

Korniel: The Colt with Purple Diamond Eyes

I woke up shivering from a strange dream. The pale light coming from under my window shade told me it was too early to get out of bed. The readout on my digital clock said the same. Good. I wasn't ready to get up for school. I needed time to think about my dream. I wasn't sure if I'd dreamed I was a horse with purple diamond eyes or if I was riding the horse. I shivered and struggled to recall my dream. I was riding a horse. No. I *was* a horse. It was all very muddled. The horse was trapped by a soft, warm wall it was galloping against. While riding or galloping, I saw some unhappy people. One was a girl I knew from school, Kirsten Walters, stooped over with sorrow. What was her problem? Had she been so sad all along and I hadn't noticed? Maybe I was too caught up in my own troubles to notice anybody else's. I rode on and saw the school bully, Mickey Munson. Mean Mickey. Only he wasn't smirking now. He was darkened by fear and anger. What troubled him? I rode on and saw another face, a face with messy brown hair drooping over the forehead, the wilted face I see every morning in the mirror. That face was me, Kenny Laurens. Who wouldn't look like that with a father who yelled at him all the time? Somehow, I knew the horse was galloping so hard against the sloping wall because it wanted to reach the people with the sad faces, even me.

The horse reared its front hooves and struck the wall so hard it broke through. Cold darkness stabbed me like a frozen knife. Was I still the horse I was dreaming about? Something rough, moist, and warm, like a corrugated towel, moved along my body, giving me some relief from the cold. The warm corrugated towel got my forehead, then stopped. I heard a snort of disgust, horror, and rejection. It was so sharp I thought somebody had snatched my blankets, but no, they were still wrapped around me. The vision of the horse faded and I stopped shivering.

Kenton! Help me. I am cold.

Kenton?

"I'm not Kenton. I'm Kenny," I whispered.

Kenton Miller Laurens is the name on my birth certificate, but nobody calls me Kenton. Not even my parents. Everybody calls me Kenny.

You are Kenton. Please come! Now. I am freezing.

"Who are you?" I asked. "How do you know my name is Kenton?"

I am Korniel. I know all true names. Please come! Now. I am freezing.

"Where are you?" I asked.

I am here. Come quickly! You will find me.

There was no way was I going to stay in bed a second longer. I tore off my covers and dived for my jogging suit.

I closed the kitchen door quietly and leaned against the side of my house.

"Where are you, Korniel?" I whispered. "Are you at one of the horse farms close by?"

What is a farm? Korniel asked.

"Are there lots of other horses where you are?" I asked.

Yes. Please come. Now. I am freezing. I am scared.

Two purplish spots just like the eyes I saw in my dream appeared, then disappeared as soon as I'd seen them. I had my direction.

"I'm coming," I whispered.

And I was off in a cloud of dust.

The closest horse farm belonged to Mr. Garret. It didn't take me long to get there, but I was hoping this was the place because I was already tired from running. I slowed down and peered over the fence. A few horses were out grazing some distance away, but I didn't see any that looked the horse in my dream.

"Where are you, Korniel?" I asked.

I am here. Come quickly. I am freezing.

I looked across the pasture for a sign. After a couple seconds, two purple eyes appeared again. That was all I needed. I carefully wriggled between the wires of the fence and ran toward the place where I'd seen the purple spots. The neighing of a distant horse froze me for a few seconds. Although I lived within a mile of this horse farm, I was as scared of horses as I was of lions or tigers.

Come!

Korniel's call for help overrode my fear of the other horses, and I dashed to the spot where the call was coming from. There, on the ground, was a small white colt all striped with blood and slimy afterbirth.

"Korniel!" I cried.

He turned his head in my direction.

"Whoa!" I cried.

Korniel's purple diamond eyes dazzled me and froze me to the spot.

Help me!

Korniel's plea pulled me back to his helpless state. I knelt down beside him and pushed some of the afterbirth off him. It was so cold, it explained why Korniel was shivering so much. All that afterbirth should have grossed me out, but I was too worried about Korniel to care about what was gross and what wasn't. I was shivering myself, and I was still short of breath, although I shouldn't have been this long after I stopped running. Then I noticed that Korniel wasn't breathing very well. I started to rub Korniel's flank as hard as I could to warm him up, but it didn't seem to be doing him any good.

"I'm sorry, Korniel," I said, "I'm not good at this."

Your love is guiding your hands, said Korniel. Do not let the stallion who yells at you rob you of knowing your worth.

Stallion? No horse every yelled at me. It was my father who did that all the time.

Over here.

To my surprise, I found I knew where Korniel wanted me to rub

him, and for how long. That gave me a little more confidence in what I was doing.

"Why did your mother abandon you?" I asked.

Not her colt.

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

I kept on warming Korniel as best I could. His mane and his head were in the worst shape, because that's where the most afterbirth was, and that's where the going got really tough and slimy and sickening.

Do not touch, Korniel warned.

"Ow!

