

The Duel

I

Morning's first light peeked over the flowered knoll where Tobin sat cleaning a saber. It had rained the night before, and the air smelled of it. In the woods below the hill, songbirds whistled their dawn melodies in fanfare, for the general would soon be here. He told Tobin to be ready at first light, but he would be late. The general was always late. Tobin had planned on this and postponed giving the saber one final shine. The steel was cold and numbed his fingers as he slid the thin cloth down its face. Every bit of rust had been scoured off the night before and now it shone like a mirror.

"My hands are too shaky to do the job right," The general had said. "There's an eight-piece in it for you if it shines like new. A general should look his best, you know."

As he finished, the unmistakable warble of an old battle hymn came drifting down the lane. It was gruff and boisterous, it echoed through the trees and sent the songbirds into a hasty retreat. Emerging from the woods, the general wore his old army uniform—green and black with silver buttons. Pinned to his chest was a medal for some great deed or victory, and around his neck, a brass plate engraved with his regiment's insignia—a spotted horse with wings.

He was a veteran of many great battles. Which battles, Tobin couldn't say, but he liked the way the man spoke of them. He liked the look in his eyes. And he must have been a great general, for in his stories he rarely lost, and when he did it cost the enemy dearly. The man's hair was long and grey and tied in a tail, which was no longer the fashion, but it suited him. His nose was red as were his cheeks. His teeth were yellowed or fallen out, but that didn't stop him from smiling when he spotted Tobin atop the hill outside the brick cottage he called home.

“Ahoy there Toby!” The man called out. “Let’s see your handiwork up close.” Taking care not to smudge the blade, Tobin sheathed it and took off down the lane. They were headed to Harpers Glen, that’s the spot they had agreed on, though the Torish man had been the first to suggest it. The field lay in a valley to the east, and it would take some time getting there at the general’s labored pace.

“There’s not a speck of rust on it sir,” Tobin said, handing over the blade.

“I’ll be the judge of that boy,” he said, withdrawing a pair of spectacles from his coat pocket. He poured over the blade as though he were inspecting his troops, ready to pounce on the slightest infraction. He checked in the crevasses and places oft-ignored, and then he smiled. “Good as new, maybe better.” He swung the blade out to the side. “And she still has an edge which means you didn’t drop her. Well done boy.” A warmth spread through Tobin’s chest as he caught the small coin the general flicked to him.

“Thank you, sir.”

“No thank you, couldn’t have done it better, you’ll make a worthy second indeed.”

The general claimed it was a great honor to be his second, but in truth, no others volunteered. He’d been holding court at the Gilded Hog Inn and a stranger had taken offense. Tobin had watched from the kitchen as they argued, but he did not catch the particulars. Right as he was placing a bowl of stew between them, a glove was thrown to the floor. The man who threw it was Torish. He wore a wide-brimmed hat with a buckle and reeked of pipe-smoke. There was something distasteful to his look, and though his hair greyed as well, he did not look as old as the general.

Dueling, the general had told him after, used to be the way of things and had since fallen out of style. There were even laws to forbid the practice, but the men who wrote those laws were soft, the general said.

And so they walked to Harpers Glen. They walked and sang and laughed. Over hill and creek to the old battlefield, where the Torish man would be waiting.

II

Cutting the air with a few practice swings, the Torish man stood beside his second. He looked to be Torish as well, though he was undoubtedly in servitude. He waited on his master like a dog used to kicks. A black destrier grazed behind them in the field, its powerful flanks glistening with the sweat of the midday sun.

The general wiped his brow and wheezed. It was common to see him out for a leisurely walk, but the trip to Harpers Glen was further than expected. He had unbuttoned his coat revealing a stained undershirt with a blotch of wetness around the chest. Despite his struggle, he kept up the appearance of being in good spirits.

“Never let the enemy see your weak spot.” He slapped Tobin on the back and let out a forced laugh as they approached.

“Ah, the General has decided to grace us with his presence.” The Torish man said with a fanciful bow. “Have you decided on terms?”

“I am prepared to defend my honor, sir, whatever terms you prefer are fine by me.” The general said.

“We are both men of war are we not? And are we not of seasoned age? Let us then duel with the rules of old and not like the barbaric youth of today.” Said the Torishman as he traced his fingers along his thin mustache.

“That is agreeable, I present the lad as my second, and I gather your footman will serve as yours.”

“Indeed, we stand ready. Though you look winded my General. Do you require some time to recover, I will not have it said that I killed a tired man.”

“Bah!” The general grunted. “I’m warmed up is all, let our blades do the talking henceforth.”

“So you do not wish to issue an apology?” The Torish man seemed surprised.

“As the rules dictate, the first offense requires the first apology, and I did not start this quarrel, sir.” And with that, the old general motioned for his sword. Tobin sprang to action and presented the blade pommel out.

“Perhaps you should rest sir, there is no dishonor in that.”

“No dishonor maybe, but he would think me feeble. Don’t worry lad, my strength will return when I wield my saber, and we fight only until one of us is well bloodied.”

The old man drew his saber and presented it, his opponent did the same. They closed on each other and paused with the flats of their sabers against the other. The Torishman was the first to attack. He struck his blade down hard on the general's waiting saber and it fell harmlessly to the ground, sticking deep in the soggy grass. The Torish man smirked and backed off, holding his blade vertically across his face.

“Well struck,” said the general. “You have the advantage.” The old man bent and retrieved his saber, the end of it now caked in mud. Tobin ran up and pulled a cloth from his

pocket wiping down the blade. “That’s good enough Toby, thank you lad. My hands weren’t as warm as I thought.”

