



## Sins of Blood

By  
Elvis Podvorac

Alluran Marr watched the butchering from the safety of his second floor study. Twenty men fell to a single blade so quickly that at first he thought it was a joke. Then he noticed the blood pooling out from beneath each quiet body.

That was several minutes ago...

Now the man responsible for the massacre just stood there, motionless, in the midst of the dead and dying. His eyes fixed on Alluran almost immediately after killing the guards, and Alluran felt as if he was withering beneath the intensity of the old man's glare, forcing him to shift his gaze.

The naked malice in his dark, piercing eyes made Alluran's stomach knot. Something about this old man sent Alluran into an apprehensive panic. His heart fluttered wildly and his breathing became heavy and labored. Something primal in his subconscious had been awakened. Shaking his head to rid his mind of such foolishness, he chided himself for being so ridiculous. Besides, he is just some old man. Old man? His brain just registering that detail now.

A sharp clacking sound interrupted his rumination, drawing his attention to the twin wooden doors of the manor house. One of the heavy doors, decorated with a latticework of iron bands, opened slowly under the guidance of one of the house servants. Just behind the servant, Alluran caught a glimpse of Figgal, his consummate steward. Moments melted away as Figgal hesitated at the threshold. Reluctantly he edged his way out of the aperture and sidled across the courtyard to meet the old man.

Their exchange was brief. The conversation was impossible to hear, but he could see Figgal gesturing demandingly. Alluran did not think the old man had spoken a word, his long greasy hair and mangy beard completely masking any discernable features, making it difficult to

tell. In a single, smooth motion the old man produced a bundle from beneath his cloak, brusquely thrusting it into Figgal's chest.

The steward's face recoiled in disgust as he fumbled the bundle away from his embroidered waistcoat. Holding the bundle out at arms length the steward seemed to sputter something indignant, then spin and scurry back to the doors.

When the door slammed shut, Alluran turned back to the old man. His skin immediately tuned to gooseflesh. The old man was staring at him again. Alluran thought the eyes looked more feral. The change was subtle, but clear.

A slight sound to his left reminded Alluran that the old man was not the only one watching him. Indeed, Calim Talpin was no doubt boring tiny wormholes into the back of Alluran's skull. Alluran's skin crawled at the mere thought of the vile little man. Nothing would please Alluran more than to stab his thumbs into the man's deep-set eyes; wiggle them inside his skull, and watch the smugness leak off his face. Unfortunately, that would be bad for business. Instead, Alluran resigned to tolerate his existence.

Calim Talpin represented House Deneith's interests in Aundair; supplying scores of well-trained and well-disciplined mercenaries in steadily increasing numbers. Recently, he had been spending the majority of his time here in Passage. The rest of his time was spent between Fairhaven and Marketplace, where his other clients' demands seemed to be steadily on the rise. Business was booming. It seemed as though everyone across Aundair was swelling the ranks of their personal militias these days. To what end, Alluran was not entirely sure. He was content to stay out of everyone else's affairs and concentrate on his own agenda.

Alluran scanned the wreckage in the courtyard thoughtfully. An expensive waste of resources, he thought and sighed quietly. Those guards had once been touted as "House Deneith's finest", and had set him back a fair sum of gold. He made a mental note to demand recompense.

Cocking his head slightly towards Calim, but not looking directly at him, Alluran said, "It would appear that I have paid extravagantly for soldiers as disciplined as a flock of headless chickens."

Calim was predictably silent. This meant absolutely nothing of course, for he was always infuriatingly apathetic. Still, it made Alluran feel better to disparage him whenever he had the chance.

An expected knock at the door spun Alluran away from the window.

“Enter.” Alluran’s voice echoed in the cavernous chamber. Normally he would take a seat at his desk, but the anticipation of Figgall’s report kept him as tense as a coiled viper.

Figgall burst through the door. Still holding the bundle out at arms length, he hurried across the room. Viscous goo seeped through the burlap. Some of the congealing globules struck the floor as he successfully dodged out of their way, while other dollops splattered on his lavender breeches.

Behind the effeminate steward, walked Dalziel, Alluran’s right hand man. Aside from Dalziel’s primary responsibilities as security advisor, the ex-soldier was also the commander of Alluran’s growing private army. To some extent, he was accountable for the poor showing his guards had given against one old man. Alluran gave his security advisor a look that promised they would speak later.

The sack had barely entered the room, and already it saturated the entire space with a putrid stench.

“And what is that?” Alluran asked.

“I believe his intention was for me to give you this...” Figgall said, absolutely appalled at having to breathe the tainted air.

“Yes. But what is it?” Alluran repeated, shaking his head incredulously. Too often, he found himself in a conversation that felt more like pulling teeth instead of getting answers.

