact that has kept you alive these three years past, defied him by daring to murder his men!"

Damn, damn, damn. Dubcob couldn't believe what he was hearing. Imalla had actually been right for a change.

"As recompense, your master has decreed that tomorrow's tribute shall be doubled." The kav's words echoed across the square, the impossibility of their demands penetrating through the fog of horror in Dubcob's mind. "Furthermore, one of every five of your people shall be taken with us now as meat for Morbeed's beasts. As you have taken life from Morbeed, so now must you return it from your own flesh."

There was a silent pause as the rider's stony gaze slowly panned across the gathered villagers, its eyes gleaming with an internal light no human could possess. Its arm rose and pointed into the crowd where Dubcob saw Imalla standing defiantly. "You shall be the first to feed my pack."

The crowd parted around the condemned woman as though she were diseased. Ashamed by their own relief at having been passed over, nobody dared watch as the

lead rider and its slaving beast approached to claim their meal. Imalla's defiant face never faltered as she locked eyes with her soon-to-be killer. Dubcob, too terrified to move in aid of his wife, could only watch as arms reached out and held him from behind, unwilling to let him add his life to the toll.

The kav-in-man-form dismounted and drew its serrated sword while bubbling saliva dripped with anticipation from his worg's fangs. Imalla backed away, her features remaining stonily defiant, but found her retreat blocked by a wall surrounding one of the village's many gardens. The sword rose menacingly and the smallish woman, unable to contain her fear at the end, cringed as she waited for the deathblow to fall.

The kav's skull caved in from the side as a shot blew through one side of his head and exploded out the other, spraying a nearby rider and worg with a soupy, red mist. All heads spun to face the direction from whence the shot came, the sound of which still snapped across the crowd like a whip.

Standing just outside the entrance to Dubcob's home, his cloak hanging loosely around him was the stranger, his hood pulled back to reveal a face wrapped entirely in bandages. A wisp of smoke rose from the rounded muzzle of the large pistol in his right hand.

Shocked by the unexpected resistance from what they had always thought to be a town of human sheep, the kav raiders stood abased and unmoving. Scant moments passed as nobody moved, afraid to shatter the calm before the storm that everyone felt about to break. The moment was finally broken when the dead rider's worg screamed forth its rage with a mournful howl. Driven berserk by the death of its master, the large beast shook its head furiously, flailing saliva from side to side as its fur hackled to exclaim its outrage. It charged.

Unmoving, the last trails of smoke still crawling from the spent muzzle of his outstretched pistol, the bandaged stranger looked on.

The slaving beast's powerful legs carried it forward in long strides as it rushed the mysterious dissident, all reason lost to its bloodlust. The villagers drew a shared breath and looked on with morbid anticipation of the monster overrunning and goring its tormentor. With nearly eight spans of its impressive length still separating it from its prey, the beast leapt into the air, the weight and force of its charge carrying it the remaining distance. Still frozen, the stranger stood there, seeming to wait for death to overtake him.

Time seemed to slow, the onlookers would later say, as all reality seemed centered upon the deadly scene, only to awaken with sudden abandon moments later as the stranger dropped beneath the lunge and was lost under the expanse of the vile animal's bulk. A duo of muffled cracks quickly sounded and two swaths of smoke burst out from beneath the beast. Its voracious leap became an uncontrolled sprawl as its weight bore the dead creature over its intended target and into a broken pile that smacked to the ground with a sickening, wet thump. The limp body rolled twice, carried by its momentum, and then stalled upon the threshold of Dubcob's home. The two holes in the animal's forehead, placed side by side above its closed eyes, poured crimson down the animal's still face.

The stranger rose slowly, returning the two smoking pistols to their holsters in the small of his back and beneath his cloak. The original weapon he'd used to shoot the rider was nowhere to be seen. "This town is no longer his" came the low, gruff voice from beneath the stranger's wrappings. "Go back to your master and tell him that, and never return."

The nearest kav rider looked to each of his pack mates in disbe-

lief before returning his gaze to the cloaked figure. He and his fellows shifted into their hybrid, man-beast forms as their worgs sidled in readiness. "And if we don't, human? If we choose to ravage you and this entire town until all its brood rests in the gullets of our hounds?" The shapeshifter was almost successful at keeping the fear and uncertainty from its voice.

