

THE GAMBLER
By Russell Zimmerman

Tenton was a small place. Too small to be called a tent city any more, too small to keep the 'w' in tent town, too small for anyone to care about missing letters. Too small for the mining outfit to even have a name, as far as I knew. Tenton was small, and, I decided, it was bad. Bluejack Braga and his wolf-pack roved the hills with wild abandon, harsh winds kept rickety-rare doors rattling and tent flaps snapping, day and night, and there were – worst of all – only two places with tables strong enough to hold up a deck of cards and loot worth winning.

One of those places was Shiloh's, because of course Shiloh, of all goddamned people, named her place after herself. Who'd tell her not to? Not me, no sir. I wouldn't tell Shiloh a damned thing. I'd request, charm, wheedle, ask, flirt, beg, sing, and obey, with Shiloh. I'd never tell. Shiloh told me, though, that I was absolutely, one hundred percent, forever and eternally, banned from Shiloh's.

We both knew I'd be back in a week. Her place got dull without me.

In the meantime, though, I was in Tenton's other half-assed establishment, The Dive. So-called because troublemakers took a dive off the nearby red cliffs, it was a watering hole where the shine and rotgut tasted far more strongly of coolant than at Shiloh's, where the companions on offer were far less charming, and where the bouncers were far less intimidating. There wasn't much to like about it.

The Dive had, though, a table. Cards. People.

Those were all I needed to get by. The drink and the company were bonuses, not necessities. They made my job easier, they made things a little more pleasant, and I wanted them; but all I *needed* was a handful of people, a handful of cards, and a handful of something to win.

It's a life as small and as bad as Tenton, maybe, but it's the life I've got.

I had three miners losing to me, even if they didn't know it yet. Whitebeard had the deepest creases around his eyes when he smiled, and he didn't smile often. Blackbeard smiled more often, and his scattering of teeth made me wish he didn't. Redbeard thought he was sharper than the other two, and he was, but instead of smiling he squinted. I could still read his stupid, hairy, face and his stupid, hungry, hands as clearly as the other two.

To me, they were open books. Skinny books, with big, blocky, letters, maybe, books with simple storylines and not a happy ending in sight, but open books all the same. I could read the way they breathed, the way they rolled their broad shoulders, the way they shifted dirty asses atop dirty stools. I could read how their split-nailed fingers touched the cards, how their split-knuckled hands held onto the tabletop, how their split-attention eyes flicked from their cards to their rivals.

I read it when Whitebeard was happy with the River and when it drowned him in a rush of cards. I read it when Blackbeard felt the Turn was going his way, and when it led him right off the cliffs behind the Dive. I read it when Redbeard fell into a Hole right away, and when he tried to reach out with bluffs to pretend otherwise. This was a game to them, a way to pass the time and – they all were sure – walk away a little richer than your friends.

To me, this was bread in my belly. Rotgut to parch my thirst. Victory to sooth my soul. The pots I raked in were sustenance, yes, but also communion. To me, this was church.

I prayed with them for hours. I invested in a bottle of The Dive's finest to flood the table with bad decisions. I spent time, fired out jokes, shoved away just enough pots to keep them in their seats. I folded good hands and bet on bad ones, whenever anyone looked like they wanted out of the temple. I kept my eyes on their faces – seldom on my cards, never away from the table – when they all looked up from my sermon, and their bloodshot gazes fell on some sharp-eyed 'slinger with a silver Guild buckle on her belt, watched her trading shotgun shells for food and drink.

Fine by me. Let *them* be distracted. Let *them* lose their edge. Let *them* care about anything but raking in the next pot. Not me.

I was focused. I was ready. I'd milk them for the money I'd need for a place to stay. I'd make enough to rent some company. I'd walk away with enough to smooth over That Thing With Shiloh. I'd have enough left over, after that, to send some money through Breaker, once I could meet him in Shiloh's; money he'd send up the chain to Braga.

Another payment. Another tax. Another step closer to paying my toll to the Bluejack crew, buying safe passage, and getting out of too-small Tenton.

I was all in.