

The Sword Review

Fantasy, Science Fiction & More

Currently Inside

"Old Steelfist"

by

Sean T. M. Stiennon

www.theswordreview.com

Issue 10, January 2006

Old Steelfist

Sean T. M. Stiennon

Grizal had gotten himself a nice little farm since the last time we went slashing: A whole field covered with onions and barley, a pen of juicy looking pigs, a milk cow which looked big enough to feed a tribe, and a nice little house, built from logs. Looked too tidy, though. Grizal had always been a goblin to keep things neat.

Bault leaned over to my ear and spoke in a whisper that a worm ten feet below could've heard. "Ya don't think ol' Steelfist's gone soft, eh?"

I shook my head and spat. "Nah. 'Member Blackwoods? Killed a Durnwold basher with his naked hands."

Bault showed all his rotten teeth in a grin. "Aye, I 'member. That un thrashed like a dead fish afore Steelfist cracked his spine."

"Aye, an' Tworiver? Was just him an' Zat an' one or two other lads. Slashed a dozen Leggy throats, at least. Left th' buzzies a nice feast."

"Right, Klor. Shouldn't be doubtin' him. Been a long time since he's tasted blood, though."

"About time, I say, an' I think he'll be agreein'."

Together, Bault and I and five other lads trudged through Grizal's fields. We all had our stickers—Bault with his big axe, notched fourteen times on its shaft, me with a good cutter I took off a Leggy and couple nice knives, and the rest with spears and hatchets. All of us were painted up for killing. I had my lucky skulls on my neck, and Bault was wearing a helmet

made from a Leggy skull clapped over with iron. It looked mighty fancy, and Bault had made sure no other goblin got one by slashing the smith.

I noticed a little goblinling rolling in the mud next to the door, squealing like a lame piggy. How many of the blighters had Grizal got? I had sometimes thought about finding a little she-goblin and having a few little slashers, but had never gotten around to it. Maybe if I got some nice gold in this next slashing.

Bault went stumping up to the door, almost squished the goblinling, and knocked hard. Bault didn't like waiting, so when the door didn't pop open, he kicked it hard enough to kill a dog.

"Comin'!" said a voice that had once roared for blood at my side.

The door swung open, and there was Grizal, five feet tall and as strong as ever. He was holding old Heartslitter, his scimitar, in one hand. The notches from Blackwoods, Tworiver, and a dozen other scraps still nicked the blade. He was wearing a woven smock—woven! I wondered whether he had cut Leggy throats for it, or whether his goblinness was good at the loom.

"Steelfist!" roared Bault, "Don't ya recognize yer ol' mate?"

"Bault Bloodspit. Sure I recognize ya," said Grizal. His voice was quiet.

His eyes, the same burning orange as always, turned to me. "An' Klor. It's good to see ya."

I grinned back at him. "Aye, Grizal. Yer gloomy as ever, though."

"There's plenty to be gloomy 'bout. What do ya want?"

"Well, now, won't ya be invitin' us in, so's we can meet yer little missy?" asked Bault.

"Sure. Jus' ya an' Klor, though. Leave th' other lads out 'ere."

"Why's that? Afraid of somethin'?"

"Nah, but Jessy don't like a lot o' muddy boots in th' 'ouse."

"Jessy, eh? Name fer a weepin' sponge. Me lads'll stay with me."

Bault walked through the doorway, pushing Grizal aside. I saw his eyes flash with anger, but he didn't take a swing at Bault or anything. I followed and clapped a hand to Grizal's shoulder. He smiled. We were old mates, Grizal and I.

We sat at a table and I looked around. Not many trophies for a goblin like Grizal: A spread of antlers over the fire, a shield on one wall. No sign of his goblinness. If she was pretty, she wouldn't want to be around Bault. He liked to have his way with them.

"Ale?" asked Grizal.

"Aye, a mug fer each of us!" thundered Bault. "We'll drink to th' ol' slashin's!"

The lads had a good chuckle while Grizal drew the ale from a keg in one corner. He didn't get a mug for himself, I noticed, though I had seen him put away enough ale to drown a Leggy. Was he sick? I had heard something about worms that got into your head and chewed until your brains were porridge. Had Grizal got them?

Bault drained his ale at a gulp while I sipped mine. Then, he leaned at Grizal, grinning, and said, "Now, Steelfist, me an' me lads were 'bout to go slashin'. There's a town owned by th' Rinstelds which is ripe fer it, not more'n fifty miles from 'ere. Hogs, cows, horses, ale, metal...all a right-thinkin' goblin could look fer. I got 'bout a hundred lads all ready fer blood, but I'd like ya along—there's a pack o' soldiers from th' capital who'll be tough to slash. Yer cutter'll come in 'andy."