"Then you'll be the first to die" was the curt reply as a pistol rose from beneath the cloak to align with the rider's head so quickly it almost seemed as though the weapon had appeared by magic.

Ten minutes later the remaining five riders and their mounts were a trail of dust disappearing over the northern plains, retreating towards the distant woods.



Dubcob stared at the stranger sitting at his table across the room. The man's cloak was thrown across the back of the simple chair that creaked with his weight while an array of weaponry lay splayed out across the table's unfinished surface—ten pistols and an unusually long musket with a hexagonal barrel. Dubcob knew yet more weapons were already hidden somewhere within the stranger's folds of the stranger's clothing, including a number of hidden pockets in the cloak.

With determined care, his guest took each weapon in his wrapped hands, wiped it dutifully with a clean rag, and reloaded. Each time he would end the ritual by reverently raising the gun to stare down its length with an eye hidden within the shadows of the fresh bandages shrouding his face. Looking on placidly, Dubcob waited for the stranger to speak—to at least give him a moment of attention so that he could thank the man for saving his wife.

"You know they'll return." Dubcob tilted his head slightly at the unexpected intrusion, acknowl-

edging his wife's words without committing to her presence. "You know they'll come back and kill us all because of what you've done" she hammered at the man cleaning his guns upon the table she served meals upon. It was a statement of fact; no question asked, no answer expected.

"Yes, I know." Imalla was across the floor and at the table in a storm, sweeping many of the pistols from the tabletop in incensed retribution for the stranger's short-spoken reply.

"You knew and through your actions damned us all!"

The head tilted back slowly, the light from the room's single lantern creeping into the folds of the bandages to reveal the gray eyes beneath. Startled by what she saw within those cold orbs, the lady of the house staggered back from the table despite herself and left without further distress. Abashed by his wife's actions, Dubcob rose and bent to pick up the scattered pistols from the floor, his old bones voicing their complaints. "She's right you know, we are doomed." The stranger merely took the pistols in turn as they were returned and keenly studied down their lengths again before wordlessly returning each to the table. Ashamed and uncomfortable in the silence, the village elder had enough sense to seek another topic.

"How did you know there was trouble outside? When last I saw you, you were unconscious and in no condition to move, let alone dodge and shoot leaping worgs."

"I was awakened by the stench of their evil" the gravely voice explained dispassionately, the answer seeming to rumble forth from the air itself rather than from the thin, unmoving area where the man's mouth surely rested beneath his wrappings. Convinced once more there was nothing wrong with his weapons, the stranger lifted the musket with a simple care and began polishing it,

shining both its hammers until they glowed.

Dubcob sat in silence, uncertain how to press on yet fully aware he could not leave well enough alone. There were simply too many unspoken questions hanging thickly in the air to feign detachment. Finally, the stranger broke the peace by replacing the musket, having reloaded it and inspected its sights. His hidden face then turned so that his shadowy gaze bore right into that of the village's untested leader. Dubcob saw then what it was that had frightened his wife from her own domain.

"Your inaction is itself a sin. You've allowed this darkness to overtake your homes." The simple statement possessed a bluntness that was as truthful as it was insulting. Instead of getting angry at the condemnation from his guest, Dubcob slouched in his seat with regretful defeat.

"It's not that simple. When Morbeed first came here, nearly three years ago, we tried to resist but we didn't have the weapons or the men for a fight. Thirty villagers, the previous elder included, were slaughtered as punishment for our latest attempt to break free."

"And what of the Church or the Sentinels?"

A sneer rose to command Dubcob's face, though it was unclear whether the venom was directed at the powers-that-be in SpirosBlaak, himself, or the entire situation. "Certainly we sent word to the nearest garrison but every time a patrol came to drive Morbeed and his lot away, they were nowhere to be found. Probably hiding in the forests. Eventually the garrison got tired of 'wasting valuable manpower on chasing shadows,' and so they stopped coming." His guest's face had never wavered nor had he stirred in the slightest. Dubcob swallowed hard as his gaze dropped to the table in a quest for anywhere to look other than at the judgment he

found in those gray eyes.

