



It's A Cruel World

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The village of Three Trees, twenty miles west of Syraikan, was aptly named. When the town was first settled, it had just three trees. Of course, since that time many more trees had been planted, but they were gnarled, stumpy things. The sandy soil and dry climate consigned most attempts at horticulture to the realm of futility. So, while the village could quite rightly claim that there were now more than three trees in the area, only those original three trees could be considered worthy of the name.

They towered over the small cluster of houses that made up the village. Majestic sentinels, they could be seen from miles around. They served as guide posts for weary travellers, and confirmed that the region was still habitable. Those trees were a sign that there was water nearby. As such they were considered sacred to the small population, and anyone found harming them in any way was treated harshly.

Creighton toiled in the stables of The Traveller's Rest, the only inn Three Trees had. It was owned and run by his Uncle Bray, and Auntie Adai, two of the meanest people anyone might encounter. They weren't his real aunty and uncle, of that Creighton was quite certain, he looked nothing like them nor did he resemble their children, his cousins, in any way. Most of the population of Three Trees were squat, with dark eyes, dark hair, and olive skin. They toiled for generations in a region where the sun's light was harsh, and where wind whipped sand and dirt into tough leathery skin. Creighton, on the other hand,

was tall. Even by the age of eight he was taller than many of the adults. And his fair skin burned easily in the sun's cruel light.

He didn't know how he came to be in this village on the edge of the sea. He didn't know why his parents had left him with these people, and he never understood why they had to be so unkind to him.

His life was one of misery, broken up by pain. He wasn't considered worthy of a bed in the house or a seat at the table. Instead he slept in the stables, and was fed scraps and left-overs along with the animals. Occasionally, a guest at the inn would take pity on him and give him coins or food.

The food was welcome, but the coins only added to his woes. As soon as the kind hearted traveller had gone, his cousins would beat him soundly and take the money.

Beatings were a regular part of his life. Cody, the oldest of his cousins, was the most brutal. He seemed to take pleasure in causing Creighton pain. During one of their scuffles he accidentally broke Creighton's right arm. He laughed at the way it hung at that weird angle, so he broke the other one as well.

Uncle Bray wasn't at all happy about what Cody did. But the punishment was not motivated out of concern over Creighton's well-being. With both his arm's broken Creighton couldn't work. Cody was forced to take on Creighton's duties while he healed. In the end Cody hated him even more but he was always careful never to hurt him so much that he couldn't work.

In truth, those few weeks with his arms in splints were some of the happiest in the young boy's life. His Aunt and Uncle kept him inside and fed him well to ensure that the injuries would heal fully. During that time Creighton would love to spend time sitting in the inn's common room and listen to the stories told by the guests that came and went through the village.

Three Trees itself wasn't an important village but it must have been on the way to somewhere that was. The Traveller's Rest was rarely empty of guests. The tales of a world outside of this hellish place captured Creighton's imagination and fired his spirit.

Careful to ensure that his aunt and uncle weren't around he would approach a table filled with dust covered travellers. He would sit nearby and listen to them talk about events and places he could only imagine. Invariably one of the patrons would notice the small boy with his bandaged arms and someone would ask him about his injury.

At first he would scurry away, unsure how to respond to their questions. But after a few weeks he found the courage to speak.

"Fight with my cousin," he said, barely above a whisper.

Sometimes his response would elicit a laugh, sometimes pity, sometimes an expression he'd since come to learn was concern. But, occasionally, it would earn him a place at the table and an invitation to their conversation.

Tonight the common room was quiet and his uncle and aunty had retired for the night. Creighton snuck out of his room and joined the small number of guests nursing their last drinks.

Creighton was glad that the stranger he spotted last night was still there. This particular patron was a large man, probably a sell sword, passing through Three Trees between jobs. Creighton was drawn to him because, like him, the warrior had blonde hair and blue eyes. He drew close to the man and stood there quietly, hoping to hear something that might entertain or amuse him.

The stranger saw Creighton approach and turned to face him. "Why he beat you?" His grasp of the local language wasn't good.

"I did something wrong," Creighton said.

"No." The man shook his head. "Why he win?"

Creighton wasn't sure how to answer.

The warrior touched his and pointed to his eyes, then did the same to Creighton. "You, not like them. You like me." He placed an open palm on Creighton's chest and leaned in close. "We, blood of warrior."

The big man moved his hand up to the back of Creighton's head, and took a handful of his hair. "Warrior not let such things happen!" he hissed.

