

Keven didn't know how long he'd been trapped in the shed. The shadows shifted through the wooden slats. The smell from the manure was overwhelming.

He heard Master Banolf call for him from some way off. The thought of being in trouble was a fleeting one. He would rather take Banolf's worst than stay in the dung. He yelled as loud as he could.

By peering between the cracks, Keven could see Banolf's scowl deepened as he approached. Keven heard him fish for the right key.

"We have guests and you're playing dwarf in the hole. Well you better get your arse to the front of the inn and take care of the customers. Then, we'll have a talk about you resting like a lord."

As he swung the door open he glared at Keven and asked, "Well, what do you have to say boy."

If Keven heard him, he gave no sign. He exploded out of the shed and stormed right past Banolf. The look in Keven's eye gave even Banolf pause.

Keven didn't run nor did he walk, he simply moved with a single-minded purpose. Hours of frustration cooled and condensed into a ball of iron hard rage. He knew where Gunter and Constance would be.

He rounded the corner of the inn and strode to the crowd in the center of the street. He was correct. Gunter, Constance and others were standing around the storyteller.

"Gunter!" he shouted, "Do you know why your father, the *great* soldier does not come home? He is either dead or lying with whores making bastards like me."

The crowd turned. Gunter stood among them, and turned along with them to take in the dung covered boy. His face gawked; astounded someone would dare say anything of the sort to him, especially the bastard. Slowly, that look hardened into the arrogant ugliness Keven was used to, and he closed the distance in four quick steps. As a testament to Gunter's training Keven did not see the fist until it hit him in the cheek.

Keven found himself on the muddy street with an aching cheek. It was nowhere he had not been before. He hauled himself up.

"Gunter, you will be lucky to make it a year in the lord's squads. You're tough with only me to fight and Constance to cheer for you. How will you fare on the battlefield? Will you make it till the end of your first battle or will you be simply another nameless corpse?"

This time, Gunter's fist came to Keven's stomach. Keven doubled over, but did not go down. After a moment he got his breath back. He waited until he could speak loud enough for the village to hear.

"Constance," he shouted, "You are the fairest in this town. But, enjoy it now. This is the best you will be. You will soon give birth to a litter of screaming babes just like your mother. You will grow large hips like your mother and be chained to a hearth like your mother. No one will look your way. You will be me."

Gunter's fist came again and knocked Keven to the ground. Keven felt the pain in his cheek and it felt good. It spurred him on.

"You know I'm right. You hate me. You fear me because I cannot be worse. I am the lowest of this town. But, you know I didn't earn it. And you know it would break you. You need me to break because then I wouldn't be better than you."

Gunter's fist did not come. He looked confused. Keven did not care.

“Hit me again. Do it. It won’t make me any less right. It won’t make you any less wrong.” Keven dared Gunter in front of the town.

“And you, Richsen, Brenden, and all of you who follow Gunter and Constance, ask yourself. Why? Why do you hate and fear me? I’ll tell you why. There is no difference between me and you. I am what you could be. My life cannot get worse, but yours can.”

He said each word as if it were a hammer blow. Beating years of pain out of his soul. Everyone on the street froze. As if their movement might focus Keven’s wrath on them.

“And to all of you GoodFolk,” Keven was shouting now, “Am I what your ‘Book Of The Word’ teaches is evil? Am I the troll that pillages your virtue? No, but I am everything you fear. As long as you are not me you think you deserve the title Goodman or Goodwife. What makes you different than me?” The last was not a question. It was a challenge.

No one in the street accepted his challenge. Keven spat the last words out like poison. He looked each person in their eyes. But, they could not meet his stare. Even the most respected of the village could not face the bastard stable hand.

With his victory established, he strode to the storyteller. What should have been an exchange that contained deference and respect was cut short by Keven grabbing the reins of the gray mare and leading her to the stable.