Dubcob eventually looked up, startled to see all the weapons had disappeared from the varnished tabletop except for the powerful looking musket. Bewildered, the peasant elder couldn't help but return the stare of the dreadful, gray eyes he felt boring into him. His eyes were inescapably locked with those of the stranger for a very long time before he finally found the will to look away.

His large, gauntlet-covered hand towed in the reigns of his massive mount, its tack jingling loudly as the horse impatiently shook its head. He surveyed the distant buildings, taking in the landscape that had become a monthly sight over the past three years. There was no movement at all, not even the usual lookout in the thin bell-fry of the hamlet's small church.

Morbeed didn't like it.

His Kavraen outriders had warned him of the village's startling insolence, but that had only made him expect the peasants to futilely try once more to put up a fight. The silence and inactivity was disturbing. "Find this man who dares kill my men and bring him to me. Burn the town."

Replacing his demonic helm atop his head, the heavily plated bandit lord watched as his force split into three segments: two wings, each of which broke to encircle from the sides, and a single spearhead that was marching to penetrate straight through the village's northern border—a vice within which to smash any resistance.

Minutes passed as his warriors quick-marched across the grassy

plain and moved into position. Morbeed could see the skull-topped heights of blackened banners as the three groups dispersed further into their individual units, sweeping into the village with a din of

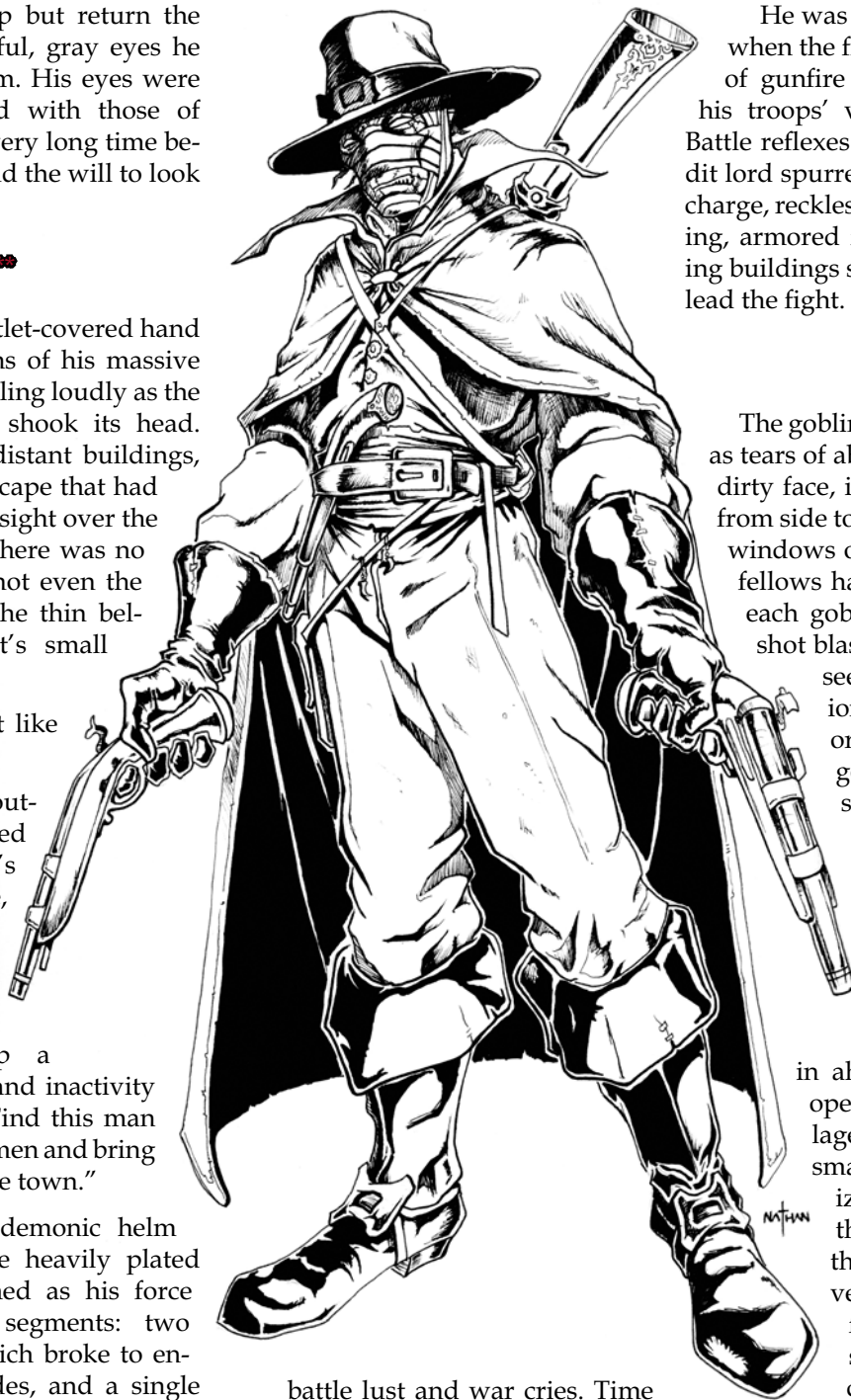
Finally came the signal from the village; a banner was raised high once, twice, thrice. The all clear. Morbeed sped his mount into a trot so that he could personally oversee the victory.

