

THE OUTLAW

By Russell Zimmerman

Tenton duty wasn't great, but it wasn't all bad, neither. It had food, water, and miners who got paid. Some. I didn't know or care who paid them, nor now or care where the stuff they mined went; I cared that I got paid, that I got their taxes and sent them up the ladder to Braga himself. Their job was their concern. My job was mine.

Someone, somewhere, made decisions about how many miners to send in, how much to pay them for what they found, how many to keep on the rolls the next day and the next and the next. Someone decided who to sell to, where, how far away, how much to charge. Someone decided.

That's just life, way I see it. Someone, somewhere, decides things for you. Then *you* decide what to do about it, whether you take their decision or not. Once upon a time, someone, somewhere, had decided on my life. I'd decided differently. Broke that chain. Made my own way.

Braga saw that I was a decision-maker right away. I showed him, no two ways about it. There wasn't any doubt, wasn't any hesitation. With that one-shot hold-out, with my shovel, with my knife, then with my bare hands, I let Braga see that I could do the fighting of two of his men. I showed him how I earned the name Breaker. He, like whoever ran the mines, decided to keep me on the rolls after that.

I held onto what I got, and I took more. That, also, was my decision.

I worked my way up in the Bluejacks, one job at a time. Ran with some outriders for a little while, did my share of shooting and looting, then ran my own little pack. Worked my way up from there, again, getting in out of the wind and the rain, rolling with Braga himself at his camp. Honor guard. Bloody right hand. Trusted lieutenant.

Then I decided I wanted more.

My life. My future. My choice.

Braga was losing it, I could tell. Getting bloodier. Reaching too far. He had a good thing going outside Tenton, running the hills, owning the trade, holding the roads, making a living. He didn't have to do the things he did any more. He didn't have to go after homesteads. He didn't have to, but he did it anyways. The Bluejacks were getting split down the middle, between the hungry and the mean. Hungry you can work with. Hungry you can reason with. Hungry you can lead through thick and thin, so long as you help them with their hunger. Mean? Mean keeps going to long, it just turns folks into mad dogs. Mean you've got to distance yourself from or put down, hard. Braga was getting mean.

So I'd left his camp. I was still his right hand, though, but now I was reaching for him, taking for him, shaking for him, instead of always being bloody. I ran Tenton in the Bluejacks' name. To the people here, I *was* the Bluejacks. I bought, took, traded. I had an arrangement with Shiloh, and she had one with me. I held court there; if examples had to be made, I could make them nastier, so I wouldn't have to make them again. The Dive was too quick a way to handle trouble, bodies fell off the cliffs, examples fell out of memory. No. If I had to be brutal, I wanted it to last. I wanted the fear to linger, so I didn't have to do it often. Shiloh got that. Shiloh always has.

So here I am, Bluejack Braga's strong right hand. I do business. I take a fair cut from the mining outfit, a fair cut from The Dive, a fair cut from the miners. I take a fair cut from men, women, and handlers that keep people satisfied. I take a fair cut from the dealers, the dicers, the scavengers like Stone-Rat. I take a fair cut from Shiloh. I offer protection, I take a tax. Never too much. Never enough they can't make it back. Never enough they can't pay.

I take my own fair cut from that pile, and I send the rest up to Braga. I'm honest about it. Clean. He knows how much I'll take, he expects it. I don't get greedy. I don't lie to him. I have Smiler write me up clean books, what comes in, what comes out, and if anyone in Tenton knows numbers, it's that cardsharp. I'm honest with Braga. I'm don't cheat him.

I'm hungry, not mean.

But sooner or later, the Bluejacks have to change. Braga can't keep on like he's doing. Too many of the crew are getting mean as him. Too many are getting that look. Too many are growing to like it too much. They're drawing too much heat, hurting too many people, getting too many guns pointed our way.

We'll see how it goes.

But me? I think Breaker's Bluejacks has a nice ring to it.