He'd warned me too late. Korniel's forehead gave me a horrible shock.

"It looks like you've got a bump on your forehead," I said. "I hope it's nothing serious."

It is what makes me Korniel.

I wanted to asked Korniel what *that* meant, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't give me an answer I could understand.

I am sorry that the touch hurt you.

"That's okay," I replied.

Korniel looked at me with those purple diamond eyes of his and the pain went away almost instantly.

You have done all you can do to warm me. I need more help.

"Where?"

But I already knew that I had to go either to the house or the stable to find Mr. Garret or to one of his farmhands. I was petrified at the thought, but since Korniel's life depended on it, I had to do it. In church, Pastor Groves was always saying, "Love casts out fear." This was the first time those words meant something to me. When I got to the house and stable, I saw a man going about his chores. With his heavy build and short hair, he looked like a marine.

"Hey! Mister!" I called out.

He gave me a look that would have stomped me into the ground

if I wasn't so worried about Korniel.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"There's a colt out there, abandoned by his mother, who's freezing to death!"

"Look, kid, a mare doesn't abandon her foal, *and* we didn't have a foaling last night, *and* we weren't expecting one. If this is your idea of a joke—"

"I don't joke about abandoned colts!" I cried, on the verge of tears.

"Don't you know the facts of life better than that?"

"I *know* the facts of life and I know what I see it with my own eyes," I sobbed. "Korniel's been abandoned and he'll die if you don't take care of him."

I'd never talked to a grownup like this in my life, and I couldn't believe I was doing it now, but I was desperate and I didn't know what I'd do if I couldn't get the farmhand to take me seriously.

"Who's this Corn-neal you're talking about?" the farmhand asked.

"It's the colt's name," I answered.

"And who said *you* could name *our* colt?"

"I didn't name him. He *told* me that's his name."

The look I got from the farmhand told me I'd made a big mistake.

"I suppose you want me to believe that colts talk to you every morning before breakfast," said the worker.

"I don't care what you believe," I said. "Just go and take care of him before he dies!"

"Look, the only person around here who gives me orders is Mr. Garret. Is that clear? If you want to tell me what to do, go buy this farm, and *then* you can boss me around."

I felt defeated and was mad enough to bang on the farmhouse door and yell at Mr. Garret to come out and take care of Korniel, but before I got to the back steps, the door opened and a heavysset

teenager came out. I recognized him as John, Mr. Garrett's oldest son, a high school senior and a star on the football team.

"Whoa!" John cried. "What's all this yelling about? You're disturbing my mother's breakfast."

"I found this abandoned colt in your pasture and I came to tell you about it," I said.

"I don't see how we can have an abandoned colt out there when we weren't even expecting a foaling," said the worker.

John gave me a searching look that wasn't unfriendly.

"All I know is that I saw him," I said. "I know he needs help. Now."

"Do you go wandering in other people's pastures like this all the time?" the worker asked.

"No. I didn't mean to trespass, but please help Kor—that colt."

John pursed his lips. I didn't blame him. He didn't need to have to go rescue a colt right when it was time to get ready for school.

"I'll check it out," said John. "What's your name?"

"Kenny Laurens."

"Okay, Kenny, I'll know whose parents to call if this turns out to be a joke."

"I promise it isn't," I said.

"I'm taking your word for it enough to go check this out. Jimmy! Come out here!"

Jimmy, a slightly built ninth-grader, who was rumored to be a dope smoker, slinked out the door with hostility written all over his face.

"What is it?" Jimmy asked.

"This kid found an abandoned colt in the pasture. Harvey and I need your help bringing it in"

Jimmy's face darkened and he let loose a string of curse words.

"Shut up and come with me," said John to his brother. Then he turned to me. "Time for you to skedaddle. And thank you if you're right about the abandoned colt."

Thank you for getting the help, said Korniel.

Those words gave me warmth and energy to get home faster than a prize-winning racehorse.

* * *

I shivered by the side of the road waiting for the school bus, as I had not gotten ready for school in time for my mom to take me there on her way to work. Our tense conversation about my early-morning run rang in my ears. It seemed she yelled at me at least as much as my dad.

The bus finally came and I got on. The seat next to Kirsten Walters was free, so I sat there. She gave me an angry look with her dark eyes. The long curls of dark hair framing her dark, puffy face made her look like a monster.

"How come you're sitting next to me all of a sudden?" she asked me.

"I don't know."

You did not make a mistake by sitting next to her, said Korniel inside my head.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Lousy. And you?"

"Horrible."

A brief vision of Kirsten pleading with her father at the door entered my head. I was sure she was trying to talk him out of going to wherever he was going. Was he a drunkard, like my father? Even more reason to feel sorry for Kirsten if he was. I tried to think of something I could say to Kirsten, but I couldn't.

The stallions and the colt are taking me somewhere.

"Good," I said, before I knew I was opening my mouth.

"What's so good about life being lousy?" asked Kirsten.

"Nothing."

* * *

"Earth calling Kenny Laurens."

