

Gunwitch: Briarhaven Banditry

John Howell

March 20, 2021

A wave of relief washed over Symon as he gazed upon the light gray granite walls of Briarhaven. He stretched his arms and back as he walked through the gates, noting the sun baked cracks in the leather along the straps of his pack. "Long overdue for an oiling.." he thought as he made his way into the center of the marketplace. The empty stalls, all decorated with signs displaying various rental prices at rate measured in days painted a painful picture. Last Spring the bazaar of Briarhaven was a symphony of customers haggling down the merchants to reasonable prices, merchants laughing in joy as their wares sold and the occasional guard giving a lecture to would be thieves. A stark contrast to the deafening silence broken only by the noise of the town crier announcing yet a deeper discount on the stall rentals.

"Hey, Gunwitch" a voice roughened by a lifetime of hard alcohol and yelling called from behind him. Symon tilted his wide brimmed hat back, not needing it to cloak his face since he has already been recognized. He turned to face his caller. He saw a man slightly shorter than himself, built like a barrel full of steak and bearing a stubbly shaved head with the beginnings of a beard. He wore a chainmail jacket, with dark brown leather trousers. Over the chainmail he bore a maroon tunic bearing Briarhaven's symbol: a shield wrapped in thorns. Tied at his waist was a sword, hanging from a leather belt. "How may I help you, sir guard?" Symon said, putting on his best smile despite knowing where this was going."Going to have to ask you to leave. We have enough issues going on here without your reputation scaring off even more merchants." The guard said gruffly. Symon sighed, feeling his fatigue set in. He took in the guards appearance. Olive skin, no doubt from countless shifts during the high sun, stubbly hair, and dark circles around his eyes. This guard was exhausted. Something was wrong. Symon rubbed his bearded chin. "Say, sir guard, what is your name? Normally the bazaar is overflowing at this time of year." He inquired. It was the guards turn to sigh as he rubbed his head, obviously not used to the current state of it. "It's Dave, and you are correct things have been fairly terrible lately and it

is affecting the number of merchants coming to hock their wares." Symon now has an in. Something is wrong, causing the guards to work later than usual alongside the scaring of merchants. Symon inquired once more "What has made everyhting so terrible? Surely one such as I could help resolve these issues in exchange for having a few days respite from my travels." Dave the Guard rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Aye, I see your angle Gunwitch. We've been having issues with bandits lately" Symon raised his eyebrow in disbelief "Common bandits? The mighty Briarhaven guards are being outwited by a few highwaymen?" "Get ploughed, Gunwitch. These bandits are not ordinary, they have an ogre." the guard spat back at the jab, immediately realizing he fell for Symon's game. Symon smiled as he replied "By the gods, Dave, where manners not a course in your guard training? Such uncouth words are unbecfitting a man of your position. But ogre? Are you sure it wasn't just a very large man, possibly half giant?" "Aye, smelled the bastard myself. About a man and a half tall, gray skin and ugly as a void creature." This revelation troubled Symon, what could a ogre be doing so far south? What' the connection with the bandits? "Well it seems to be you could use the services of The Gunwizard, as witch I am not. I do not even own an cauldron. Can you take me to the mayor? We can discuss this further and more officially." Dave spat on the ground, shrugged and motioned Symon to follow him.

They walked across the town, Symon taking in the familiar rounded stone buildings and the deep grass everywhere barring the paths beaten to dirt underneath the feet of Briarhaven's denizens. The duo approached a squared off weathered building bearing the maroon flag of Briarhaven and the blue and gold flag depicting a Lion holding a broadsword in it's mouth. The flag of the Coalition of Caldara. Symon recognized the courthouse. He sneered at the Coalition flag as they passed it. Dave eyed him for this motion, but ulimately kept quiet. The duo entered a stone chamber. The stone floor decorated with various carpets of maroons and pillars forming a circle around the center. At the center sat a table, filled with various papers, atop a raised platform. At the table sat a middle aged clean shaven man writing away on a document. His skin pale, betraying many days sitting in the torch lit chamber. His hair the color of coal, worn at an awkward length and swept back from his face skillfully. From his ears dangled three earrings, all bearing different icons. One a thorn, one a shield, and one a symbol of the Colition. He also wore a fine suit of silk, the same maroon of the Briarhaven flag. Symon was impressed by the dedication of such a strange colorscheme. Several others where in the chamber with them aside from the mayor, Symon and Dave. Various aids, receptionists and lawyers working

