

The Kid
by
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The Kid turned his face just enough so the punch caught his cheek instead of his nose. He'd suffered a broken nose just a couple of weeks back and it still hurt like all the hells. He had no wish to repeat the experience.

He hit the ground hard and gasped. Dirt and air rushed into his lungs in equal measure and a coughing fit exploded from his chest. He heard the others laughing but couldn't work up the bother to care. Kav spat at him, Benben and Jan were doubled over from their braying and Lissa shouted an insult at him; something to do with being more worthless than the horse shit he'd fallen in.

Lissa's insult shouldn't have hurt; she never spoke to him other than to mock him, but for some reason it felt like a knife to his chest. More than the punch, more than the coughing fit; her insults made him hurt.

The Kid managed to get his coughing under control and opened his eyes. Kav and Lissa weren't even looking at him anymore. Benben and Jan were making stupid faces. Nobody else around paid them any attention; folk moved about their business as if they hadn't even seen the punch. One guard glanced their way and then went back to staring at the merchant hawking spices from Sarth; wasn't exactly illegal to set up a stall so close to the docks but it was frowned upon and that was reason enough for a shakedown.

"Reckon he got the point," Kav said. "Ya get the point, No Name?"

The Kid pushed himself first to his knees and then to his feet; they were unsteady but they held alright. His cheek was stinging something fierce; he touched it with his hand and winced. His hand came away bloody.

"Aye. I got it," the Kid said. He looked down at the ground lest any of the others see the dark scowl on his face.

"Let's get o'er ta the Burn. Reckon we can scrounge us a meal if we make No Name beg," Kav said and started walking. Lissa stuck by his side like fleas stuck to a dog. Benben aimed a kick at the Kid and then he and Jan hurried after the others.

The Kid stood there for a few seconds; his hands clenching and unclenching. He bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood but swallowed the scream of rage. Then he spat into the dirt and rushed to catch up.

The Burn was aptly named. The place stank of charred flesh and sweat. The heat made the entire area oppressive, gave the atmosphere a 'boiling point' feel that could bubble over and turn violent at a moment's notice. Then there were the flies. The Kid didn't have a word for so many flies but then the Kid could only count as far as six. They buzzed everywhere, got everywhere, were everywhere; on the meat, on the ground, on the water, on the people. The Kid hated the Burn; shame it was the surest place for the likes of him to get fed in Korral.

The meat was always cooking in the Burn. The fires never went out and as long as they were lit they had meat on them; most of it was charred to a crisp but beggars couldn't be choosers and Kav's little crew were nothing if not beggars.

"Alright, Horse Shit," Kav said giving the Kid a new nickname for the day, all the others laughed. "Get o'er there an' beg us some food. An' don't go askin' where it came from this time."

The Kid snorted but stepped to his job with haste. If he waited around or argued Kav would give him another beating and Lissa would insult him again. He glanced back at her. She wasn't pretty; far from it in fact, but there was something about her, something that made him want her to like him. Instead she mocked him and sometimes even joined in with the hitting but only after the others had already put him down.

The Kid sauntered over to the nearest fire and waited; giving the cook his very best '*I'm a starving orphan*' look. The cook ignored him. The Kid decided it was best to wait his turn; he'd learned long ago that if you piss off a cook, you get the shits and if the others got the shits he'd get another beating for sure.

"Well if it ain't the little nameless shit," the cook said after noticing the Kid. "Ya got some bits ta pay fer it this time?"

The Kid snorted.

"What a fuckin' surprise. Here." The fat cook reached into the old meat barrel and pulled out a handful of charred strips of flesh. The Kid counted six and another three; he pocketed one discretely.

"Tell Kav ta get his scrawny arse over here. I got somin' fer him ta do."

The Kid grunted and hurried away before someone bigger, older or armed could steal his scraps.

"That all ya got?" Lissa demanded. She was sweating and her greasy hair was plastered to her head. "Ya really are a useless shit."

The others snatched at the takings. The Kid barely managed to hold on a single strip. Kav and Lissa got two each, Benben and Jan took three between them.

"Cook wants ya," the kid said to Kav.