The sharp edge of sarcasm in Mr. Miller's tone of voice grated on me. Worse were the grins he got from my classmates.

"Yes?"

"Is there any reason why you cannot pay attention in math class?"

There were many reasons why I couldn't pay attention in math class. My life was already a mess before Korniel came along, but I couldn't tell my math teacher that.

"I guess not," I said in a low voice.

Mr. Miller went on with words that cut me to ribbons, the same kinds of words I my dad would say.

Somebody is helping me because of you, said Korniel.

"Oh, good!" I exclaimed before I could stop myself.

Mr. Miller stopped in mid-sentence and glared at me.

"Do you mean to tell me you're glad you're flunking math?" Mr. Miller asked in a soft voice filled with knives.

It was hard to concentrate on talking to Mr. Miller when I felt Korniel's thoughts and feelings inside my head. Fortunately, Korniel calmed me down, as if he knew I was in trouble.

"I'm sorry I'm not doing better," I heard himself saying. **"I don't mean to make it a hard day for you. I'll work on the math this weekend."**

Mr. Miller looked surprised that I spoke nicely and he started to look like a human being himself.

"Well, I hope so, Kenny. I'll be calling on you in class again next Monday."

That wasn't a good start to the school day, and it didn't get better. During history class, I suddenly felt saturated with warmth that started to drive the chill away.

Yes, said Korniel before I could form the question in my mind. *A light is making me warm. Thank you so much for coming, Kenton.*

"My name is Kenny," I reminded Korniel.

That drew a strange look from Ms. Moore and more smirks from the other kids.

"There *was* no General Kenny in the First World War," she said.

"Are you dreaming of being a great military hero?"

"No," I mumbled. "I don't want to fight any wars."

"Glad to hear it.

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After I'd gobbled down my lunch, I leaned against a tree in the schoolyard and watched the other kids play.

***Why don't you join the other colts?* Korniel asked me.**

"I just don't. How are you doing?"

I am feeling warmer and the stallion gave me something to drink.

"That's good."

The stallions worry about me, but they shouldn't.

"Is it that bump on your forehead?"

Next thing I knew, my head was slammed against the tree and Mickey Munson was glaring at me.

"What's this about a bump on my forehead?" Mickey asked.

I wanted to sink further into the tree to get away from Mickey.

***This colt is afraid,* said Korniel.**

Korniel's support straightened up my backbone. I looked Mickey in the eyes and saw that Korniel was right. There was a lot of fear mixed with his anger.

"Maybe it's because you *do* have a lump on your forehead that keeps you from thinking straight," I said.

I almost regretted saying that when Mickey slammed my shoulders against the tree a second time. I couldn't believe I was standing up to Mickey even this much. Oddly, I noticed that tufts of

hair were sticking out of Mickey's head, the sign of a very bad haircut that he probably got from a parent who didn't want to pay a barber to do the job.

"Who are *you* to talk about lumps on my forehead when your whole face is going to be one big lump when I'm through with you?" Mickey asked me.

"I am Kenny Laurens. That's who. And I won't take any more bullying from a crummy kid like you."

"Since when?"

Suddenly, I glimpsed a couple of bigger boys beating up on Mickey. Somehow I knew they were his cousins and they had attacked him recently.

"Since now," I said. "How come you have to pick on me just to feel better about getting picked on by your horrible cousins?"

Mickey backed away, his face turning pale.

"Who told you about my cousins?" Mickey asked.

Spooking out Mickey made me bolder, but I was just as spooked myself about the visions I was getting from Korniel.

"A little horse told me," I replied.

Mickey drew back his fist to punch me in the face.

"I guess you know how kids feel when you beat up on *them*," I said.

Mickey drew back his hand and collapsed in front of me like a pack of cards. He gave me as menacing a look as he could and sauntered off.

"Korniel," I whispered, "how do you know so much about Mickey's problems?"

I know everything I was sent here to know, Korniel answered.

* * *

"Want to see how your colt is doing?" John asked me when I off the school bus with him and his glowering brother.

“You bet.”

“I’m kind of anxious to see how he’s doing, too. Come on!”

Jimmy gave me another poison look that made it clear he blamed me for his having to do some extra work that morning before he skipped into the house.

“Hey, Harvey!” John called out as we reached the stable. “How’s the baby?”

“Still alive.”

As soon as I got through the barn door, my eyes went straight to Korniel. He was lying on a bed of straw, surrounded by heat lamps that turned his white fur into various shades of orange. He turned his head to look at me with his purple diamond eyes.

Thank you for coming, said Korniel. I am warmer now because of you.

“I’m so glad they found you and brought you in,” I said as I knelt down to touch the colt.

“Better not touch him,” Harvey growled.

He didn’t look any too pleased to see me, but he couldn’t drive me away as long as John was with me.

Our minds touch, said Korniel.

“Could you get it to take any milk?” John asked Harvey.