with haste. It made Symon stand out even more, the people of Briarhaven where a few inches shorter than him. Their skin on average a little darker, and their dress more formal. Symon wore a green cotton shirt, with tan leather leggings ending in dark down boots. His hair long, he kept the top bundled under his wide brim hat. His facial features sharp, as opposed to Briarhaven's round features and high cheekbones. Dave cleared his throat "Mayor?". The Mayor looked up from his work looking towards the source of the noise. "Yes, David? I take it this is an important matter, considering my guard captain is here with me and not outside helping his men. There's also the matter that you brought the Gunwitch here" Symon stepped up beside Dave "Good afternoon Mayor Tackson." He said as he bowed his head. The Mayor bowed his head in return. "Hello Gunwitch. May I ask why you are in my chambers? I have nothing against you personally, but as you understand history does not bode well for places you tend to stay." Tinged with a bit of annoyance Symon removed his hat, letting his hair fall free. "Gunwizard. I don't turn people into newts. Good Mayor, I assure you I am here to help. I have been told about your bandit problem. Specifically the ones that have teamed up with an ogre. Now it's not incredibly uncommon for ogres to form shaky pacts with those that have foo-" "Pact? The bandits *control* the ogre Gunwitch, not the primitive contracts ogres are occasionally swindled into."

That made Symon lose his train of thought. Pacts are one thing..but total control? That takes a lot of magical power, enough that any magician that strong would be on the Coalitions radar. "Controlled? Do you know the magician, perhaps The Bastard?" Mayor Tackson rolled his eyes "If I knew, wouldn't you think I'd contact the Coalitin? Whoresons don't even return my letters regarding the manner. The Bastard has been unseen here since the war. This may be his home, but he has been officially disowned for years. Much like the relationship between you and your home after your heinous actions." That cut Symon significantly deeper. Post war his hometown, Wendelberg, disowned him and his lineage. Stripping him of land and titles and exiling him. The various bureaucrats stopped what they were doing and stared in the direction of Symon and Dave. Symon noticed something glowing in the corner of his eyes. The fine runes on all of his guns glowed green with power, and his hands balled in fists. "Heinous? I'm sorry I couldn't sit and hide behind walls of stones getting fat and protecting my dragons horde of wealth during the war." He snuffed out his magical power and cleared his throat. Unconsciously threatening the man he's trying to make a deal with wasn't initially on the table.

"Damn you thrice, Gunwitch. I will have you know that there was great many reasons for my actions during the war that I will not share with an exile."

The Mayor glared at Symon, angered at the threat and the insult thrown his way. "State your terms Gunwitch, I'll draft the contract up and you can get out of my sight." "One week stay in town, with you providing my inn fare. Alongside subsidizing a stall for me to sell my wares." Symon stared stone faced at the aging mayor. "Done." the mayor started writing furiously, at a very impressive pace only obtainable from a lifetime of notary. "Sign here." Symon walked up to the table, took the pen and signed "Symon Weson, Gunwizard." He threw the pen on the floor as he readjusted the revolvers on his hip and walked outside of the courthouse.

Outside the main gate Symon peered at this map, trying to discern the path most merchants would take. After a few minutes he devised his path and started to think of a plan. First he has to appear to be a merchant. He retrieved a small pouch from within his pack. Within it he took a handful of small wooden disks and a gleaming gemstone. He then walked a ways into the dense forest surrounding Briarhaven. Gnarled branches threatened to trip him as he came upon a clearing. Rays of sunlight bathed this clearing with a comfortable heat, highlighting the thick green grass. Symon sat, legs crossed in the middle of the clearing, with his disks and gemstone in front of him. He muttered some words, as the runes lining his gloves glowed a soft green. Suddenly images of deer grazing lazily flooded his mind. The nature spirits way of greeting him. Symon responded with images of golden rings, and earrings followed by the image of his wooden disks and finalized with the mental image of his gemstone. Warmth flooded Symon as the ground opened up to swallow the gemstone and the disks. A few moments later golden rings, with ruby studs rose from the ground followed by humurously large golden hoop earrings. Symon inspected them closely, judged the illusion to work fine and put on all of the faux jewelry. Working short handed, this would have to do to appear as either a merchant or a particularly wealthy traveler.