"Shit. Which one?"

"The fat one."

Kav raised his fist so the Kid lowered his eyes and pointed. Kav punched him in the arm anyway before leaving the group. Lissa went with him and the Kid found himself alone with Benben and Jan. The two were brothers; born at the same time though both argued about who came out first. They both had pudgy faces, beady eyes and crooked teeth. The only real distinction between the two was Benben's nose bent to the left and Jan's bent to the right. Broken noses were proof of Kav's dominance over the little group.

"Give us ya meat," Benben said. Jan echoed his words.

The Kid stuffed his strip of burnt meat into his mouth and started chewing the tough leather. Benben laughed and punched his left arm. Jan laughed and punched his right arm. The Kid let out a whimper, backed away a step and turned his back on the bigger boys.

He looked for Kav and saw him standing alone by the cook's fire, tending to the meat and filching the odd fresh strip. He saw Lissa following the fat cook away from the fires. They both disappeared into one of the dishevelled hovels and reappeared a few minutes later; the cook swaggered back to his fire and Lissa walked towards the little group, wiping her mouth and scowling at the whole world. When she got back Benben and Jan laughed at her and made jokes. The Kid ignored them all; if Lissa was angry she'd take it out on him if she noticed him.

Kav was talking to the fat cook; negotiating by the looks of things. Kav was smirking and making number gestures with his fingers, the cook was waving a meaty fist in a threatening manner.

After some time the negotiations ended. Kav picked up some more meat strips, from the fresh barrel this time, and sauntered back to his group. The Kid wiped sweat from his face; he was soaking and the rest of the group were fairing no better.

"Here." Kav handed a strip of meat to each of his little group. The Kid got the smallest piece but at least he got one.

“Got some work,” Kav said, chewing on a strip. “Paid an’ all. Not fer you, Horse Shit. Get yaself home an’ don’t steal nothin’.”

The Kid thought about arguing; if he didn’t help out he didn’t get paid, but decided against it. If Kav had made a decision arguing would only earn more blood.

The Kid didn’t go home right away. Wasn’t really much of a home anyway; more like a collection of old, dirty straw with something resembling four walls and a roof. They’d had a nicer place a few weeks back until a bunch of armed adults had kicked them out and claimed it as their own.

The Kid went to visit his friend. Took a lot to survive in Korral and that went doubly true for an animal; they were either seen as a source of food or a disease-carrying pest. Somehow the Kid’s friend had survived and, despite an obvious distrust in people, had come to trust the Kid. It was, he reflected, probably something to do with him feeding it.

The Kid had even named the dog. He may not have a name himself but his friend deserved one so he had named the beast Brownny on account of its fur colour.

The kid whistled when he approached to the scorched ruins of the house where Brownny lived. He got no answer. He checked the area, made certain there was no one else about then sat down, set the fresh meat in front of him and whistled again.

A shadow detached itself from the wall to his left. It crept towards the Kid and sniffed at him and nipped at his fingers when held them out. Then it spotted the meat on the floor and snatched it up; wolfing it down.

The Kid took the old strip of flesh from his pocket, bit it in two and gave half of that to Brownny as well. After the meat was gone they played for a bit; Brownny enjoyed being chased. He would charge around the ruined house, barking at the kid and dancing away whenever he got close. Sometimes the Kid would catch the dog and they would wrestle on the ground; rolling around and snapping at each other. When they tired they would just lie there. The Kid laughed and talked to his friend, Brownny listened and dozed, sometimes he scratched himself, sometimes the Kid scratched for him.

When the light started to fade the Kid knew it was time to go. If he wasn’t back home by the time the others got back they might look for him, or at the very least beat him when he did get back. He said his goodbyes and left Brownny sitting in the ruined house; staring after him with big, brown eyes.

A few days later all the kids around the docks were in uproar and a fair number of the adults too. The Kid couldn’t say he was surprised; it wasn’t everyday somebody with a big name passed through Korral let alone a crew with five big names.