“Yes, amazingly enough. I was afraid he’d balk at a baby bottle, but he took right to it. Guess he knows what side his toast is buttered on.”

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked.

Of course I will be okay, Korniel answered, because of you.

“We’re taking care of the exposure,” Harvey answered, “but there’s another problem, it seems.”

“What’s that?” asked John.

“There’s this bump on his forehead that feels like it might be a tumor. Gave me quite an electric shock when I touched it. Your dad called the vet about it. He should be here any minute.”

John gently touched the bump, then jerked back his hand.

"I warned you," said Harvey. "I don't know how it happens. Never heard of an electric tumor before."

"If a colt's going to be weird, I guess it might as well be weird all the way," said John.

***He touched the spot that makes me Korniel,* said the colt.**

"The bump is ... it's important," I stammered.

The looks I got from John and Harvey made me feel incredibly stupid, but the look in Korniel's eyes reassured me.

"Can you tell me what you mean by that?" Harvey asked.

"No," I replied.

"We'll see what the vet has to say about it," said John.

I was given a little bit of time with Korniel while Harvey and John worked at other chores.

"You were right about Kirsten and Mickey having problems," I said in a low voice.

***I am always right about these things,* said Korniel.**

"I wish I could help them."

If you wish it, you will.

Soon, I heard a car motor outside the barn followed by some voices. A moment later, Mr. Garrett came in with a man wearing a thick red mustache. He had to be the vet. Harvey and John followed right behind them.

"Is this the patient?" asked the vet.

"Sure is," said Mr. Garrett.

He gave me a look that made it clear he expected me to get well out of the vet's way. I did.

"Looks so weak, we won't have to tie it down or sedate it."

"Please don't," I pleaded.

The vet gave me a sharp look. His thick red mustache bristled enough to make him look like a wild boar on the attack.

"Who's this kid?" the vet asked Mr. Garret.

"Name's Kenny," said Harvey. "He found the colt in the pasture. Has some obsession with him."

“Kenny,” said Mr. Garrett, “I’m grateful that you found this colt when it was in trouble, but if you want to stick around, you’ll have to keep your yap shut.”

I strained to contain myself as the vet poked and prodded poor Korniel, especially when he shook his head over the bump on Korniel’s forehead.

“It looks to me like this poor colt has a first-class tumor growing out of his forehead. We’ll have to put him out of his misery.”

***What misery? What is a tumor?* Korniel asked.**

“Korniel isn’t miserable just because you think this bump on Korniel’s forehead is some growth that shouldn’t be there!” I cried.

“Since when have you ever heard of a tumor that *should* be where it is?” the vet shot back. Then he turned to face Mr. Garret. “Are you sure this kid isn’t as sick as this horse?”

“Not sure at all,” said Mr. Garret. “Maybe he’s been watching too many horse movies. Kids don’t save horses in peril all the time in real life.”

The growth that this stallion does not like is supposed to be where it is, and it is supposed to grow more, said Korniel. My growth will be complete soon, and then nobody will be able to stop me. I need a small piece of time before that happens.

“It’s not a tumor,” I insisted, “it’s something that’s *supposed* to grow. It’s the most important part of him!”

“Don’t tell me you have some telepathic link with this colt that tells you these things,” said the vet.

I started to crumble, but somehow, I didn’t. I think Korniel was strengthening me to help me fight for him.

“Then ... I won’t tell you that I have a telepathic link with Korniel,” I said right back to him. “But I *do* have a telepathic link with Korniel, whether you like it or not. And whether you like it or not, Korniel is *not* an ordinary colt. So get used to it!”

Everybody was amazed that I had talked back to the vet like that. My eyes were filling up with more tears than I could fight back. I

could only hope that the vet didn't have authority to put humans like me in the nuthouse.

"So what do you want us to do, Kenny?" Mr. Garret asked in a tone of voice that told me he didn't really want my advice.

"What I want you to do is give Korniel a couple of days and see how he does," I replied in a steadier voice than I thought possible. "Don't try to treat him. Just leave him alone. If he gets worse and you're sure there's no hope, you can—"

"Sounds fair to me," said John, interrupting me.

"You really think that's a good idea?" asked his father.

"I'd rather give this colt a couple of days and find out if Kenny's right, then do something that we can't undo."

This was the first time in as long as I could remember that somebody had supported me when I said something about anything. I'd always thought John was a decent sort, but I was amazed that he was as nice as this.

"Are you suggesting that you think Kenny could be right?" Mr. Garret asked his son. "Do you really think he's getting telepathic messages from a newborn colt?"

John straightened up his whole body to show that he was willing to be patient, but he wasn't about to back down.

"Something queer is going on," said John slowly. "I don't know Kenny very well, but I don't think he usually goes around telling people what to do with their horses. Somehow, this colt is really important to him, and I'd like to give Kenny and the colt a chance. I don't think it'll hurt our business or our farm if we wait a couple of days to see what happens."

It was obvious that neither Harvey nor the vet wanted any part of this deal, but Mr. Garret looked willing to listen to his son.