Alluran could see Figgall’s eyes dart around the office for a place to set down the noxious bundle. He caught the steward eyeing his antique teakwood desk. “Do not even think it.” Alluran warned in a low voice, which stopped Figgall cold. When he still could not decide what to do with the sack, Alluran pointed to the floor.

The sack landed with a squish. It sat abandoned, no one taking the initiative to open it. “Well?” Alluran blurted impatiently, “It isn’t going to unwrap itself.” Figgall’s face shriveled with

horrific incredulousness when he realized Alluran was looking directly at him. Had the situation not been so stressful, that look would have amused Alluran.

With great trepidation, Figgall stooped to unravel the round bundle. Alluran's patience was thinning as he watched his steward carefully search for a clean spot to grasp the wrapping. Pinching a frayed edge, he tugged gingerly. Alluran sighed loudly, exasperated. The burlap peeled open like a rotten orange. Inside they could make out a lumpy sphere swathed in a soggy, red cloth. With a final tug, the bundle disgorged its macabre stuffing.

Tumbling awkwardly, the bloated goblin head made moist flopping sounds on the smooth tiled floor. Reeling as if he had been physically slapped, Figgall flailed his arms absurdly, as if he were warding off more imaginary blows.

Alluran felt his stomach drop. Not from revulsion, but rather a sudden comprehension. Glancing up at Dalziel, the look on the ex-soldier's face told Alluran that he too had grasped the implications.

The tragic incident at Whispering Pines was now several weeks old. Nestled in a remote northern dale within the Eldeen Reaches, the tiny hamlet had passed the entirety of its existence without notice. Until recently. Alluran had been making regular inquiries – as inconspicuously as possible – from a number of contacts, as to the ongoing investigation into what had happened at Whispering Pines. From all reports, it appeared as though the small woodland community had been razed to the ground by a band of marauding goblins. In their wake, the goblins left only mounds of ash, scattered livestock and most sadly, no survivors.

Exactly as Alluran had planned.

As usual, Dalziel had taken care of all the details. Dealing with goblins and discussing strategies was far too plebian for Alluran. Leaving others to hash out the tedious minutia, he preferred to focus on the big picture.

Examining the red fabric matted to the goblin head – which turned out to be the wretched thing's cap – Alluran identified the clan markings emblazoned on the crude skullcap; a fork, speeding through the air. Knowing the answer, but still needing to hear it, he asked, "Dalziel. Is this one of your goblins?"

Under different circumstances, Alluran would never openly discuss personal matters such as this in mixed company. However, this dilemma needed his immediate attention.

Dalziel confirmed his suspicions, "From the markings, this goblin appears to belong to the Screaming Vultures clan."

Alluran closed his eyes and cursed silently to himself. He recalled the name now. It was the same clan Dalziel used to flatten the village. Waves of prickly heat crawled up the back of his neck. His guts started cramping from the mounting stress. A throbbing ache was making it hard to think clearly. With difficulty, he managed to concentrate through the roiling chaos in his brain.

The old man had delivered his message – loud and clear. It was obvious that he somehow had made the connection between the goblin clan – Forks. Vultures. Whatever – and Alluran. But who was he? Alluran could only surmise that his reliable sources were wrong. There were survivors. At least one, anyway. Was he in the village when the goblins attacked? Was he from another village close by? Too many unknowns.

"Figgal. Did he say anything to you when he gave you the head?" Alluran asked. He immediately sensed the desperation in his own voice, and reflexively gave Calim a sidelong glance – the bastard was still just taking it all in.

Now breathing through a silk handkerchief, the steward simply shook his head to indicate that the old man had not said a word.

"What do you suppose he is trying to communicate, Dalziel?" Alluran asked.

"It appears as though he is trying to get your attention." Dalziel replied.

"Obviously." Alluran frowned; he was in no mood for drollness. "But, now that he does have my attention, what should I do about it?"

"He seems to be waiting for something. Maybe you should ask him directly." Dalziel offered.

"Me? So that my head may join that one?" Alluran sneered, dismissing the notion entirely.

The room filled with silence. Only the rustle of papers, fanned by a gust of wind, filled the stillness. It was Dalziel who broke the silence first, "Shall I unleash Sluggo and Muttonchop?"

Alluran had planned on doing just that. He decided it best to rely on his own bodyguards to dispose of this transient. While he could muster the remaining Deneith-guards, which were stationed throughout the manor, he didn't think they would be any more effectual than the other guards. Besides, it would give Alluran great satisfaction lording his own men's success over that of Calim's.