He was halfway to the village when the first resounding sound of gunfire shattered the silence his troops' violence had created. Battle reflexes taking over, the bandit lord spurred his horse into a full charge, recklessly driving his imposing, armored form past the outlying buildings so he could personally lead the fight.

The goblin slunk down the alley as tears of abject fear ran down its dirty face, its round eyes darting from side to side as it scanned the windows of the upper floors. Its fellows had already been slain, each goblin killed by a single shot blasting out from the unseen to take his companions through the head or chest. The surviving goblin's jagged short sword trembled in its hands, hanging impotently to the side and leaving a shallow furrow behind it in the dust-filled lane.

It could see the light pouring in ahead where the alley opened up into the village square. The goblin's small, devious mind realized danger lurked in that open space where there would certainly be very little cover against further gunfire. The small brain then wondered why it had been heading forward into such danger. Wasn't it safer here in the alley with walls to either side? Would it not be safer to just turn around and make a break across the plain for the forests beyond?

battle lust and war cries. Time passed with the slow crawl of expectation as small plumes of ugly smoke began to rise into the sky. A strange silence descended, broken only by the odd yip or howl of a kavraen, worg, or goblin.



The creature's fear-maddened thoughts ended abruptly with the removal of its brain from its head. A grayish-green splatter ran down the wall in crimson rivulets as the goblin's lifeless form slumped to the earth, its sword falling limply to rest by its side. A small twist of smoke still curling from its muzzle, the pistol barrel receded back into the shadows of the window above and behind where the goblin continued to pour forth its life onto the dry ground.



Cocking his head slightly as the last, hollow returns of the single gunshot bounced through the buildings, the bandit—a human—turned and signaled the surviving members of his bunch of cutthroats to follow. Each studied the street with the sort of caution only experience breeds. They examined windows for a glint of light from a protruding barrel, they kept an eye on the rooftops for hidden snipers, and they slammed open each doorway before moving on to the next. All were vigilant, bordering on paranoid, having already learned the hard lesson of survival at the cost of ten comrades.

Like himself, the other two humans were armed with blades and large caliber pistols while the hulking ogre bringing up the rear guard carried a multi-barreled volley gun capable of cutting down an entire unit of men with a single pull of its trigger. The two kavraen, one in his man-rat form while the other had shifted into a barrel-chested man-wolf, both wielded huge battle axes and walked the point positions.

None of their care and watchfulness would save them.

The commanding bandit's inspection of yet another doorway ended in a cold sweat when two shots whistled past his head, one to either side, even as the thunder of the guns' firing reached his ears. A slight groan and the sound of two bodies crumpling to the ground let

him know that his group was now short both other humans. The man threw himself into a nearby doorway, his fear granting him strength as he sought shelter from the snipers. The kavraen and ogre had likewise lunged into cover behind separate buildings following the twin shots.