"All right," he said. "Two days. If the colt is still this sick, or worse, come Monday, that will be the end."

Thank you, said Korniel. This end the stallion is talking about will never happen because of you.

* * *

The next day was a Saturday. No school! I could spend the whole day with Korniel! As soon as Mom was out of the house, I got up, fixed myself a bag lunch, and jogged over to Garret's horse farm, ready to forget my problems for a while. In the stable, the sparkle of Korniel's purple diamond eyes was enough to make me forget about all the yelling I'd gotten from my dad last night, but the bump on his forehead had grown bigger, sharper, and uglier. I ran over to Korniel and flung my arms around the colt's neck.

"Oh, Korniel! I'm sure that awful vet won't like this bump. Are you sure it's supposed to be there?"

Do not worry about the growing part of me that is supposed to be there. They will never be able to harm it.

"I'll try not to worry then," I said, "but I'm still worried."

You will not have to worry long.

John came into the stable.

"You must be eager to see your friend if you can get here ahead of me on a Saturday morning," he said.

"I am."

"It's a good thing I do the Saturday morning chores," he said.

"Dad wouldn't like your going straight in here like this."

"I'm not hurting Korniel," I said.

"I know."

John went about his work as I stroked Korniel's mane.

"Do you *really* get telepathic messages from that colt?" John asked after some time had gone by.

"Yes. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Good question. I suppose I should think you are, but I don't. Maybe it's because I feel something really *is* different about this colt"

"You don't know the half of it."

I offered to help John with the chores. He took me up on that and as a result I spent the next hour or so working a lot of muscles I

never knew I had and filling my nostrils with the smell of you-know-what. Being around Korniel all that time made the work a lot more fun than most anything I'd done for as long as I could remember.

"Do you think we could try taking Korniel out to the pasture?" I asked John when we had finished our work.

Yes! Korniel exclaimed with nearly enough excitement to knock me over.

"Hmm, I doubt he's strong enough to stand on his feet for even two seconds, said John.

Before those words were out of John's mouth, Korniel was on his feet and walking to the stable door. His spindly legs looked so weak, I didn't see how he could do it, but he walked on out of the stable with no problem.

"He sure is moving along pretty well for having feet that shouldn't support him," John remarked.

"That's why I think there's more to Korniel than meets the eye," I said.

We brought Korniel to the near edge of the pasture where John left us to ourselves. I sat quietly with Korniel for some time, just enjoying his presence. I opened the bag lunch I'd brought with me and held an apple up to Korniel.

"Want an apple?"

Before I knew it, I heard a hard crunching sound and the apple was nowhere to be seen.

While we ate, I saw Jimmy with two or three friends wandering off to some distant part of the farm. When they saw me with Korniel, Jimmy yelled some unfriendly things at me.

That colt is angry and afraid.

"How come you always feel sorry for people?"

I want everybody to get better.

"Even me?"

Of course. Your stallion worries you.

That brought back a flood of stuff I didn't want to think about,

but it was clear that I couldn't hide anything from Korniel. Not only that, but I realized how painful holding everything in was, and I really did need to talk to somebody about it.

"My father got wild again last night," I admitted.

Was he drinking the water that washes his mind away again?

My face turned red. Even with Korniel, it was hard to admit to the problem, but I had to do it, so I spilled the beans.

"Yeah, that's the problem. He's fine when he doesn't drink, but it seems like he's always drinking and he's never fine."

You have to make your stallion stop.

"I know, I know, but how do I do that?"

Suddenly, I was flooded with a vision of my father sitting alone in his favorite bar, drinking and looking very miserable.

"If it makes him that unhappy, why doesn't he stop?"

He is trapped. You must look into his eyes with eyes like mine and tell him to stop drinking the water that washes his mind away.

"But I'm just a kid," I protested.

You are Kenton. You are not just a colt, you are Kenton.

Then I saw a vision of a boy who looked a little like me getting yelled at and slapped by a man who looked like my dad. I hardly recognized the man because I hadn't seen him in years, but I realized it was my grandfather treating my father the way my father was treating me.

"Does this mean I'm going to treat my kid the same way?" I asked.

It is up to you to make sure this does not mean that Kenton.

* * *

Sunday morning, I was in church, squeezed in a pew between my parents. They looked so proper in their Sunday best, it was hard to believe that they were at each other's throats just last night when Mom tried to talk Dad out of going to the bar again. Pastor Groves

was in the pulpit, going on and on. My mind started to wander, as it always does during long sermons. I hoped Jesus wouldn't hold that against me. I wasn't bored with Jesus, just bored by lots of talking that I didn't understand. This Sunday morning, I had something big for my mind wander to and pray about. Deborah and her mother were sitting just a few rows in front of me. Since I knew she was worried about something, and she looked it, I was praying for her, too. I hoped that Jesus didn't think I was acting like a heathen by praying for a colt. The Bible doesn't seem to answer that question and, as nice as Pastor Groves was, I was afraid to ask him that. A hard poke in the ribs from my dad with a glowering frown to go with it drove that question away.

