

PURITY OF PURPOSE

By Gareth-Michael Skarka

The old Master leaned heavily on his staff as he surveyed the group of students seated before him on the hard clay of the courtyard. A dozen or so, each of whom had braved the hard climb through some of the roughest terrain in the Eagle's Claws to reach the remote hermitage. Getting here was test enough, yet today, as with every day since their arrival, the old Master continued to test them.

“Answer me this: What are the Unsurpassed Weapons?”

The students hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. The question was simple enough — a recitation of a lesson given by the Master days earlier. His questions were never that easy, however.

The silence of the nervous students was broken by the sound of one rising to his feet. The old Master recalled that this one was from the Thousand Mesas, many days to the south. The Master did not recall his name. He never bothered to learn their names until the second year.

The student stood until he was sure the Master's attention was upon him. He answered, clearly and confidently, in a strong Castalan accent that confirmed the Master's recollection of his origins: “Master, the Unsurpassed Weapons are The Pistol and The Sword.”

“Correct,” said the Master, “and why are they called so?”

Smiles broke out among the less disciplined of the gathered class. This is what they had feared, the old man's trap.

The standing student paused momentarily before answering. “Purity of purpose, Master.”

A slight twitch at the corner of the mouth and a reflexively raised eyebrow where the only evidence of the shocked surprise on the face of the old Master. *This one bears watching*, he thought.

“Correct. The Unsurpassed Weapons represent the pinnacle of the form, due to purity of purpose. Every other weapon is an adapted tool. A spear or a rifle is used for hunting. An axe for the felling of trees. A hammer for driving nails. A knife for everything from cutting rope to whittling to carving a steak. The Pistol and The Sword, though... they were built for a single use. They have no other purpose, but to take a life.”

“What are the greatest among the Unsurpassed Weapons, Master?” A question shouted from one of the seated students — a slight boy from somewhere in the Periphery, if the Master recalled correctly. The standing student glared at his classmate momentarily, for the breach in protocol — a student should stand before speaking, and then only speak when prompted. He quickly regained his composure, returning his attention to the Master, who directed him to sit.

“There are many. Weapons built by legendary smiths and wielded by heroes and villains alike. You’ve all doubtless read the dime novels.”

A few chuckles fluttered through the class like butterflies.

“Judge Wellam’s Thrice Repeating Sword, The Lone Gun, Green Harmony, The Maiden’s Sixgun... all fine weapons, and each rightfully famous. To my mind, however, the pinnacle of the Unsurpassed Weapons would have to be Wind and Fire.”

The old Master sat down on a stool under the only shade tree in the courtyard, and wiped his brow with a sleeve. “A matched pair of long-barrel pistols, build over a century ago by a man who was looking to kill a god, or so the tales go. The finest ironwork you’ve ever seen. Carved into each handle, in the old speech, the names of each gun — Wind and Fire. Those handles have been worn smooth by the hands of many men over the years — some good, some evil, all terrible. Always worn

in a reverse rig, high on the belt line, to be drawn cross-handed — and so that the grips, with the names emblazoned, can be seen clearly. Red tassels, like you put on a sword, are hung from the bottoms of the grips to draw the eye. Almost like the guns want their names to be seen, as if to say *‘Stand down, for we have killed better men than you.’*”

The old man fell silent for a moment.

“Dismissed. Get to the kitchens and get the meal ready.” The students rose, and dutifully filed out, but the old Master saw that the one from the Thousand Mesas stood for a moment, regarding him, before joining his classmates.

The cool night air of the mountains brought an unwelcome ache to the old Master’s bones as he finished his evening pipe. Knocking the spent tobacco from the bowl, he slowly made his way through the darkened hallways of the hermitage, back to his chamber.

He was not surprised to find the student from the Thousand Mesas there, standing at his writing desk in the middle of the room. On the desk was the burlap bag from the bottom of the steamer trunk which had served as the old man’s dresser since he had carried it up the mountain decades ago.

“Your name?” The Master asked, as he walked, bent with age, towards the desk.

“Navi Herroah,” he said.

“And what brings you to my chamber this evening, Herroah-si?” The Master said, in the young man’s native Castalan.

Herroah pulled the guns out of the bag. The metal glimmered with an oiled sheen, even after all these years. The worn grips with the carved sigils protruded from the ancient leather of the holster rig, and the tassels seemed black in the moonlight, rather than the vibrant red that was seared into the old man’s memory. Even lying there on the table, the pistols seemed like living things, coiled and ready to strike... predatory and heavy with menace.

The old man shook his head sadly. “You didn’t come here for instruction. I should’ve known that. You already knew too much.”

Herroah’s lip curled in an arrogant sneer at the old man’s acknowledgement of his skill.

...which was all the distraction that the Master needed.

With blinding speed, the old man kicked the desk, shattering it in twain. As the desk exploded upward, the guns flew into the air, along with papers, an ink pot and pen, and the other contents of the desk, like blown leaves in the autumn.

Herroah’s training took over after only a moment’s pause from the shock of the sudden action of the old man he had thought feeble. He drove forward, hands curled into the claws of the Ascendent Eagle style, looking to tear the throat from the old man. His speed was impressive, and his fingers dug deep.

The Master’s jacket tore away in Herroah’s hand. For no sooner had the Master landed the kick, he had begun his leap. The Thousand Mesa’s Ascendent Eagle style, rather than tearing out his throat, only managed to grasp cloth as the old man flipped into the air over Herroah’s head.

When he landed behind the young man, the old Master had Wind and Fire in his hands.

Herroah spun to relaunch his attack, only to be cut down in an instant as the two pistols roared their disapproval in the confined space of the Master’s chamber. His body hit the floor before the last of the papers had finished drifting to the ground.

The old man looked down at the smoking guns in his hands, the worn grips which fit so perfectly against his palms. They had delivered the final lesson to Herroah.

Sometimes, it’s not just weapons which have purity of purpose.

Gareth-Michael Skarka is the creator of Far West -- a writer, game designer, consultant, graphic designer and veteran of over twenty years in the entertainment business. For the past eight years, he's been at the forefront of the growth of the ePublishing industry, appearing in articles on the subject ranging from the Washington Post to the South China Morning Post, and online via dozens of sites, including CNNMoney, ABCNews.com and the Nintendo Wii News Channel.

The married father of three lives in the old frontier (in Lawrence, Kansas), but works in the new one.