Grizal nodded. "I thought it'd be somewhat like that. I won't be comin'."

Bault had grabbed another lad's mug and was just finishing it off when he choked and spurted ale over the table. "What's that?" he coughed.

"I don't want no part in slashin'," said Grizal.

"Grizal, mate, is yer head wrong?" I asked. "Plunder fer the takin', an' a few toughs to slash besides? Don't yer cutter be thirsty? Them Rinstelds 'ate goblins, an' we 'ate them. Now's th' time fer gettin' our own back."

"Yer own?" asked Grizal, "Ya mean when them Leggys razed Gobgurts place?"

"Th' same!" roared Bault. "They slashes us, so's we haveta slash them back. An' besides, we needs food. Them cattle'll provide nicely."

"Can't yer grow yer own?"

Bault didn't answer. His eyes were like melons underneath his helmet. "What's wrong with ya, Steelfist? Has yer heart turned green? Has yer brain gone porridgey?"

"Bault, Klor, don't yer 'member why Gobgurt got th' torch? Was 'cause he an' his lads had et a few Leggylings. Otherwise, he might've been left 'lone."

"Shut yer gob, Steelfist! Somethin's got into yer. If ya don't come slashin', yer a coward."

"I wants to stay with me mate an' goblinlings. I've slashed enough fer one life."

Grizal stood up, still holding his cutter. Maybe he had got brainworms, but his eyes didn't look stupid. "G'bye, Bault, an' good 'ealth to yer lads."

My chieftain snarled and smashed his mug on the floor. "Yer crazy."

Then he turned and stumped out the door. The other lads formed up behind. I stayed behind a second—not long enough for Bault to get mad and rip me up, but long enough to have a few words with Grizal. "G'bye, mate. Yer might be stupid, but I still 'member th' times we were together."

He smiled at me and I left.



We joined up with the rest of the tribe, and that night, while the god Gash was pulling down the sun, Bault and I got our teeth into a pair of rabbits. One was enough to fill my belly, but Bault had his then stole another half of one from a goblin too small to defend himself. Around us, a hundred lads ate, fought, sang, joked, and bragged.

When we had finished, he said to me, "We got to do somewhat 'bout Steelfist, Klor me mate. He's gone crazy."

"What can we be doin'? If he won't come, he won't come."

"Nah, don't ya see? It's that gobliness, that bitch Jessy. She's poisoned him, aye? I bet yer her pretty eyes snared Grizal, an' since then he hasn't been right in th' head. Made a porridge brain outta him. Got him plantin' an' howin' an' spawnin'. Introduced weird notions into his head 'bout slashin' an' Leggys. She's a devil in gobliness 'ide, Klor, an' we's gotta do somewhat 'bout that."

I frowned and licked grease off my lips. "Kill her?"

"There's naught else to do. I 'ates to see a fine lad like ol' Steelfist go like that."

"Do we need him along so badly?"

Bault looked at me like I was a rotten dog carcass. "Need him? Grizal, don't yer 'member nothing? 'Sides me, he's th' best warrior o' th'

goblins! 'Course we need him! If he were weaker, I might jus' mourn him fer dead. But he's Grizal Steelfist, an' we can't be lettin' him give himself up fer vegetables an' goblinlings."

"Ya may be right. But I don't like to do Grizal no 'arm."

"That's th' thing, Klor. There's no 'arm—only 'elp. We's only doin' what needs doin'. Grizal thinks he's 'appy, but we knows he can only be 'appy when he's slashin'."

"Perhaps yer right. When?"

"Tonight. No better time fer this."

"And what'll we do with Grizal himself, while we's killin' his missy?"

"Crack him on th' 'ead. Shouldn't be too 'ard—he'll be sleepin' sound."

I scratched my nose. "I still don't be liken' it, Bault."

"Ya don't have to like it. Ya only have to do it. Rough, but it'll get Steelfist back."

One by one, he broke open his bones and sucked out the tiny scraps of marrow, while I went away to give my cutter a quick sharpening.



The night was dark as a wolf's insides and the moon hid behind a puff of cloud. Some Leggys say goblins are children of the moon, and its true we like the night—and can see mighty well in it too—but sometimes I think the moon's afraid of us. She's nice and white, and doesn't have any love for the goblins who crawl below in mud and blood.

Bault crept beside me, his axe in one hand. We had all covered our blades in fire soot for the occasion, just in case Grizal was more alert then we were hoping. Anyways, it was good practice for fighting Leggys, whose sentries got drunk and fell asleep fast. Grizal's vegetables wouldn't be good

for much after the tramping we gave them, but he wouldn't need them by the time the sun showed his gob when Gash pushed him up. The house was quiet—not even a squalling goblinling or a yapping dog to be heard. The pigs were snuffling a bit, but they were a little ways off.