It was starting to hurt.

The blonde warrior stared into Creighton's eyes. He pulled tighter.

Creighton fought to keep the tears from forming. Cody liked to make him cry and he knew that tears could make people hurt him more.

After a long time the man let him go. "Good." He smiled then, as though satisfied by what he saw. "Maybe warrior still in you."

Creighton smiled as well. It was the first time anyone had treated him like someone special. He felt like he'd just passed some sort of test.

The next day the blonde stranger was gone, but Creighton remembered what the man told him. He was different, he didn't belong here, he was better than the people in this village.

Weeks passed and soon Creighton had fully recovered from his broken arms. As soon as he was free of the splints Uncle Bray sent him back to the stables. After weeks of inactivity, Creighton was as weak as a newborn babe but, inspired by the muscular physique of the blonde warrior, he set about a daily routine of exercise. First he concentrated on his arms, but once he'd regained his strength there he continued to build the rest of his body.

He soon learned that the meagre scraps of food he was given wouldn't be enough to sustain his growth so each night he would sneak into the kitchen and steal some extra food. It wasn't easy and there wasn't always much available but it was still more than he was used to and soon his body began to develop.

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The fire started in the stables.

Creighton peered through a hole in the floor of the loft into an empty stall where Cody and one of the village girls pressed their naked bodies together. He wasn't exactly sure what they were doing but there was something very pleasing in the way the young girl's chest jiggled.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen the two of them together.

He pressed his eye through small knot in the wood and smiled at the sight below him. He could tell by the sounds they made that this encounter was nearing an end and he knew he needed to get clear in case he was seen when they were getting dressed.

As he slowly pulled back his hand he brushed past a rake which toppled over with a loud crash. Creighton froze.

"What's that?" the girl said with a gasp.

"It's nothing, just lay back."

"No, there's something up there."

Cody snorted. "Wait here. It's probably just a rat. I'll kill it."

Creighton knew by the way he emphasised the word kill that Cody knew exactly who was up here. He needed to get away. Without thinking he snatched up the fallen rake and stood up just as Cody reached the top of the small ladder.

The girl below screamed when she saw him standing there and took a step back, knocking the lantern off the wall between the stalls.

The flames quickly caught on the dry hay and spread to the walls of the stable.

Cody ignored the rapidly spreading flames. He had his eyes firmly fixed on Creighton who brandished the rake before him like a staff.

“How long have you been watching us?”

Creighton took an involuntary step back and tightened his grip on the handle.

“I’m going to take that rake and beat you like the rat you are.”

“Your father won’t like that.”

Cody spat. “I don’t care what he thinks. He’s getting old, he doesn’t scare me anymore.”

Cody lunged. Creighton swayed back and brought the rake down on Cody’s shoulder. It was just a glancing blow but it caused Cody to stagger and allowed Creighton to slip past him toward the ladder.

The loft area quickly filled with smoke, and the shifting shadows caused by the fire made it difficult to see up there. Creighton cast a quick glance down and saw the young girl grab her clothes and run screaming from the stables, just as the first of the overhead bales caught alight.

Cody’s fist cracked into the side of his jaw.

Creighton dropped the rake and caught hold of the ladder to keep from falling from the loft. He saw Cody’s face, the flames reflecting in his eyes and teeth, made him look like some demon from the realm below.

Creighton swallowed, the smoke started to burn his throat, and quickly descended the ladder.

Cody recovered the rake and followed him down.

Creighton eyed the door but the words of the blond mercenary echoed in his mind. *You have the blood of a warrior, a warrior would not run.*

He turned to face Cody, his hands closed into fists and his jaw set.

Cody saw the change come over him and laughed. "What are you going to do? Hit me?"

Creighton did just that. He stepped forward and swung his fist in a wild arc. The ferocity of the move caught Cody off guard and the young man wasn't able to avoid the blow. Creighton's fist struck Cody firmly in the chest. He then followed up with a second punch into the older boy's side that caused Cody to double over.

Winded and off balance, Cody was unable to keep Creighton from pushing him back, into the flames that now consumed the floor behind him. He dropped the rake as soon as the fire touched his unprotected flesh. His body demanded he breathe, and he sucked in the superheated air.

Creighton watched as his cousin writhed in the flames, unable to cry for help as the fire burned his throat and lungs. He knew he didn't have much time. The fire had taken hold and the roof was burning brightly.

With a final glance at the boy who had tormented him for much of his young life, Creighton turned and ran from the stables and out into the cool night air.