Looking back, he could see the corpses splayed indignantly the dirt. By the looks on their faces, they hadn't even had time to realize their fate was upon them. Everything was silent except for the faint calls of other, unseen bandits scrambling throughout the village. Even the wind seemed to be holding back, waiting to see what would happen next.

Like the irrefutable ticking of a clock, time was counted in the ragged breaths of the bandit's fear as he cocked his pistol's hammer. The sound of the device clicking into place, ready to fall, was like thunder echoing down the deserted street. His hand shaking, the bandit panned the pistol from one distant window to the next in search of the sniper.

Another shot then rang out from a side street to his right.

With a bellow of pain, the ogre spilled to the ground, his shattered and bleeding knee crumpling beneath his weight. An already dissipating cloud of smoke hung in front of a second story window about thirty yards away. There was no further sign of the sniper. Impossibly short moments later, a second shot, this time from the left, entered through the ogre's right eye and exited his lower jaw, ending his roar as the lead ball left a flying line of dark blood trailing behind it.

An effigy of his terror, the pistol quaked unsteadily as the lead bandit realized the snipers would quickly run out of other targets and come after him, if he wasn't already being lined up in someone's sights. Apparently the same thought occurred to the pair of kavraen be-

cause, as one, they suddenly broke cover and ran for the withered fields on the village's fringe.

Two shots, so successive they resounded as a single, smoky boom, ripped past the man and tore into the back of each fleeing lycanthrope's head, dropping them in a spray of red.

Consumed with panic, the man dropped his shaking pistol and ran past the dead kavraen, screaming in torturous fear for his life. The sound of the shot that entered through the back of his neck, snapping his spine and blowing out his throat in a bloody mist him didn't even have a chance to register in his panic stricken mind before he fell dead.



Morbeed yanked on the reigns to bring his mount around in a tight circle. Now facing towards the sound of the latest barrage, he counted six shots fired in roughly three groupings. His gauntlet resonated with a dull clang of frustration and rage against his ebony, armored thigh. How could the villagers, untrained and cowardly peasants that they were, remain hidden from his troops for so long, let alone manage to kill so many? Already he could hear more shots reporting through the village's twisting streets. The bandit lord briefly wondered how many more of his men had just died.

Signaling to the leader of the seven remaining worg riders, Morbeed ordered them to form a circle around him, facing outwards in anticipation of the final assault upon the village square. Nearly ten minutes passed with neither the distant cries of his warriors nor the dooming bellow of gunfire to shatter the crystal silence.

Like puppets whose strings had suddenly been cut, two of the kavraen astride the monstrous worgs encircling him dropped to the ground, the thunder of the shots that had killed them pouring over the otherwise empty square within a heartbeat of



their deaths. One of the beasts, the blood of its beloved master fresh in its flaring nostrils, howled plaintively and dropped to bury its head mournfully in its front legs while the other, enraged, loosed a throaty growl before speeding off down a nearby street in search of its rider's killer. Another minute passed before yet another shot rang out, quickly followed by a pained yelp. And then all was quiet again.

Two more shots—both from the same musket, by the sound—followed quickly by a third, dropped three more riders and one of their massive hounds, the shot having driven through its master's armored head from behind and then into the back of the animal's skull. The two surviving kav turned and fled, the loping strides of their mounts quickly carrying them out of the deathtrap that had once been a human village. No shots cut them down as they sped away, leaving Morbeed to wonder if the villagers were saving their next shots for him.

Bewildered and angry well past the point of fear, Morbeed rose up in his stirrups and shook his fist at the sky. "Come out and face me, you cowards!" Tearing off the screaming demon mask of his helm and throwing it to the ground in challenge, the bandit lord's face flushed with his violent wrath.

"As you wish."

Twisting in the saddle, one hand drew a heavy pistol lightning-quick while the other smoothly unslung the deadly broadsword from his back. Morbeed fired the first weapon directly behind him where the voice had seemed to travel from. With a whining zip the shot bounced off empty ground and then ricocheted harmlessly down a street marked by well-worn cart tracks. Nothing was there.