Two score of lads went to the door in front, and another two score went in back. Bault and I and the last score went round to the cottage's side, where there was another room besides the main one. The windows were shuttered with heavy slabs of oak, locked from the inside. Grizal had only gotten more cautious since his marriage. "Do yer thing, Klor," hissed Bault.

I had skill as a lock breaker, and I never went anywhere without my tools. The lick-hook found the locks, the nick-hook cracked them, and the cruncher brought them down without more than a peep of noise. Bault reached for the shutters, but I stopped his hand and rubbed some rabbit fat against the hinges. He chuckled. "Ya always was th' smart one, Klor. Besides Steelfist, natcherly."

He opened the shutters. "Lift me up, lads," he said to four of the goblins at his back. "Th' goblin who makes a noise is carrion."

They heaved him up, clenching their teeth to keep from grunting under his weight, and Bault got a leg over the windowsill and went through. His boots thumped heavily on the floor inside.

Almost instantly, I heard a voice that I knew was Grizal's murmur something, and heard him sitting up. Bault's footsteps hammered away from me, and I heard the sound of his fist smacking into Grizal's skull. "He's out, lads! C'mon in!"

I leapt up, grabbed the sill, and swung myself into the darkness ahead of the other lads. I drew my cutter and tried to see in the darkness. Screams and cries erupted around me. Bault towered over the gobliness—she was pretty, as far as I could tell in the dark, and was screaming. He raised his axe slowly, blackened blade almost invisible. The little goblinlings—who naturally slept with their parents—squalled loud enough to wake Black Bogo himself. I took a swing at one of them, but my cutter hit only wood. Other lads bubbled through the window. I saw Bault's axe fall and go straight through Jessy's chest and into the mattress beneath her. She died still screaming, and Bault tore his axe away.

More light filled the room as a couple goblinlings opened the door to the other room and scrambled out there, squealing. Three others had already been slashed, and I felt blood pooling around my feet. I chased after the two others, raising my cutter. They couldn't run half as fast as I could. I caught them up and swung. My cutter hamstrung one goblinling. I raised it up for another whack. Shiny blood poured out from his wounds, and his white eyes looked up at me. I hesitated for a moment. He was a strong young goblin. He'd have been a good warrior.

One of the other lads threw a club and pulped him before I'd made up my mind to swing. The other goblinling died quickly just as the door shattered and two score lads came in through it. "All gone, Klor?" one of them shouted to me.

I nodded slowly. I felt as though I was asleep, and I'd wake beside the campfire in a moment.

"Fun's over, eh?" said the goblin. "Well, let's plunder th' place! C'mon!"

Howling, they all rushed in and started smashing Grizal's stuff. I kept looking at the dead goblinling. The club's owner retrieved it and followed a few other lads to go see how tasty the pigs were.

"Klor! Hey!" yelled Bault. " 'Elp me drag Steelfist out!"

I took him by one arm, and we hauled him out into the warm night. The moon hid even further behind the clouds—perhaps she hated the sight of what we had done. Steelfist had an oozing lump on his bare head where Bault had clonked him.

"There! Soon as he's awake, we'll 'ave our lad back," said Bault, leaning on his bloody axe with an expression like he usually had after a big meal.

I wasn't so certain. I could hear our lads tearing apart the house, and at least one pig had gotten slashed. The picture of that little goblinling, hamstrung and staring at me, was branded behind my eyes.

Grizal didn't wake up until after our boys came spilling out of the house, some of them carrying plunder, some eating strips of raw meat, some getting drunk on Grizal's stolen ale. Some of the lads tore at each other over little scraps of cloth or bits of food or bottles of drink. Bitzer the shaman would have some wounds to look after tomorrow.

Steelfist's eyes opened, and he came completely awake all at once. "Bault!" he howled, scrambling to his feet. "What've ya done?"

Bault stood up to his full height—nearly five and half feet—and took up the expression he used when he was about to beat a goblin who'd gone out of line. "It was fer yer own good, Steelfist. Yer too fine a warrior to be wastin' yer time spawnin' an' farmin'. That Jessy of yers was a bad influence. Now that she's gone, yer gonna come slashin' with us."

For a moment, Grizal's teeth ground against each other so hard I thought they'd crack. His eyes strained almost out of their holes. Then, he roared, like a hunting bear, "Me own good? I was 'appy! Me sons would've been brave! Jessy was good! I loved me life an' me brood!"