Hangman Yril they called him on account of his preference for hanging folk. He rode into town with Arik Coldhammer, Alrun Halfhorse, the Saint, No Mercy Bob and five others the Kid had never heard of. They were dragging four men behind them and word was they were going to be hanged publicly. Word also had it these four men were part of a bandit crew led by Eirik Hawkeye and once the hanging was done Yril and his crew of bounty hunters would be going after Hawkeye himself.

There was a thick crowd around the square where the Hangman had chosen to carry out his executions; it seemed as if half of Korral had turned out to watch. Luckily Kav, Benben and Jan were more than adept at pushing, elbowing and punching their way through a crowd so the Kid and Lissa followed them in, determined to get a good view of the spectacle.

When the Kid got his first look at Hangman Yril he was surprised and a little disappointed. He had expected a younger man, a man in his prime, a man with hair on his head. Yril was bald with great, grey eyebrows and bushy, grey hair on his cheeks. His face

was hard and angular and wrinkled and, though the man held himself as straight as an arrow, he was obviously advancing in years.

Yril watched the crowd while a hasty gallows was constructed then dug a hand into one of the pockets of his jerkin and handed a piece of paper to one of his fellows.

The second man cut a much more striking figure in a black leather jerkin and a long, brown overcoat. He was tall, lean and handsome with a casual grin, short-cropped hair the colour of driftwood and a dusting of stubble.

“The Saint,” Lissa breathed from beside the Kid. He snatched a glance at her to find she was staring at the handsome man with a blush lighting up her dirty cheeks.

There wasn’t much for the Saint to say; he read out the names of the four men, listed a few crimes that, in truth, most folk in the wilds were guilty of, and then stepped out of the way so the gathered crowd could see the condemned.

It took longer than the Kid expected for the men to die. They choked, thrashed, kicked, and turned first red in the face then a dirty purple colour. Two of them pissed themselves and one of the others shit himself. Then it was over and four corpses swung where just minutes before four living men had stood.

Some of the bounty hunters laughed at something the Saint said but the Kid didn’t hear it; the crowd was already starting to break up and there was a dull roar of unidentifiable noise. The Kid stared at Hangman Yril; the old bounty hunter was watching the corpses sway from the gallows. He seemed peaceful.

“Go talk ta him, Nameless,” Jan said.

The Kid gave his head a vigorous shaking as a reply.

“Go talk ta him or I’ll beat the shit out o’ ya,” Kav said, a nasty grin on his face.

With a loud sigh the Kid turned and set off towards the gallows. He stopped at the foot of the flimsy-looking wooden construction and waited; looking up at the back of the old bounty hunter still watching the bodies sway in the sea breeze.

“Yril,” said the Saint. “Ya got a new friend.”

The Hangman turned and looked down on the Kid; his eyes were bright blue underneath his thick eyebrows.

“Got somethin’ to say, boy?” the Hangman said his accent clean of the drawl of the wilds.

The Kid tried to think of something, anything to say but his mind came up blank; what was there to say to the most feared and respected bounty hunter in all the wilds?

“Why hanging?” the words burst from the Kid’s mouth before he could think better of it and he lowered his eyes before the Hangman could get angry.

Hangman Yril laughed. He had a deep voice and a deep laugh but it seemed full of humour not menace. The old bounty hunter lowered himself into a sitting position on the stage of the gallows.

“You probably think it’s for some deeply profound reason, eh? Or maybe because I like the way the bodies twist in the wind? Or maybe I think it’s the only real way to punish a man for his crimes?”

“Um...”

“Truth is it’s none of those. Back in the Five Kingdoms hanging is just how we deal with criminals so when I came to the wilds that’s how I continued to deal with them. Pretty soon people started callin’ me the Hangman. These days that’s a name that strikes fear into those that commit crimes so I figured it’s worth keeping.

“You look a bit young to be a criminal but don’t you worry; step out of line and we can find a rope long enough for you.”

The Kid’s eyes went wide and his knees went soft. The Hangman laughed again, reached down with a hand and tousled the Kid’s hair.

“Go on. Off with you,” the Hangman said, smiling. “And take this.” He tossed the Kid a silver bit. The Kid caught the coin, said a hasty and terrified thank you and retreated back to Kav and the others just about as fast as his legs could go.