The service ended with one of those rousing hymns that always makes me feel good. When we all got outside the church, Dad turned on me, as he always did.

"Kenny, if you want to go to heaven, you're going to have to be more respectful in church than you were this morning," said Dad.

Same old words as last week, but this time, I didn't cave in.

"I was paying attention to Jesus," I said, surprised that I was talking back to my father.

"Kenny," said Mom in that warning tone of hers, "just pay attention as best you can next time we're in church."

"It didn't look like you were trying paying attention to anything but your daydreams," said Dad, his anger rising. "It seems to me that all you care about is dreaming. Why don't you care about the real world? I know why. It's because you're too selfish to think about anything but your daydreams. Do you know where selfish little boys like you end up?"

Yes, I knew the answer very well.

"Good morning, Mister Laurens," said Pastor Groves.

The pastor seemed to have come out of nowhere to save the day. A heavysset man himself, he was a match for Dad physically, and he was one person my dad was always polite too, no matter what.

“Pastor Groves, I apologize for my boy. He’s got to learn to pay more attention to your good words before he gets lost on the wrong path.”

I shrank inside as Pastor Groves looked down at me.

“Is that so?” said the pastor. “Well, sometimes kids know when we use too many words.”

What a relief! Pastor Groves was turning out to be a cooler guy than I thought any pastor could be. Next thing I knew, Pastor Groves was shaking somebody else’s hand, and my dad was left with no wind in his sails.

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As soon as Sunday dinner was over with, I hit my schoolbooks hard so I could go visit Korniel sooner. I was distracted by anger with my dad for making such a ruckus the last two nights that I couldn’t get my homework done, which would have let me go over to the Garret farm right after dinner.

Come! Help me!

Korniel’s cry hit me as forcefully as if he had crashed through my window.

“What’s the matter?” I asked

Come! Now! I am surrounded!

I felt a blow across my face that made me think Dad had just come into the room and belted me, but he hadn’t.

“Are they hitting you?” I asked.

Yes.

For a few seconds, I saw Jimmy Garret and his friends swinging sticks at Korniel in the middle of the pasture. I pulled away from my desk, grabbed my jacket, and scooted out of the house before Dad could look away from the basketball game long enough to ask me if I’d done my homework. It seemed that I was closing in on Jimmy Garret and his friends almost as soon as I left the house. Each of the boys was

wielding a tree branch as they circled Korniel in the pasture, exactly as I had seen in my vision.

“Come on, horsy,” Jimmy taunted Korniel. “Come and get your medicine.”

“How come you’re stumbling like a drunk?” another boy asked him.

“Got your nose into Garret’s liquor cabinet?” asked another.

I stood where I was, scared stiff. What could a little kid like me do against all those kids who were bigger and meaner than me? I’d known that Jimmy Garret was a bad sort, but I didn’t know he was *this* bad.

He is bad, said Korniel, but one of the colts with him is worse and he is making this happen.

Once Korniel had said that, I could see for myself that one of the other boys had a hard, sadistic gleam in his eyes, and Jimmy himself was going along for the ride.

“You’re not being very respectful of us,” the sadistic boy taunted Korniel. “You’re not even getting on your knees to apologize. I guess I’ll have to *knock* you down on your knees.”

“No!”

Jimmy and his friends froze for a moment. Then they turned around slowly to face me. I just about melted when they glided over in my direction. I was way out of my league.

“Who ... is ...this?” asked the toughest looking boy in the group with a nod in my direction.

“Oh, haven’t you been introduced to the biggest jerk in the country?” said Jimmy. “I think that this jerk has come to defend his little baby horse. Is that right?”

“Don’t you dare hurt Korniel,” I ordered.

Jimmy made a mock puzzled face.

“Who are you talking about?”

“The colt. Don’t hurt him. Your father won’t like it. You’ll get in trouble.”

“My old man doesn’t care about this colt. He’s going to put him to sleep tomorrow anyway. “

“Well, I care what happens to him!”

The boys gave me cold, mocking looks.

“Poor Kenny,” said Jimmy with mock sympathy. “He has no friends and so he stoops to making friends with a sick colt. Poor Kenny, doesn’t know how to mind his own business. Poor Kenny is about to turn into a pool of jelly.”

I thought of trying to make a run for the house to get Mr. Garret or John, but Jimmy and his friends already had me surrounded with sticks raised. At least I was saving Korniel from a beating—for a few minutes, anyway. I clenched my fists, ready to fight back. I wasn’t about to go down easily.

Do not hit these colts, said Korniel.

“Then what am I supposed to do, let them hit me?” I asked Korniel.

They will not hit you.

I didn’t see how Korniel could stop them, but I didn’t have the heart to doubt my friend. Not after all I’d been through with him. I collected my strength and stood as straight and tall as I could, letting my eyes burn the way Korniel’s eyes burn when he looks at me.