I thought he would tackle Bault and try to claw the chief's heart out with his naked hands. But he didn't. Only stood staring with all the hate of the Big Fire in his eyes. Bault frowned a little more, showing some anger. "Don't ya talk like that to me, Steelfist. We's yer ol' mates, an' we knew what ya needed. It might 'urt now, but once you've come slashin' a while, you'll forget all 'bout that 'ussy."

"Don't ya be insultin' me wife, Bault!" roared Grizal. "Yer nothin' but a pack of vultures an' murderers! You've killed me Jessy, an' all me goblinlings, an' now ya wants me to kill Leggys with ya? Aye, you'll go kill yer Leggys, an' their Jessies, an' their little uns, an' you'll get drunk, an' you'll fight over th' wine, an' kill each other fer a little meat. An' then what'll 'appen? They'll come an' do th' same to ya! You'll feel a Leggy cutter in yer ribs, an' you'll 'ear yer lads an' yer wenches an' yer goblinlings screamin' fer mercy from th' Rinstelds, an' you'll smell roastin' goblin from those who didn't get themselves outta th' huts soon enough!"

I half-expected to see him foaming like a Durnwold hound, but his eyes were cold. His arms shook with rage. I knew we had done a bad thing. That goblinling should've lived. But shouldn't Grizal have come with us, his mates, in the first place?

"Gobgurt's place got roasted!" thundered Bault, trying to out-shout Grizal. "We's gotta pay 'em back!"

"Yer always hated Gobgurt. Ya don't need any excuse fer murderin' an' gettin' drunk on drink ya stole."

"Watch yer gob, Steelfist, or I'll whack ya!" said Bault, raising his axe.

Grizal's voice reminded me of the way a winter blizzard feels on bare skin. "I'd rather be dead then slashin' with ya, Bault. You'll 'ave to kill me like ya killed me Jessy. I 'aven't got any blade."

"Then get yerself one," said Bault. All his teeth were showing in a snarl.

Grizal turned to the lads. They had gone quiet, except for a few drunk goblins who kept mumbling songs under their breath. Most of them knew of Grizal, and they hadn't expected anything like this. He swept his eyes across them. "Any of yer got a cutter?" he asked. His voice was thunder.

I flipped mine over and held the grip out towards him. " 'Ere, Grizal."

His eyes met mine. I looked down at the cutter while he came towards me and took it. "Thank ya, Klor," was all he said.

"Sorry, Grizal," I whispered, softly enough so that none of the lads heard it.

He turned away without another word and faced Bault across a few feet of dirt. He didn't bother with any twirls or fancy stances. He just stood with the cutter in both hands and said, "C'mon an' die, Bault Bloodspit."

We all stepped back a few paces and got in a circle. Even the drunkards went quiet. We were used to fights, but this was something special to every lad. Two of the greatest goblin warriors alive were about to slash each other.

Bault whacked first. His axe came up, and he charged at Grizal. Their blades smashed together with a thunder-clap, and sparks lit up the night for

a moment. They stood locked against each other, each shoving with all his muscle, trying to force the other goblin's weapon away so they could get a good cut in. Bault was heavier by a good slab, but Grizal had once been strong enough to lift a Leggy. Soon, I saw that he hadn't gone soft in that way. He forced Bault's axe up, inch by inch, and slid his cutter down. If they didn't come apart in a few seconds, Bault would get Grizal's cutter through his helmet.

He pulled away, taking his axe with him, and took a swing at Grizal's ribs. Grizal blocked easily and turned it into a counter-attack at Bault's neck. The chief only dodged it by leaping back.

Bault was a tough warrior, and his weight and height gave him some advantages. He fought with a snarl on his face that had sent many a younger goblin off to hide. His axe swung in blows that could've beheaded Grizal if they had ever landed. My old friend fought with his mouth closed and his eyes narrowed—but he was angrier than I had ever seen Bault, even when the chief was beating a gobliness who hadn't filled his ale mug high enough.

Black ash covered both blades, and the moon hadn't shown her face yet, so I had a rough time telling whose weapon was where. But I could see when Bault's axe tore a strip of meat off Grizal's side, and when Grizal's cutter hit the chief in his leg, tearing his breeches and his muscles below. The blood shimmered black in the faint light that peeked through the moon's shelter. They didn't notice their hurts. Another whack from Bault. Grizal's upper arm tore open, and I would've sworn to Black Bogo that I could see white bone glimmering like eye-whites inside. It wasn't his cutter arm.

Bault took a slash that didn't manage to get past his ribs, but sliced a line of blood across his chest anyhow.