He set out on the route he had determined earlier. As he walked he listened to the songs of the birds, taking in the forest smell. As he got further along the route he noticed less and less wear on the dirt footpath, and the songs of the forest no longer sounded giving way to a eerie silence. He heard some rustling and turned to move to his left as a large man, almost a head taller than Symon, who's bare chest bore more scars than could be counted with a large axe across his back, stepped out of the brush. "I believe that is close enough" he motioned for Symon to stop. "I take it you've heard this before, throw all your valuables onto the ground and get on your way." The wind blew the mans mop of hair out of his face as he crossed his arms to wait for compliance. Symon smiled and drew a revolver. He started inspecting it as he spoke "You know I know these aren't too common, and

you probably didn't pay too much attention in school, but by my count I have six shots at you before needing to switch guns. You have an axe, and are at least twenty feet away. This doesn't favor you." The axeman's weathered face broke into a grin. "Your math is sound, traveler. However there's more than just me." He whistled. A man came out to stand beside him, with a drawn long sword. From behind Symon the brush parted and gave way to another man holding a hatchet. All three of them wore basic cotton trousers with bare chests. "Nice of your friends to join us, however I still count three of you and six shots, twelve if I draw both of my hand guns." Symon cocked the hammer back on his pistol. Axeman's grin grew wider as the ground seemed to begin shaking. "Come on out Anna" a young woman, no more than twenty came out of the forest. Shortly behind her a mass of gray skin and bugling muscle emerged. It's disgusting mouth opened wide as it roared revealing a set of yellowed jagged teeth. Symon's eyes widened at the sight. So they really did have an ogre. "Alright, we've played our hand. Your stuff, before Anna loses her patience and sicks our large friend on you." Symon unbuckled his pack and threw it on the ground between him and the axeman. "Guns too, bastard." Symon complied, unholstering and tossing his revolvers and his rifle. Symon studied the group. Obviously seasoned bandits, however the girl was young. Fresh faced, couldn't have been out of her home for more than a few years. He noticed a hidden strain in her. She was struggling to control the ogre. He examined the ogres gray, leathery skin. Lots of scars, some recent. Some burn marks as well. The bandits were tormenting it. For fun? To help keep the spell? He had no clue. But he had an idea. "Listen gentlemen, surely we can work this out with me keeping my belonging and you remaining alive." The axeman ran his hand over his hair, his facial expression betraying his annoyance. "Now how do you plan on doing that? We're taking your stuff, and you are lucky we are letting you live. What gives you such a moronic confidence in the face of being outnumbered, and in the presence of such a beast?" Symon sported a wolfish grin. "You obviously don't know who I am. I'm the thrice damned Gunwitch"

The faces of all the bandits, bar Anna dropped immediately. Symon's gloves glowed intensely as a revolver flew from the ground into his hand. He aimed and fired at Anna. Hit her right in the stomach. Her eyes wide with surprise as she fell over, blood staining her dress. The ogre roared in anger, as after a brief moment of confusion it realized what had happened. And it was angry. It took it's tree of an arm and swung it's fist at the longsword bandit, flinging him a good fifteen feet, a tree bringing him to a final stop. The ogre then swung at the axeman, but he dove out of the wave