With a nod, he committed to the decision, but added. "I would prefer it if Figgal carried out the order, Dalziel. I may require your expertise here." The ex-soldier acquiesced, but Alluran could tell by the man's body language he was not pleased. Perhaps he too felt the foreboding menace? It is possible Dalziel is afraid. Alluran never thought of Dalziel as a man easily unnerved. Then again, until today, he never thought he could be so easily unnerved either.

Addressing the steward before he could whisk out the door, Alluran added, "And have this cleaned up." Figgal gave a curt bow and fled the room.

"Did you see any of it?" Alluran asked Dalziel, referring to the fight out in the courtyard. Fight. He scoffed at his own use of the word. It was too one sided to have been a fight. Those men might as well have all been standing still with their hands in their breeches.

Dalziel nodded. "I watched it unfold from the north tower."

Alluran moved back towards the window and Dalziel followed.

It was as if the old man had been carved from stone. He remained rooted to the spot, those eyes locking on Alluran's the very instant he came back into view. Feeling the hairs bristle on the nape of his neck, Alluran involuntarily shivered. His voice cracked slightly as he plied Dalziel for an analysis.

"What do you think Dalziel? I estimate his age to be no less than fifty winters."

"Yet he fights with greater skill and strength than most men half that age." Dalziel seemed to read Alluran's mind and finish his thought.

Alluran was undeniably shaken. Catching a glimpse of the old man's faded leather armor during the fight, he could tell it was well worn and definitely military. Old military at that. That would explain his skill, he mused.

"Did you notice his sword?" Alluran asked, confident that nothing escaped Dalziel's keen eye.

“It is called a tangat.” Dalziel corrected, “And it does not appear to be made out of metal.” That detail had eluded Alluran. He never even considered it could be anything other than steel. “What then?” he asked.

“The elves on Aerenal are said to forge weapons made of wood.” Dalziel replied.

Alluran could not help but laugh. Wood. His convoluted plot to gain access to one of the oldest and thickest growths of giant black pines located anywhere on the continent seemed to be crumbling. On the brink of seeing those plans come to fruition, a mysterious old man suddenly appears out of nowhere – wielding a piece of sharp wood no less – and jeopardizes everything he has labored so hard for. Irony was such a bitch.

Alluran pursed his lips as he studied the old man. “He does not look like an elf.”

“And you do not look like a goblin.” Responded Dalziel. The meaning was not lost on Alluran. He knew it was pointless to try and understand why the old man was here. It didn’t matter where the old man had come from. Nor did it matter why fate had plopped him into Alluran’s affairs. The only thing that did matter now, was his excision. An old orc proverb suddenly popped into Alluran’s head, which somehow seemed fitting. He couldn’t remember how to pronounce it in orc, but the translation was orcishly simple; *Meat is meat*.

The ex-soldier cautioned, “This will not end without more bloodshed.”

“No, Dalziel.” Alluran agreed. “I do not believe it will.”

With the sound of the locks clacking open again, Alluran felt his resolve strengthen. His confidence returned. His fear burned away like frost in the morning sun. He watched his champions stride dauntingly into the courtyard.

“Fortunately, that blood will not be mine.”

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Karst eyed the two warriors as they closed on him, their footfalls sending tremors through the flagstones beneath his boots. Unlike the greens he just cut to ribbons, these two were veterans. They were not sent to parlay.

The shaggy faced ogre grinned audaciously as he swaggered across the courtyard. In each hand he carried a solid steel – or possibly silver – spear, tipped with broad, diamond-shaped heads and lined with deep serrations.

He would die first.

Veering to Karst's right, the densely armored warforged walked with slow, purposeful steps. It was a classic flanking maneuver. In his youth he had fought more than his share of these powerful warriors, and he knew first hand how difficult it was to take one down.

Karst could not help but marvel at the size of this fearsome looking monstrosity. He had never encountered one quite so large. Spikes bristled in rows, running the entire length of each of the juggernaut's arms and legs, making him as unassailable as a phalanx of spears. Instead of a fist, a massive spiked ball capped a thick, reinforced right-arm.

Karst spoke the words in Druidic, and felt the crackling energy build inside him. Before either one his opponents could react, he punched out his arm, pointing his fist at the stupefied ogre. Without warning, a roaring tower of flame slammed the giant warrior into the ground. In a heartbeat, the immolated ogre was transformed into a fiery effigy. Screaming and flailing desperately in the center of the column, the doomed warrior was rapidly consumed by the voracious fire.

As the ogre burned, Karst turned his attention to the warforged. He could see the reflection of the flames flickering in its coal black eyes as it watched its partner shrivel to a blackened husk. The flame strike had also singed the warforged, but it managed to back out of the spells radius quickly enough to avoid any significant damage.