Then Grizal pinned Bault's axe to ground with his cutter, let go of the weapon, and lunged onto Bault with his naked hands. The chief punched him in the gut, hard, but Grizal didn't even flinch. He climbed up onto the chief and locked his hands onto either side of Bault's skull, wrapping his legs around Bault's hips. Bault clapped his hands onto Grizal's neck, roared, and started squeezing for all he was worth.

The field was as quiet as a bobcat on the hunt. The two of them squeezed at each other—Grizal on Bault's head, Bault on Grizal's neck. The rage on Grizal's face made my guts twist, and I had seen plenty of terrible sights. His claws sunk into Bault's skin, and blood welled up around them. I could almost see them pale with how hard he was squeezing. His face darkened at the same time—Bault was crushing his throat into pulp.

Then Bault's face changed. I couldn't tell what it was at first. He opened his mouth, but didn't let out any sound. His eyes widened. I had never seen Bault with that expression. Fear. Bloodspit was scared for the first time in his life.

I heard a crack and Grizal's hands came closer together. He had broken straight through Bault's skull and mashed whatever he kept inside. Bloodspit's hands went limp as his corpse dropped, and Grizal stood up, hands dripping with blood. "That's fer me Jessy an' me goblinlings!" he shrieked.

The lads didn't wait long, and I couldn't stop them. They tore Grizal apart, howling all the while, and when they were done, the moon came out and showed her light on the blood of the two great warriors.



In the morning, Vatch, the goblin second to me in the tribe, found me sitting on a rock and staring off into the forest. I hadn't slept, and I had left my cutter where Grizal had dropped it. It was a misty day—a bad omen.

Vatch came up to me and said, "Klor, what yer want us to do? Th' lads are gettin' itchy, with th' chief dead an' all, an' they want to know what yer says to do. They all says yer th' chief now. That's what Bault would've wanted."

"Does they still want to go slashin'?" I asked

"It's up to ya, but th' lads were lookin' forward to a good slashin'. They thinks Bault got what he could've expected, goin' up 'gainst Steelfist, an' that we'd best be movin' on to go slash th' Rimsteld's."

"All of 'em?"

"They wants to know what ya think."

I scratched my jaw. The mist was so thick that the trees got hazy after just a few feet. "I think we should turn 'round an' go back to th' village. Black Bogo doesn't like this slashin'. If he did, he wouldn't've let Bault an' Grizal whack each other. An' this fog, right after they're both lyin' dead—Bogo'd have to pound yer skull to make things any more clear. This is a bad luck slashin'."

"Bitzer the shaman was sayin' somewhat like that," said Vatch. "An' I don't want to be makin' ol' Bogo cranky. C'mon an' tell th' lads what we gonna do."

I stood up and followed Vatch back to the camp. The lads would listen to me. They didn't want Black Bogo mad at them any more than Vatch did,

and every goblin knows that the chief knows the most about what Bogo wants.

But I wouldn't tell them another reason I had for not wanting to go slashing. Most of them probably hadn't listened to Grizal much, but I had. I liked a good fight, but I had seen Gobgurt's village after the Leggys had been there. I didn't like to see goblinlings killed, nor goblinesses. I didn't like what Bault had done, and I thought he deserved what my old friend had given him.

I'd ask Black Bogo to go easy on Grizal. Bault could fend for himself.

Old Steelfist

Runner Up,

The Sword Review 2005 Fiction Contest

Sean T. M. Stiennon



Copyright 2006, *Sean T. M. Stiennon*

Sean T. M. Stiennon is a student in Madison, Wisconsin. Previously, his writing has been published in *Deep Magic*, *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection*, *Amazing Journeys Magazine*, and *The Sword Review*, and he recently won second place in the 2004 SFReader.com Short Story Contest. He is currently a staff book reviewer at *Deep Magic*, where he also helps read submissions, and his short story collection *Six with Flinteye* was released on July 1, 2005 from Silver Lake Publishing. For more information, visit his author page at www.sfreader.com/authors/seanstiennon.



Cover: "Double-Edged Sword"

Copyright 2006, *Double-Edged Publishing, Inc.*

"Double-Edged Sword" is an original illustration created for *The Sword Review* by staff member, Bill Snodgrass.



The Sword Review is a publication of Double-Edged Publishing, Inc. It is available at www.theswordreview.com and updates are published weekly. Issues are completed monthly.

The Sword Review (ISSN 1556-5416)

9618 Misty Brook Cove, Cordova, Tennessee 38016

For more information visit www.theswordreview.com. Sean T. M. Stiennon's "Old Steelfist" and "Double-Edged Sword" appear as part of Issue 10, January 2006.



www.theswordreview.com