Then, from the corner of his eye, the bandit lord saw a man step out from a shadowy doorway to his right. Alone, the figure wore a sim-

ple cloak pulled around his body, its hood raised up so his face disappeared into its twisting darkness. Although the stock of a musket clearly protruded from behind the hooded man's back, his hands were safely away from it, nested within the dark raiment enfolding him.

The man was obviously no villainager.

The bandit lord kept the stranger in view with a sidelong glance as the figure walked forth and around him, circling the horse and its rider at twenty paces or so without once raising his head to allow the bandit lord to see his face. The vile chieftain of cutthroats used the time given him by the cloaked fool to reload his spent pistol.

"Where are the rest?" demanded Morbeed, his gruff voice snarling the question with animal intensity. Continuing to circle in silence, head bowed and hands hidden, the stranger pointedly ignored the gruff query.

His pistol reloaded, Morbeed whipped it around to fire, the action so quick the gun became a blur. A cloud of smoke belched forth from beneath the stranger's wrapped cloak, the deadly roar filling the expanse surrounding the two warriors. The bandit lord's gun spun away and to the ground, the impact of the shot against his weapon immediately causing the bandit lord's hand to numb.

Brandishing his sword with his other hand, Morbeed didn't have to see the two pistols rising from within the folds of the man's cloak to realize his disadvantage. Smoke still seeped from one of the pistols' down-turned muzzle while the other, its hammer cocked and ready to fire, was leveled at him.

Morbeed hadn't even had the chance to spur his horse forward to impale his impudent prey.

As the pistol rose upwards to yawn into the bold bandit lord's rage-reddened face across the ten-

yard span separating the two men, his foe's head lifted slightly to aim down the weapon's length. For the first time, Morbeed was allowed to see what was hidden beneath the hood. Shock stole the look of doomed defiance from Morbeed's face, the flush falling into a failing, ghostly pallor.

"You! But, but you can't be ... you! You don't exist ... you're just a myth! You're not real!" Morbeed, the last of his strength stolen, began to stutter in confusion, his mind unable to cope with the truth.

"If I'm not real, you have nothing to fear."

The shot took the mounted warrior directly between his unbelieving eyes before spraying the back of his horse with a globular shower of blood. With a slow finality, the dead shell that had once been the mighty bandit lord, Morbeed, fell from its saddle and slammed to the ground with a dreadful clatter of failed armor. Shaking his head sadly, the stranger returned both pistols into the concealment of his cloak, its layered folds consuming the gentle smoke that still flowered from the weapons' tip.

Without a backwards glance, he turned and walked away.

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Dubcob moved from his hiding place and peered around the curve of the concealing tree. The sound of gunfire had been absent for nearly ten minutes, as had most other sounds. Even the birds seemed to have stilled. Squinting towards the distant village against the confounding flare of the setting sun, he saw a single silhouette marching south into the wide plains beyond. The elder signaled to his wife to pass word it was safe to return to their homes as he groaned with the effort to rise off his haunches. He felt his age like never before as he led his people back to the village.

Every street and some of the



buildings were littered with bodies, each of which had been gunned down, usually by a single shot to the head. The pools of blood that mingled in the crude gutters and turned the brown dirt black were the worst. Dazed by the carnage around them, the returning throng stumbled into the open square to find Morbeed laying on his back, one hand still clutching his barbed broadsword. The puckered wound between his eyes had left his face covered in gore, leaving it almost unrecognizable.

From beside where he stood staring down at the corpse of the man

who had terrified his people for two long years, Dubcob heard a sharp breath escape Imalla. She gripped his arm, turning him to face the wall where she pointed, her hand shaking.

Defacing a building at the edge of the square was a simple message written in blood.

\*\*\*\*\*

"It's all here, right where he said it would be!"

Cheers beat against his ears as

Dubcob and the other searchers rushed through the trees in the direction of the shout. Finally, he and the rest entered the clearing, finding the path where the abandoned caravan wagons still rested, each laden with life-giving supplies. The wagons had been left where the gory message said they would be.

Dubcob smiled and told himself that he would have to remember the mysterious gunman in his prayers that evening, and for many more nights to come.

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