The spell ended with a sizzle, and the living construct exploded into a charge. For something so heavy, it moved with incredible speed. Its morningstar arm lead like a battering ram, but Karst sidestepped it with ease, words to another spell already forming on his lips. In his youth, Karst learned a trick or two when dealing with warforged. With luck, this particular warforged was just as susceptible to a heat metal spell.

While Karst nimbly avoided the bodies of the dead guards, the warforged heedlessly trampled them. They circled one another in tandem, each waiting for the other one to go on the

offensive. When the juggernaut abruptly paused to look down at its arms and chest, Karst knew that his spell had taken hold.

Darting in from an angle, his tangat struck with blinding speed. Against the steel of the morningstar arm, the enchanted bronzewood didn't even scuff the surface. However, the blade found a weak spot under its chin, slitting the juggernaut's throat. The damage was superficial, and the living construct recovered quickly. By the time it could collect itself for a counter-strike, Karst had already moved out of its reach.

Just as the juggernaut was ready to charge again, its body shook visibly. This time, he streaked in from the opposite side. Karst saw the arm level in an attempt to smash him with a backhand and ducked under the swing. Rushing past in front of the looming juggernaut, he slipped his tangat in behind a protruding plate that acted as its knee guard, running the blade's edge from hilt to tip along the soft joint. Dodging the second hand, which clumsily clawed at him, Karst whirled in behind its left flank. With a lumberjack's grace, he chopped viciously into the back of the same damaged knee. Even as the nearly severed leg buckled, the juggernaut managed to shift its weight and retain its balance. But just barely.

Karst knew it was hobbled. Staying just outside of its reach and circling, Karst kept moving, forcing it to turn with him. Even with the damaged knee, the juggernaut was still a dangerous foe not to be taken lightly. He needed to end this now.

Karst wasted no time in casting again. This time, on himself. Magic infused his body, tingling, electric. Sounds were becoming clearer, and his sight grew sharper. Muscles twitched with new strength and his body felt lighter, quicker – like a panther's.

Karst shrunk into a crouch, waiting. He knew that his heat spell had one more bite left before it started to wane. Both man and construct faced each other, neither one making the first move. The instant the warforged twitched, Karst pounced, covering the short distance in a blink of an eye. Intuitively, Karst knew the morningstar was racing to intercept him. Stopping cold, he flung his arms out wide, a spike point slicing through his antiquated leather armor and drawing a thin line of blood across his chest.

Without pausing, he flung himself at the warforged. Using the spikes jutting out from its side like a ladder, he scrambled up its body effortlessly. Perching on the warforged's shoulder for

less than a heartbeat, Karst eyed the array of spikes fanning the juggernaut's head like a plume. Lunging through the air, he grabbed hold of one of the head spikes with his off hand. The warforged's head jerked sharply out to the side as his body weight swung past. Following rapidly, the tangat cut through the stretched and vulnerable neck.

Landing lightly on his feet with his back to the juggernaut, he let the head slip out of his hand and crash to the ground. The clanging sound, as it bounced on the flagstones, reverberated off the low, fat walls of the silent courtyard. He could hear the warforged's body creak as it teetered on its heels; then topple like a tree. Its thunderous impact sent vibrations shooting through the ground.

Soon, he promised, hurling the thought like a javelin. Soon I will have my vengeance.

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Alluran was stunned. Panic nearly unraveled his mind. He could no longer contain his hysteria. This is insane! Was there no limit to the old man's capabilities? He nearly fled the room seeking to escape over the back wall and not stop until he reached Ghalt. But before he could fully commit himself to flight, a voice knifed into his skull. Calim's voice? Judging by Dalziel's reaction, he heard it too. Alluran turned to face the reticent man, and stared blankly at him. It was definitely Calim, but not Calim's voice; at least not his speaking voice. Telepathy?

Now that he had Alluran's undivided attention, he said, in a whispering croak: "Send him... Baroosh." Bewildered, Alluran mouthed those words to himself, over and over again. It took a few moments for their meaning to sink in. He felt himself calming.

Calim never travel anywhere without his bodyguard – Baroosh. The man is always close at hand and seems to arrive by his master's side at precisely the right moment. Alluran had never seen him in combat, but even if a fraction of the stories he had heard were true, Alluran's problem is as good as fixed. The mere sight of Baroosh had made Alluran shudder, and his men took great pains in avoiding Baroosh whenever he was about.

Baroosh had been a gladiator in Darguun when Calim had found him. His renown in the death pits was, and still is, near legendary. It is said that his name has been chanted a thousand

times, and that no man or beast has even come close to besting him in strength or prowess. Some go so far as to claim that Baroosh is perhaps the most ferocious warrior to ever walk the face of Eberron.

“Yes.” Alluran Marr hissed. “Send him Baroosh.”