“Too sissy to fight back?” Jimmy asked with his stick raised above my head.

“Too sissy to fight one-on-one with your bare hands?” I asked in return.

Next thing I knew, half a dozen sticks loomed over me like a canopy and I resigned myself to going down with a body covered with bruises. But that did not happen. I still have no idea what happened next. Something like a white cloud or a white sheet whirled around me and screams exploded like so many firecrackers. A few seconds later, all of the boys were on the ground with varying expressions of rage, fear, and amazement on their faces. Korniel himself looked too weak to move, but the purple sparkle in his eyes was stronger than it

had ever been. Korniel half-trotted, half-limped toward Jimmy. Jimmy slid backwards on the grass, then sprang to his feet and backed away.

“Just you wait until I tell my dad about this,” said Jimmy through his teeth. “This colt will be out of his misery and mine before you can shake a stick.”

Jimmy made a mad dash to the house, and the other boys ran off, leaving me alone with Korniel. I wrapped my arms around the colt’s neck and stroked his mane. His bump looked a lot worse than it had just the day before. It was enough to make my heart sink.

Thank you for coming. Now you need to return to your stable before you get in trouble with the stallion here and your own stallion.

“I want to stay with you,” I said.

Come back later when I need you again.

“I will, Korniel.”

* * *

Sunday evening, I was back in church, doing double duty for God, like I do every Sunday. Sometimes I think it’s too much of a good thing, but this time, I was praying real hard for Korniel, so I was glad to be there. My father had already gone out to the bar, so he wasn’t with us. Not fair, but that made it easier for me to pray for Korniel while Pastor Groves was preaching.

The stallion who is saying these words can help you make your stallion stop drinking the water that washes his mind away, said Korniel.

“What?” I asked.

My mom and several other people around us turned to stare at me.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

I was embarrassed, but encouraged, by what Korniel had just told me; however, I was still worried about him. During the last hymn, I suddenly felt like I was being tied up with a rope. For a few seconds,

my arms were pressed against my ribs. I yelped before I could stop myself. Fortunately, we were singing a rousing hymn, so I didn't attract too much attention. A few seconds later, I could move again.

Once the service was over, I desperately tried to think of something I could say to Pastor Groves on the way out of church to get him to make Dad stop drinking. While I was stalling, Deborah's mom rushed up to Pastor Groves to talk to him. That gave me a little more time to work up the nerve to say something myself.

Talk to the stallion now, said Korniel.

There was no arguing with Korniel when he got that way. As soon as Deborah's mom had said what she was had to say, I pulled my mother just close enough to Pastor Groves for him to notice us.

"Hey, Martha, where's Burton?" the pastor asked my mom.

"He had a bit of a headache and couldn't come," Mom lied.

Mom was always telling lies like that when Dad was too drunk to do something. I was awfully tempted to swallow the words burning on the tip of my tongue, but I knew I could never face Korniel again if I backed down this time.

"Maybe Dad doesn't have a headache now," I said to Pastor Groves, "but he'll have one when he gets home from the bar with a hangover."

"Kenny!" Mom cried.

Pastor Groves narrowed his eyes at me, making me afraid he was about to blow me off the face of the earth.

"Are you saying that your father drinks too much?" he asked in a quiet but firm voice.

"He just needs a drink once in a while," said Mom before I could answer the pastor.

"He needs a drink *all* the time," I insisted, "and then he yells at me all night and slaps me around."

"Is that so?" asked the pastor.

"Kenny's exaggerating," said my mom

"I am *not*!"

Pastor Groves held up his hand.

"You know, Martha, sometimes it's hard to tell when a person needs a drink once in a while and when he needs a drink all the time. Perhaps the two of you should come see me tomorrow after school, and we can talk about what is really happening."

I could hardly believe my ears! Korniel was right. This stallion was going to help me and Mom do something about Dad. I could see right away that Pastor Groves knew a lot about people drinking too much.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Mom. "We're getting along."

"It *is* necessary, and we are *not* getting along!" I said. "I've had it up to here. And Korniel says we have to make him stop."

As soon as I said Korniel's name, I felt very dizzy. I heard Pastor Groves ask who Korn Neal was, but I was too weak to answer.

Help me! Korniel cried out.

I stumbled, feeling as drunk as my dad, but not on the floor of the church; I was stumbling over the straw in the stable. I saw Mr. Garret's grim face and Jimmy's face full of fear and hate. Pastor Groves and another guy in the parish caught me before I fell to the floor.

"What's the matter, Kenny?" asked Mom.

"I don't know."

A fog filled my head. Again, I felt like I'd been strapped down to the floor and I couldn't move. Pastor Groves and some other guy carried me to a pew in the back of the church and laid me out across it.

"Let's see if you're feeling okay in a few minutes," said the man who had helped the pastor carry me.

The church faded away again and the faces of Mr. Garret, John Garret, Jimmy, and the vet swam about me.

