

## **ACTION SAMPLE, by Stimson Snead**

*An excerpt from the action novel "The Dust Land". A post-apocalyptic western in the style of "Mad Max" or the \*Fallout\* franchise.*

### **THE REUNION**

The four men broke out laughing around the fire. Bixby slapped his knee, unsure if the boy was being clever or just fantastically stupid. Handsome laughed through his burn-scarred face. Even Ke'il smirked in spite of himself.

In their laughter, none of them heard the grinding of delicate milk-white fingers dragging a tiny body across the stones.

At last.

Forty feet. Close enough to work.

The girl was a mediocre shot and *Pepper* was never her first choice of weapon, but she could make the revolver count at forty feet.

Starting with the shotgun, *Miranda*, the girl brought both weapons forward. Miranda rested ready on her right, waiting to be snatched up after Pepper was spent.

Curling her thin fingers around Pepper's grip, she took aim.

Ke'il didn't turn his head. Earlier, while Bixby rambled, something in the dark had reflected the firelight. Maybe forty or fifty feet out. There was junk everywhere in this wasteland. It could have been a thousand useless things.

Or one extremely bad thing.

He kept still. Watching his peripheral. Waiting.

The girl knew which one was Ke'il.

A perfect shot too. He sat in profile, still and focused on the three men around him. It would be an easy shot.

But Ke'il couldn't be first. Not yet. No matter how badly she wanted it. His aim was almost as bad as hers. In the old days the two of them had argued over who was a worse sniper.

She would get one, maybe two shots off, before the retaliation came. So she needed to drop the most dangerous man first. That was the old man with the burned face. *Handsome*, they had called him.

After him would be the red-haired man, Bixby. She had never seen him work, which meant he was a different sort of muscle.

The boy was the worker. Strong, slow, probably never held a gun. He could wait.

Ke'il was certain now. Someone was out there.

That someone was hidden in the dark not fifty feet from where they sat exposed, their backs to the cliff.

His left side faced away from the attacker, so with his left hand he slid the sawed-off shotgun free. He didn't know their guest's exact position, but with this weapon he didn't need it.

Ke'il still hadn't moved. The shot was so tempting it hurt her teeth. She forced her breath slow and kept Pepper steady. She aimed at the burn-faced man.

Ke'il thumbed both hammers back, hiding the clicks behind a cough.

Handsome fell silent. He saw the drawn weapon.

He understood immediately. Without changing posture, he did the same. The Winchester rested within easy reach. He didn't need to see where their guest was. Ke'il would shoot first. Wherever Ke'il aimed, Handsome would follow.

Their bodies were already primed. Muscles tight. Heartbeats rising.

Enough waiting.

Ke'il snapped his head to the right and both men raised their weapons.

*Crack!*

The boy screamed as Handsome's brains sprayed across his shirt. Bixby was up a heartbeat later, guns out and in Ke'il's way!

Ke'il had seen the muzzle flare. It came from the ground, forty feet out, but Bixby was blocking his shot. Ke'il threw himself backward and fired both barrels into the dirt in front of Bixby.

Ke'il's shot blasted gravel into her eyes, momentarily blinding the girl as the tall red-haired man charged towards her. But his gaze was high. He wasn't looking at the ground.

Bixby powered toward where the attacker must be. Just beyond the firelight. He knew they would be startled by his confidence. He knew they would hesitate. He knew they would miss like all the others had before them. His perfect eyes would see the muzzle flare, learning their location. Then his perfect hands would do the rest.

Ke'il screamed something behind him.

No time to listen.

Bixby cut a wide, erratic path to confuse the attacker. His gaze scanned the full arc of possible threats, waiting for the mistake.

Ke'il screamed again.

"Ground! The ground!" he shrieked.

*Oh.*

Bixby looked down. The figure lay not ten feet away, pressed flat to the dirt, below where he had been aiming, something in their hands pointing at him-

Miranda's shot crushed Bixby's chest, sending his precious eyes flying into the dark.

The girl rose a second later. Her eyes still burning. She clawed gravel from her lashes as she pushed off her good leg, praying the mechanical one did not betray her now.

*'Well. This had gone to hell,'* Ke'il thought as he sprinted past the boy into the cover along the cliff wall.

Less than twenty seconds since the first shot and half the gang already gone.

The attacker moved awkwardly. Ke'il had seen it and could have used it if he hadn't wasted both barrels. But now he was behind rock and reloading.

The attacker would come.

This was planned.

This was personal.

Whoever it was, they were here for him.

Ke'il hissed at the boy, still standing stupidly by the fire.

"Move! Move, damn you. Run!"

Something rushed the boy from the darkness, using the boy as cover.

"Fuck it," Ke'il spat.

The blast of his shotgun threw the boy at the attacker.

Miranda's return shot knocked him back like a gruesome pinball. The attacker crashed into the boy's gored body, lifting him like a shield.

At fifteen feet and with one round left, Ke'il stepped back, aiming high to hit the head behind the boy. But his foot found nothing.

His shot went wide as he slid over the cliff edge. Dropping the gun, he managed to claw a grip in the sandstone and hold.

The ruined body of the boy went over the cliff and down into the darkness, hitting with a wet thud.

Silhouetted against the firelight, the horror stepped into view. It was a small woman. Or half of one. Wild curls spilled from filthy bandages. Blood soaked her face and chest. Her body was intact to the right knee, and below that was a construction of springs and wires meant to mimic a leg and ankle.

She shifted weight to the mechanical limb and kicked his gun into the void.

Ke'il had always hated that limb. Hated her limp. Hated how awkwardly she moved. Hated waiting for her to unstrap it before he could have her.

She stepped close to the cliff. Close enough to tower over him. Far enough that he couldn't drag her down with him.

He exhaled and dug his nails deeper into the rock.

"How have you been, Ash?"