“Did you lose sir?”

“Hells no, though I must wait for him to strike first now.”

“He struck first the last time, sir.”

“And now I know what to expect.” The general winked at the lad and presented his blade once more.

The Torishman was swift to engage again, but this time the general parried his blow. They moved in tandem, circling and striking in turn. The sound of their sabers clashing filled the valley and startled the destrier who galloped off to more peaceful pastures. Tobin watched with bated breath as the men demonstrated their craft. They would bend and feint and move in ways that seemed right, even to one unaware of the art. It was no lie when the general said his strength would return, for he danced with the vigor of a man half his age. His sword arm was lithe and nimble, and his free hand sat confidently on his hip as he poked and slashed and misdirected strikes. Gone was the visage of an elderly veteran past his prime, to Tobin he looked as he imagined in his stories, fierce and terrible.

And then the Torishman scored a blow, and the old general was back. Blood seeped from his shoulder and stained his shirt. They parted once more and Tobin ran up offering the general some water.

“Shall I bandage it for you, sir?”

“Not yet lad, not yet. If you did, I’d have to admit defeat.” The general said through pained breaths. “It’s only my left arm, and I need it not.” He handed the waterskin back to the boy and returned his gaze to his opponent.

“Do you yield?” The Torishman asked, his blade already sheathed.

“I do not,” he replied flatly. And then they were at it again. The Torishman, sensing weakness, fought with a renewed fury. He whirled his blade in a clumsy fashion, trying to batter the general's sword from him. Keeping his composure the general continued to parry, light and effortless in his movements. Soon the Torishman showed signs of tiring, his slashes more labored and slow. The general took this as his cue and unleashed a flurry of attacks. He pressed in and fainted then whirled his blade back around in a fluid motion for an overhand swing. Then he scored. A thin red line appeared on the Torishman's brow, and blood dripped into his eye. He staggered back and wiped the blood away.

“Do you yield?” asked the general between heaving breaths. The Torishman blinked and wiped but could not clear his vision. He looked to his second, then back to the old man whose arm was now soaked in red.

“I do not.” He said at last. “But let it be noted that my sight is hindered should I fall.”

“It will be noted,” the general replied.

From the south, storm clouds were drifting in. Tobin could feel the odd drop of water splash on his cheeks. Then came more drops, and soon his hair was damp. The Torishman stood wary, his feet less sure and his head cocked to favor his good eye.

“Come on then, before the drizzle soaks us to the bone,” the general taunted.

The move was unceremonious. To Tobin, it lacked any semblance of grace or appearance of mastery. It was quick and decisive and over before Tobin knew what had happened. The general lurched to the side to avoid a strike and his foot dislodged a clump of grass sending his boot skidding longways across the mud. With a single clash and a sudden slice, the general's

innards spilled from his gut. He slumped to his knees and grasped in futile panic at his exposed bowels, hands slick with blood and rain.

Tobin ran to him. He leaned the old general back and removed his shirt to use as dressing for the wound. The general groaned.

“No. Stop lad.” He inhaled in quick sharp breaths. “There’s nothing to be done.”

“I’ll fetch the Torishman’s horse and we’ll get you back to town, we’ll stitch you up good as new,” Tobin said as his shaking hands struggled to contain the seeping red.

“Peace lad. What better way is there for a general to die?” He opened his mouth to catch a few droplets. “A general should die on the battlefield, and this here is as good a field as any” Then he died.

The Torishman looked on with indifference from his good eye.

“He was no general boy.” He said as his footman wrapped a linen bandage around his head. “I said as much last night, but the fool insisted.” Whistling for his destrier, the Torishman stood and made ready to depart. Tobin watched as the war steed cantered into the glen, as the Torishman mounted and set off to the west, and as the last trace of his figure vanished into the foggy horizon. He knelt there beside the cooling remnants of the man, like a great stone that only eons could move or sculpt.

The ground was good and muddy, so he had little trouble digging a shallow grave with his hands. Tobin laid the general down and tried his best to cover him before the waterline was over the general's pale face and unblinking eyes. His mouth hung agape and filled with dirt as Tobin hurriedly flung the earth back in its place.

When he finished, he picked up the general's regimental insignia and the steel cavalry saber that he had been so proud of this morning. He could see his warped reflection in the tang, a

foolish boy indeed, he thought. The blade stuck deep into the earth, a sorry headstone but what else could be done?

For a moment he stood there, unsure of what to do next. He had no words of eulogy, in fact, aside from his tales of glory Tobin realized that he knew precious little of the man.

Struggling and stuttering he tried to say something profound, even with no one there to hear it.

“You fought well, sir,” he said at last. “I will tell of how you were struck down at the battle of Harpers Glen. Of how if not for the soggy ground you would have come out victorious.” Tobin shivered and clutched his goose pimples arms as his lips blueed and teeth chattered. “I will tell them you died with honor sir. I will tell them you died a general.”

The rain became sporadic, and hints of the sun poked through the clouds that carried the summer shower to another valley. It was low in the sky, and Tobin knew he should head back, lest he be caught out in the dark. Wiping his nose, he turned and started back down the lane towards home. A few paces into his stride he stopped. With a resigned exhale he marched back to the grave and exhumed the saber from the mud. He slung the brass plate around his neck and wiped the blade clean, sheathing it in the scabbard he left nearby. Setting off once again he found himself handling the smooth pommel of the old general's sword as it swung by his side. It would be a terrible shame for the blade to rust.
