

THE BRAWLER
By Russell Zimmerman

This place ain't much, but it's my name over the entrance and that counts for something.

I don't work for nobody else no more. I don't sleep on the ground. I don't spend my days riding in a creaking, run-down, wagon with someone else's name painted on the side, and my nights fake-smiling and begging and fat-fingered stealing. I was never cut out for that life, nor that life cut out for me. I'm not a stealer. I'm a taker.

I take the biggest piece of meat, everywhere I go, and I chew it up and spit it out. Every little homesteader has a big brother or a daddy or an uncle who thinks he's stronger than a girl. Every dog pack of outlaws has someone with scars and a belly full of anger who thinks he can take me. Every proper town with proper law has some fancy man behind a badge who thinks it means he can beat me down.

They're all wrong. I show them that. I take that from them, then I take whatever it was I was after when they got in my way.

Jackie's, my place used to be called. He wasn't strong. He was just psycho who called himself the Jackal, a two-bit killer that stole people for the Bluejacks, with his ash-rubbed scars and his filed-down teeth to make him look scary. I showed him what scary looks like, right where everyone could see. Fair and square, open challenge, broad daylight. I took his reputation and I took his skull and I broke them both. There's no lock on the tent-flaps to this place, but Stone-Rat made me a little shiny-wired lucky charm that has half of Jackal's pointed teeth dangling on it, and I call that my keychain. Nobody comes into this place that I don't want. I'm my own door, I'm my own lock.

Shiloh's, it says. Pillar of Tenton. Ask anyone. They'll tell you true.

I take business from The Dive, but I do it honest. I serve better liquor. I charge a better price. I have cleaner and happier hosts. I have my crew, even when I don't need them, to watch my back. I took my people from bad situations, I picked them up, I showed them how to be strong, and now they work for me instead of working against me.

I don't know how long their loyalty will last, but so far, so good. Some folks get it. When a stronger person offers them a hand up, they take it, and they hang on for dear life, because they know – deep down – that strength is what matters. They'd rather stay on the good side of a stronger person, rather take up a club and swing it next to me, learn from me, grow stronger with me, than go back to being weak. Some of them get it; the best of them leave, to go find a place for themselves, to go show the world how strong they are. Some of them fall in with the Bluejacks, and that's fine, Breaker pays me fair for recruits. Some of them try to take what I've shown them and turn it against me. I make messes of them, hang part of them over the entrance next to my name, let everyone know whose place this is.

Shiloh's.

Nobody in Tenton wants trouble with me, and I don't give it to them unnecessarily. I don't know how long this will last. I don't know how long my name will be painted up there. I don't know how long it will be before someone wants to take it from me and succeeds.

But I know it won't be today. It won't be Breaker or the rest of the Bluejacks that break me. It won't be Stone-Rat or any of the rest of the little scavengers that will pick my bones. It won't be Smiler and his cards and his tricks and his card tricks, no, nor even his smile, that take anything from me I don't take back from him. It won't be the mining outfit with all their picks and their hammers and their tired-eyed fools who kill themselves for rocks. It won't be any 'slinger with a pretty belt and a shiny buckle and no real strength to back it up.

It'll be someone bigger. Someone stronger. Someone who fights right. Someone too broad in the shoulders for hiding, too heavy to sneak. Someone too ugly to make a living off cards and swindling and lies, but who earned that crooked nose and all their scars the honest way. Someone with split knuckles and knotted muscles and old aches and pains earned by fighting, not day-labor. Someone who deserves to win. Someone who'll make a show of it, and take a trophy when I'm gone.

Someone like me.

In the end, only someone like me can beat me.