Kav wasn't happy and when Kav wasn't happy the others weren't happy and when no one was happy things tended to go badly for the Kid.

First there was the punching and the mocking but those were regular enough that he'd learned to deal with them over the years. Then Kav stole the silver bit the Hangman had given to the Kid. For folk like the Kid a single silver bit was no small amount; it was, in fact, the most money he had ever possessed and Kav just took it with only a bloody nose as way of 'thanks'. To say the Kid was annoyed at that would be something of an understatement but he knew there was nothing he could do but bear it so bear it he did.

There was no way the Kid could have known things were about to get a whole lot worse.

It was a few days after the incident and, though the others were still angry that it hadn't ended in a beating for the Kid at the hands of the wild's most feared bounty hunter, things seemed to have settled down. Benben and Jan had been out for most of the day and when they returned Kav decided it was time they visited the Burn to beg some free food.

The leader of the little group didn't do his usual, didn't order the Kid to beg for them; this time he led them up to one of the fires himself. It was the fat cook, the one who liked Lissa so much. The Kid hated the man but he'd never say anything.

“Here fer ya meat?” asked the cook though his eyes were on Lissa.

“It cooked yet?” asked Kav.

“Cooked enough ta eat,” the cook responded with a shrug.

Kav tore a strip directly off the spit and juggled it between his hands for a few moments.

“Fuck. Still hot. Here, Nameless. Get that down ya. Bet ya've never had meat so fresh.”

The Kid caught the offered meat and tore into it. It was hot, greasy and stringy but tasted good and filled the gnawing hole in his stomach. He was so engrossed by the taste of fresh meat it took him a few moments to realise Kav was laughing at him and Lissa and Benben and Jan, even the cook was giggling.

The Kid slowed his chewing. “What's funny?” he asked.

Kav was near creased over he was laughing so hard. “Ask him...” he said, pointing at the cook. “Ask him what type of meat it is.”

The Kid swallowed; a lump of half-chewed meat slid down his throat. “What type of meat is it?” he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Dog,” said the cook.

A whole new round of laughter broke out. Kav was bent over slapping his leg, Lissa was leaning on him to keep herself upright, Benben was pointing at the Kid and roaring at his face and Jan was rolling on the ground like a pig in mud.

It took a few moments for the Kid to figure it out.

He threw the last bit of meat on the ground, turned and fled. The sound of harsh laughter ringing in his ears.

The Kid sprinted to the ruined house, sprinted to Browny's home. He was out of breath, drenched in sweat and on the verge of tears but he forced out a whistle anyway.

Nothing.

The Kid whistled again. Then he called out for Browny. Then he searched the ruins. Then he found the bloodstain on a large rock and a tuft of brown fur next to it. Then he threw up.

The Kid sat there among the ruins of Brown's house; shaking and crying. He wasn't sure how long he cried, only that he cried until he couldn't.

When he looked up he found that it was dark. Night had long since set in but the moon was low and full and kept the town lit. He knew he couldn't go back home; not now, not ever. He also knew Kav needed to pay. Kav and Benben and Jan and even Lissa. They all needed to pay. But hanging was too good for the likes of them; it was too quick, too clean. He needed something much worse.

The Kid didn't go home that day, nor the next. It wasn't that he was scared, he was biding his time; watching, waiting. He had a plan; the only way he could see to deal with all of Kav's little group. He couldn't do anything to them himself; they were too big, too strong, there were too many of them and they were always together. But the guards, those who policed Korral, they could do it for him.

The Kid knew that there were two crimes that would bring the guard down heavy; steal from one of them, or murder one of them. He intended to frame Kav for both.

First the Kid had to find a target. It had to be a guard with money, preferably a lot of money. The Kid got lucky when he found a guard going through the pockets of some drunk passed out outside a tavern. The drunk looked to be blooded; someone important no doubt, someone rich. The guard found a small purse on the drunken fool, four gold bits and a handful of silver; a fortune by most ordinary standards.

The guard pocketed the purse and continued on his way. The Kid followed, staying out of sight, keeping to the shadows. He got his chance just after sundown.