last moment. Symon unloaded the other five shots into the back of the ogre. The bullets bit into the gray beasts flesh, as it was barreling towards the scrambling axeman but apart from a pained growl it did pay any attention. Behind him, Symon heard scuffling. The third bandit, the one wielding the hatchet was coming up behind him. Symon dove into a roll right the bandits axe swept to where he was just a moment earlier. The bandit fell from the force of his swing, but recovered and began to come back to finish what he started. Thinking quickly and realizing the bandit was between him and his guns Symon activated his magic spell once more. His rifle sprang to life and started flying towards him stock first. A sickening crack rang out at the stock smashed against the back of the bandits head. He stumbled forward from the force of the hit, as the rifle sailed home into Symon's hands. Symon flipped the rifle, grabbing it by the barrel and swinging the stock into the face of the stumbling bandit. The bandits face exploded into a fountain of blood and teeth as he fell backwards onto his back. Symon shoved the barrel of the rifle into the gorey mess and pulled the trigger. Two bandits down. Before he could celebrate he felt the earth shaking getting closer, he turned to see the bandit running towards him with the ogre shortly behind. The ogre sporting a few fresh wounds, with the axeman untouched but winded. Symon braced himself on his left leg, as he took his right and swept up dust throwing it in the face of the axeman before springing away getting out of reach of the rampaging ogre. The axeman fell, trying desperately to clear the dirt of his eyes. The ogre roared and savagely brought its foot down on the axemans body. Beneath the foot a pool of slick viscera began to spread. The ogre wiped its foot across the ground, leaving a crimson smear, as it turned towards Symon. It glowered with its hideous eyes momentarily staring right into Symon's soul. It roared and began its charge. Symon waited until last second and rolled out of the way from its giant paws as it swung, trying to launch Symon into the air. Symon dropped to his knee and took aim. Channeling all the friction in the air, combined with the energy of the wind and uttering a quick plea for help from the forest spirit Symon's rifle started to glow with power. The ogre had made his turn and with hatred in his eyes bullrushed Symon once more. Dust began to kick up from around him as the spell charged. Symon mentally pulled the trigger, causing a beam of pure heat to explode out of the end of the barrel. Brilliant light temporarily blinded Symon, he scrambled away in a random direction in case his attack failed. He cleared his eyes and glanced towards the ogre. The ogre was kneeling with its hand over its face. It looked over towards Symon, a giant circular hole in its head taking out its left eye and brow. It slowly rose to its feet, its blue-black blood spilling from its wound covering its face

and chest. It started moving, though at a glacial pace compared to before. Symon took a moment to think of his options as he lazily dodged a swing from the ogre's meaty arms. He jogged over to grab the large axe from the fallen axeman. The ogre drunkenly followed, but slipped in the bloody carcass it had left behind. As the ogre got to its hands and knees post fall, Symon rose the axe and hacked with all his strength. He felt skin split, tendons tear and muscles bite as he managed to jam the axe a third of the way through the thick muscley neck. The ogre died with a whimper as it fell over dead.

Breathless, Symon walked over to gather his second revolver and slung his pack over his shoulder. He then walked over to Anna, the bandit he initially shot. She wasn't moving, but her chest was lightly rising and falling. He needed to patch that wound up if she is to survive long enough to interrogate. He took a knife from his pack and cut a length of her dress near her feet. He wrapped her midsection and picked her up in a fireman's carry as he walked to check on the bandit that was smashed against the tree. "You alive?" Symon asked as he discovered him, a crumpled broken mess. "Ye..s" the bandit croaked. "he..lp" Symon frowned. "Sorry, I can't take you both and she's more important at the moment. Any other request before I leave you to your fate?" The bandit pondered for a moment, a look of resignation came upon his face. "Do..it" Symon shrugged and said a quick prayer to the gods as he shot the bandit in the face. He holstered his revolver and somberly walked back to Briarhaven.

Guard captain Dave greeted him from the wall as he came upon the entrance. "Gunwitch, is the ogre dead? Who is that woman?" Symon took Anna off of his shoulders and laid her on the ground. Stretching and rubbing his right shoulder he looked back up at Dave and replied "Yes it is done. This woman needs a healer, she was controlling the ogre so..I shot her." Surprise washed over Dave's face "I never knew you were such a gentleman Gunwitch." Some guards came out to collect the woman, ensuring once she is healthy Symon could question her. Symon walked back to the courthouse replaying the brutal events of earlier as the sun set behind the trees. He received the assurance that the contract was complete and he could sell his wares and stay at the Pinprick Inn for an entire week. Upon getting to his room he disrobed, and laid in bed contemplating on what mysteries questioning Anna the Bandit Sorceress will bring.