

A shoddy tavern sat quietly in the waning sunlight, rain starting to pour on the mud street outside. The few regular patrons-peasants and farmers-were this night joined by a group of six men: travellers in from the road, sitting at table, and in the mood to get drunk. They were a couple of pints in when another stranger walked into the dimly lit room.

It had only started raining a few minutes previous, and the man had not been prepared for it. He shook off his riding jacket and readjusted his sword; it had been knocked askew from sprinting to shelter after tying his horse at the stable out back. Unlike the rest of the clientele, this new customer reeked of wealth. Tailored cloth and gilded sword upon a tall and well set man, looking to be in his mid-twenties. A little thin from not having manual labour, but he bore himself steady enough to the bar.

The waiting barmaid looked him up and down, “You lost, love?”

“No, I’m afraid not, my dear.” He smiled back, “I had hoped to make it to the city proper by sundown, but this sudden storm has forced my hand. I’m afraid I must dull your tavern tonight, and ask if you have fitting accommodation for a man to sleep.”

“If you’ve got coin, I can make somethin’ work.”

Nodding his head, the wealthy young man lifted a coin purse from his belt and produced a gold piece, setting it on the bar. The barmaid looked to it and then back up at him, “I ain’t got no change for that, love.”

“That’s okay, I’ll have a few drinks and a place to sleep. The rest can be a tip.” He smiled again as his eyes scanned for a menu, “What do you have on tap this evening?”

She looked at him sideways and raised an eyebrow, “We’ve got beer.”

“Excellent, I’ll have one of those.”

With no barstools to sit on, the young man received his pint and turned to lean his back upon the counter. With a curious eye he looked upon his newly discovered accommodations. Three older men sat together around a table, discussing farming and occasionally shooting him a suspicious glance, two younger men sat laughing and talking about girls, and a group of six gruff-looking travellers were at a table to his left. These men seemed to be chatting amongst themselves quite urgently.

Catching the eye of one of them, the young man raised his pint and chin in friendly greeting. To which the man smiled back and beckoned him over.

Obliging the polite invitation, the young man walked to their table, “Grab a seat and join us, mate.” The gruff voice of their leader came from a weather-worn and smiling face, “Eh lads, move over so he can sit down.” The three men made space between them on the bench so he could sit with his back to the window, across from the smiling man, “What’s yer name, son?”

“Nice to meet you, sir. My name is Halcyon.”

Giving a short chuckle he responded, “I ain’t no sir, that’s for sure. Me name’s Harry, we’re fresh off the trail like yourself. We came to enjoy a few pints and have a few games, din’t we lads?” The lads all mutter in differing forms of agreement, “Awwww, now don’t you mind them. They just ain’t used to being around the classes such as yerself. But I reckons yer just like us, deep down: you likes a good pint and a good game, dontcha...Halcyon, wasn’t it?”

“Sounds like a fun time, Harry.” The young man smiled enthusiastically.

“Great! What did I tell yer lads? We’ll be laughing and joking and piss drunk before you know it! Alright! Here’s the game: you ever played Knives before lad?”

“I can’t say that I have, but it sounds exciting.” Young Halcyon, having quickly finished

his pint, raised his stein for a refill.

The barmaid sauntered over and poured his second as Harry explained the rules, “Right! So, each of us buys into the round. One piece each. Then we each put our knife into the centre of the table. Then we all sit with palms on the table and wait for the cue. The leader calls what the cue’s gonna be. Then, when the cue happens, everyone grabs a knife. If you grab one knife, yer through to the next round, if you grab two knives then someone else is out. If you don’t get a knife, yer out. If yer out, you take your knife with you, but you lose yer buy in. Then the next round starts, the previous round’s leader gets to choose who’s gonna be leader next. If you run out of coin to buy in, you’re out. If yer the last one in, you win the pot! Clear?”

“Sounds clear to me! Except one thing: what’s the ‘cue’?”

“Oh you’ll pick up on that in no time, but it’s easier to experience than explain. You in?”

“Absolutely!” Halcyon excitedly pulled a gold coin from his money purse and placed it on the table, the rest put copper down, “Sorry lad, we ain’t as wealthy as you are.” The young man shrugged it off, waving that it was okay.

“Right, knives in.”

A group of very simple, but effective looking blades were joined in the middle of the table by a hand crafted and engraved work of art, “Bloody hell, lad. Alright. Hands on the table.” Everyone obediently put their hands on the table and waited for the cue, “The cue is...” Looking outside, Harry spied a couple more farmers headed their way, “...next time the door latch opens.”

Halcyon and his three bench-mates had to crane their necks to spy the door latch, the other three had a clear view. The young man could see how giving the cue was a significant

advantage. There was utter silence at the table as all attention focused on one thing. Hands twitching in nervous excitement, it seemed like hours of waiting. But when the latch moved, the table became a sudden blur of hands and steel. Halcyon beamed in excitement and victory, as he had managed to snag a knife from the centre of the table. Harry and the man to his right had each managed to grab two, meaning, “Rick and Boren! Yer out!” Harry’s voice boomed with laughter and excitement, as the men grabbed their knives and stood grumbling at either end of the table.

