

THE GUNSLINGER

By Russell Zimmerman

The moron leader smirked at me – at me! – with his dirty hand hovering over the grip of his dirty pistol. He was a raggedy ass, like his friends. There were close on to ten of them, cloak-wrapped, scab-covered, sun-shaded, and they had blocked the canyon path and emerged from the high-ground rocks like they thought they were clever. I'd been polite. Let them show themselves, let them make their move, let them think they had me scared. At first, they thought I was just some fool pilgrim, or a scrounger, or a tinker. At first, they thought they'd scare me for fun, kill me for pleasure, and loot me for food. At first, they just thought I'd be a payment they could offer to the Bluejacks, protection money to let them keep hunting here.

But then their leader had seen my belt – tooled, polished, cared-for leather, a gleaming silver buckle with my Guild's symbol – and seen Ender and Dealer riding in it, all gunblued-and-silver, lethal, beautiful, flawless, one on each hip, perfectly balanced as all things must be. He knew what I was, even if he had no idea what it truly meant. I became, in an eyeblink, a point of pride for him. An opportunity for standing. A challenge.

Fool.

He licked his lips. He ran half-gloved hands through his greasy hair. He cracked his knuckles and wriggled his fingers like he was warming up. He squared off in front of me, after one little nod to a dirt-faced boy that was him but younger, and another nod to a big-shouldered man with a scattergun on his other side. I knew the nod he gave Shotgun-Man.

I sighed under the brim of my broad hat, my exhalation a cloud of roiling mist. We were wasting time. When the sun came up, I wouldn't want to walk nowhere. And here, in the coolness of dusk, was this fool wasting my road-time.

I didn't know his name, nor he mine. All he saw was Ender and Dealer and my gleaming buckle and all he felt was greed and envy. Me? Only impatience. I wasn't on this trail for him. Bluejack Braga was here, on the other side of this maze of sun-bleached canyons, squatting over some two-bit no-place called Tenton. He thought that put him out of the reach of the law. He was right. But that didn't put him out of the reach of me. Nor Ender, nor Dealer. After what he'd done, we'd reach him anywhere.

But first, this fool.

I didn't lick my lips, play with my hair, or work my fingers. I didn't smirk.

I waited and closed my eyes.

I balanced.

I felt Dealer over my left hip, Ender over my right. I felt the weight of my belt and the burden of that gleaming, silver, Guild buckle. I felt the pressure of my training, the awesome weight of my Master's pride, the recoil of a thousand times a thousand shots passed down his line to me. I felt the rusted iron grit of this planet beneath my feet, felt the night-chilled air in my lungs, felt my heart beating in time to the world. I felt Bluejack Braga's heart pounding somewhere out of sight, somewhere I couldn't shoot him while I wasted time on fools like this.

Deep in the balance, I *felt* the violence burst from this ragged fool as he desecrated his gun by touching its cracked grip with greasy-fingered urgency, as he jerked it from his waistband like a child with a toy, as he insulted the gun and I alike by trying to set its rusted, crooked, sights on me.

I felt Dealer spring into my right hand, Ender fill my left. I opened my eyes.

Dealer honored this scabby brigand with a clean shot through the eye he'd dared squint at me over ugly sights. Ender was lined up flawlessly, a pure, straight, line from the muzzle to my hand, up forearm, elbow, bicep, and shoulder; without looking, I'd crafted a spear pointed right at Shotgun-Man. He was next in their line. He was the lieutenant. I speared him with my eyes, too, pinned him in place with a too-sharp stare.

He paused. Swallowed. Thought.

The boy to the leader's right didn't. Lanky, as ugly as the dead man, he squawked and started to lift his rifle, an old thing that had served someone homesteader's daddy and their daddy before him. It was a tired old piece, heavy and slow and too big for his skinny shoulder. Still, he clawed at the bolt and lifted it my way. Dealer barked again.

My eyes were on Shotgun-Man as both corpses fell. He had a good five folks left in this vulture-band that was suddenly his, and he'd keep them if he stopped the rest from dying.

He held my gaze over Ender's sights and gave me a nod. I knew that nod, too. He slowly worked the slide and pumped at his shotgun until it had belched up every slug into the red sand at his feet. He put the scattergun down, slowly, an offering at the bloody temple to Ender, Dealer, the Guild, and my Master.

He led his survivors away. I let him.

Braga was waiting.