The Kid knew the guard, knew his name; Berry. Berry had never been nice to the Kid, never been nasty to him either. Some folk were just unlucky and Berry was about to be one of them. With such a fortune in his pockets the guard would want to spend some and the Kid knew just where he'd go; also knew he wouldn't get there.

The Kid waited until Berry hit an alley and then called out his name. Berry turned, his hand on his sword hilt, a suspicious look on his face. He relaxed when he saw who it was; no one had any cause to be scared of the Kid.

"You're one of Kav's little shits. What d'ya want?" Berry said.

The Kid approached. His hand slick with sweat around the jagged shard of metal he was passing for a knife. "Kav told me ta find ya."

"What does the little fuck want this time?"

Just a couple of feet away and the Kid launched himself at Berry. The man was a good stretch taller than the Kid but his makeshift knife found Berry's neck all the same.

Berry tried to scream; that much was clear even to the Kid, but all that came out was a loud gurgle and a squirt of blood. They went down, the Kid on top stabbing again and again and again. By the time he was finished Berry was long dead and the Kid was wearing the guard's blood on his hands, on his clothes, on his face, he was wearing it everywhere.

The Kid threw up.

He went to work in a trance. Everything seemed muted and dull but the Kid didn't have time to stop and think it over. He took the purse from Berry and took the ring the guard always wore. He left the body in the alley, someone would no doubt find it soon enough.

He found another homeless child; one smaller and weaker. He beat up the child and took the rags from her back then the Kid made his way to the docks. There he found a secluded spot and jumped in; washing the dried blood from his skin. When he was done he changed into his new, bloodless rags. It was time to go home.

The Kid found himself a nice spot, hidden from view, where he could wait and watch. Hours passed before Kav and his group left their home, probably headed for the Burn to eat.

The Kid hadn't eaten since... since they made him eat Brownie. He was light headed and starving but he wouldn't eat yet, not until his friend was avenged.

He snuck into his old home and planted the evidence; the bloody knife, the gold bit and Berry's ring. Then he scurried away and found Captain Andru.

"You're that little nameless kid, the one that works for Kav."

The Kid shook his head. "Not no more. Kav went too far. Kill one o' you."

"What?" Captain Andru's face went dark and cold.

"Said he stabbed one o' ya in a alley. Took a gold bit. Even showed us the knife," the Kid said.

"Show me."

So the Kid did. He led Captain Andru to Kav's home and showed him the planted evidence. The Captain bought it hook, line and sinker. Justice in Korral was swift, brutal and blind.

The guards caught up to Kav just outside the Burn but they didn't stop with him; they took Lissa, Benben and Jan as well. All four took an unhealthy beating before being hauled away and the Kid watched it all.

In some places Kav and his group might have been executed but not in Korral. Captain Andru had a much better punishment in mind. Kav, Lissa, Benben and Jan were branded, slapped in iron collars and shipped off to the free city of Chade to be sold as slaves. A lifetime of servitude and punishment. The Kid had gotten his revenge.

He thought a part of him should feel sad as he watched them shipped off; for Lissa at least, he had always felt something for her. But truth was he felt nothing but cold satisfaction.

Five years later and the Kid was well known in Korral. Folk knew him and many of them feared him. He had a reputation for being tough, brutal and ruthless and that reputation had gotten him an interview to join a real crew.

Two people sat opposite him. The man was a black-skinned southerner and a big one at that. The woman was short with shit-coloured hair and a permanent sneer.

"Sounds like ya know a thin' or two. We been lookin' fer a young'un like you since our last one... got himself killed." Every time the southerner spoke the Kid saw metal teeth. "Ya reckon ya got the stones ta crew with us?"

"I done stuff. Know what I'm doin'. I've killed," the Kid said, making sure he shot a grin at the little woman.

She snorted. "Boy looks green as grass."

"Ya got a name?" the southerner asked.

The Kid shook his head. "Never had too much need o' one."

"Aye. Well ya gonna need one now. Reckon we'll call ya Green. Good?"

Green grinned. "Good."

<http://tinyurl.com/qfyhuy8>