“Well, look at you, rich boy! You got one! Good fer you! Alright, round two! Get yer coins in. Right, now yer knives. Hands on the table. Kyger, you lead this round.”

“Alright,” Kyger was sat next to Halcyon and looked around to decide what his cue was going to be. The two new farmers had joined the other young men, but it was only a few seconds before one of them got up and went to the bar. Seeing he was getting a bit friendly with the barmaid, Kyger made his choice, “When the girl swears.”

There were nods all around, then utter silence from the table as they paid acute attention, “Now c’mon Susan! I heard you didn’t mind givin’ a little...y’know...”

Hands on her hips, Susan frowned back, “Give a little *what* exactly?”

“Y’know...make a young man happy...”

“Now you look here you little shi...”

The table exploded with movement. This time only Harry managed to grab two knives, but once again Halcyon had made it through the round: a surprised and elated look on his face.

“Well done lad! Yer a natural! Kyger, you called the cue and yer still out!” Harry laughed, “Get yer arse off the bench!”

Kyger begrudgingly got up and started wrapping his hand where he had cut it trying to

grab a knife, he gave a look over to Susan and smiled, “Maybe I can help her out with her language.”

“Later, Kyger; focus on the task at hand.” Harry pulled the man’s attention back to the group. With one man standing at either end of the table, Kyger positioned himself behind Halcyon to watch the rest of the game. Harry continued, “Alright! Round three! Coins in. Knives in. Hands on the table. Kyger, who’s up?”

“You are boss.”

“Okay, the cue is...when Kyger finishes his bandage.”

The final four watched carefully as Kyger milked every moment, slowly tying the wrap around his hand. Then suddenly and very dramatically, he lifted his arm to shout, “Go!”

There was a blur, and this time both Harry and Halcyon came away with two knives each. Harry laughed in pure joy, “Way to go, lad! Just the two of us now!” The other two picked up their knives and stood behind Halcyon, who was now feeling a little surrounded. Harry sat across from the young man, there was one man to his right, one to his left, and three behind him.

“Right,” Harry continued, “Round four! Put yer coin in lad. Now yer knife. Hands on the table. And, it looks like you get to lead this round,” he smiled confidently..

Halcyon looked at Harry’s knife and then back to the man, “That looks military issue, are you soldiers?”

“Not any more lad,” he smiled up to his comrades, “We’re what you’d call...retired.”

“Interesting,” Halcyon looked around the tavern, “The cue is...” He looked straight at Harry, “When one of us blinks.”

Harry and Halcyon locked stares: Harry with sly confidence, Halcyon with fixed

determination, “Retired, huh? Are you sure you aren’t deserters?”

Harry broke eye contact to look up at his men, who began reaching for their swords. But Halcyon, swift as lightning, grabbed both knives and thrust them into the opposite sides of Harry’s neck. He then kicked the bench into the knees of those behind him, while throwing both knives into the hearts of the men standing at either end of the table.

Halcyon spun clockwise as he drew his sword, cutting two throats before the men had even released their blades. The final opponent parried, but was easily countered, and Halcyon’s finely crafted steel thrust through the man’s chest to the hilt.

Pointing down, he allowed the body to slide onto the floor with a thud.

Six men lay dead around the table. The tavern in shock stared at him, too scared to move lest they gain his attention.

Halcyon pulled a cloth from his pouch and cleaned his sword before returning it to its sheath. Walking over to the dead man on his right, he retrieved his knife and gave it the same treatment. Then he went to each of the bodies and relieved them of their money purses as he began to speak, “My name is Halcyon Demitrius, and none of you have anything to fear of me: I am an agent of the King. Two months ago these men did desert the royal army at the eastern front, and have since been raping and pillaging their way across the Kingdom. As you can imagine, this sort of despicable behaviour is very much frowned upon.”

Now with six money purses on the table, Halcyon unfolded a large leather and cloth square, and lifted Harry’s head up to slide the square under it. Looking around at the six bodies, he found what he was looking for, “I have been tracking them for weeks, and finally caught up to them here.” He lifted a weighty looking sword from one of the men and carried it over to Harry,

raising it above his head, “They were murderers, rapists, cowards, and enemies of the crown.”

With a grunt he brought the blade down and separated Harry’s head from his shoulders. The sword stuck into the wood of the table, “The world is a safer and more peaceful place because of what happened here tonight.”

Halcyon wrapped the head in the leather cloth bag, then lifted it and the six money purses over to Susan’s terrified form. Halcyon smiled pleasantly, “Please put the bodies in the stable and cover them. Men will come for them later this evening.” He dropped one of the money purses on the bar, “For your troubles.”

Halcyon Demetrius walked out of the tavern, and disappeared into the evening.

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