"I think that tumor is doing things to his brain," said the vet.

"It is *not!*" I cried out.

To my surprise—to my shock—I was kneeling in the straw next to Korniel. Mr. Garret was standing just a few feet away. Next to him, the vet was holding a gun. There was no question it was for Korniel.

“What are you doing here now?” asked Mr. Garret.

“Please don’t put Korniel away,” I pleaded.

Mr. Garret shook his head sadly.

“He attacked Jimmy out in the pasture this afternoon,” he said.

*“No! Jimmy and a bunch of his friends attacked *Korniel!*”*

“You should have seen the crazy look in that colt’s eyes when he attacked me!” Jimmy exclaimed.

I wanted to ram my fist into Jimmy’s nose, but I was too weak to get to my feet. A big help I was for him.

“Look kid,” said the vet, *“this colt has a very serious problem. Even if this tumor is benign, we’d still have to take it out. That’s an expensive operation right there, and there’s no telling what brain damage there is already, let alone how much brain damage there will be after surgery. If it’s malignant, everything will be even worse. Now, I have a special gun for cases like this. It kills the animal instantly, painlessly. This poor colt won’t feel a thing.”*

“N-O-O-O-O!” I yelled as I flung my arms around the colt’s neck. *“Please, let me buy him!”*

Everybody froze, too startled by my crazy behavior to know what to do or say.

“I know some people can bond pretty close to a horse,” said Mr. Garret, *“I’ve done it myself a few times, but this takes the cake. Do you have any idea how much money it will cost you just to keep me from losing money on this colt?”*

“I’ll save up for a hundred years if I have to,” I said with tears in my eyes.

Not that I had any idea how I could ever raise enough money to pay for Korniel.

Mr. Garret shook his head.

“I won’t be around that long.”

“But Korniel is special!” I pleaded. “This bump isn’t a tumor. Leave it alone. It won’t hurt him. I promise!”

You’ve done it! Korniel exclaimed. You have given me the time I needed to finish growing. You have saved my life. Hang on!

Suddenly, I was blinded by a golden light. Everybody around me screamed. I screamed, too, but almost as soon as I did, I felt a sense of peace I couldn’t believe. I’ve heard Pastor Groves talk about the peace that passes understanding. I didn’t understand what I was feeling, so maybe this was it. After a few seconds, the golden light didn’t blind me anymore—it swirled in relaxing patterns that soothed my eyes. A golden horn rose from Korniel’s forehead where the unsightly bump had been. The ropes that had tied him down broke. Korniel was free, and I was mounted on his back, ready to go wherever he wanted to take me.

“Incredible!” John Garret cried out.

“Impossible!” Mr. Garret exclaimed.

Jimmy was long gone, and good riddance to him.

“Y-you can keep him,” Mr. Garret stammered.

“Nobody owns Korniel,” I said, my voice steadier than I thought it could be.

“Kenny, you’re the darndest kid I’ve ever seen,” said John.

Those words melted away as Korniel floated outside the barn and then flew away. By this time, my head had cleared up completely.

“Where are we going?” I asked Korniel.

***We will be there faster than I can tell you,* Korniel answered.**

No sooner had those words passed through my head than the cloud cleared and I saw two boys advancing on Mickey Munson in the back yard of a house. Mickey screamed. The boys turned around. When they saw Korniel and me, they screamed and ran inside the house.

“Don’t worry—he won’t hurt *you*,” I said to Mickey, “as long as *you* don’t hurt anyone.”

Mickey’s face tightened with rage and fear when he saw me

looking down at him. I was tempted to gloat, but I knew Korniel would not approve of that.

“What are *you* doing here?” Mickey asked.

“Ask Korniel,” I replied.

“What the—”

Mickey choked on his next word as Korniel locked eyes with him. After a minute or so, Mickey’s eyes grew wide, and he nodded soberly. He didn’t seem to know what to make of it all.

“See you later,” I said.

I wished I could have said something more meaningful, but I didn’t know yet how to talk to a kid like that. That was going to take some time.

“See you,” Mickey mumbled.

The cloud swirled around Korniel and me again. A few seconds later, I saw the church and Pastor Groves talking earnestly to my mother in front of the door. I dismounted and waited for the few people lingering outside the church to make a ruckus over Korniel, but nobody seemed to notice him except Deborah. She stifled a cry, then listened to Korniel for a moment. When Korniel finished with what he had to say to her, her face lit up.

“I hope so,” said Deborah.

“*There you are!*” said Mom.

“Feeling better?” asked Pastor Groves. “I see you’re on your feet again.”

“Yeah, feeling better,” I said, but my legs were still wobbly.

“Kenny,” said Mom, “Pastor Groves says that you’re right. We have to sit down and have a long talk tomorrow about your father and how we can become a real family again.”

For a second, I felt like saying “I told you so,” but a second later, I knew it was better to settle for giving Mom the best hug she’d had from me in years. Over Mom’s shoulders, Korniel was looking at me with his purple diamond eyes.