

## The Long Fall of Humbert Dumas

*Humbert Dumas? I have never heard that name.* — Last words spoken by King Luyer IX as he lay upon his death bed, as recorded by Arimagna, High Prioress of the Nine.

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Five thousand strong, most of them drunk and all of them impatient, let out a bloodthirsty roar when the first cannon fires from the parapet, signaling the arrival of the King's Horses and the King's Men to the jousting field. Cassa nickers and shifts nervously at the sudden earful. "Calm, darling, calm," I say from atop the saddle. If I could stroke the tuft of hair behind the nub where her right ear had once been, I would.

Four more cannons blast in immediate succession, each one a wraithlike shockwave through my paralyzed chest and insensate gut. The echo of the blast bellows in my head, and if I close my eyes, I can almost—almost—feel it flutter from the base of my neck and gambol down my spine like one of King Luyer's larkers upon the tightrope. The King's drummers strike snares in cadenced synchronicity. If I imagine hard enough, the hum and thrum of it all sends war march pulses to the furthest reaches of my body.

For a moment I wonder if perhaps I can once again curl my fingers or roll my toes.

But no, I can't. Not anymore.

One last cannon blast reminds me of the sound my skull made as it met the cobbled stone of Saint Mariel's Square. The metallic stink of spent shells conjures the reek of blood leaking from every hole in my head.

"You have the favor of the Nine, Humbert Dumas," Brother Nichlaus says. The Prior looks a fool—priestly, purple robe flowering at his feet, pommed biretta cocked atop his head, squiring for a crippled ex-King's Man atop a one-eared mount. If I ever had a true friend it was this fool.

“I owe the Priory of the Nine my life, Nichlaus.” If I could, I’d extend my hand to him one last time. Though the muscles of my face are hard of maneuvering, I muster a grin and nod as far as I am able. In my condition, Brother Nichlaus will understand the honor meant by smaller gestures. Nichlaus gives a final inspection to the bespoke locks that fuse my sabatons to the stirrups, snaps the jousting lance into my left vambrace, then nods back at me before taking his place among the rest of the Priors of the Nine on the first row of the grandstands.

The Priors, it seems, are the only ones not shouting for my head.

Trumpets sound the King’s arrival and a joyous cry erupts all around me. King Luyer enters the field from the North Tunnel atop his burgundy destrier.

Cassa winnys at the sight of the competing horse. *The two-eared bitch*, I bet she’d say if she could.

“I know, Cassa,” I say. “Today we show that prig our true spirit.” Cassa shifts her weight, front to back. She can feel the glory of the moment as much as I can, I am sure of it. And I want this for her as much as I want it for myself. My one-eared mare, unfit to stand among the King’s Horses. For she, too, is defiled. But I will never be convinced that she is not the greatest horse in all the Kingdom, my friend through the darkest days of my life. It wasn’t easy on her, learning to carry a clumsy cripple—unable to move a muscle below his neck—upon her back.

Behind Luyer, all the King’s Horses and all the King’s Men take their positions underneath their guidons hanging along top of the field wall. They clap each other on the back, laughing and sharing piercing words, ready to see their king put down this challenge to his honor. There is Sir Rodinger the Meek, and there Sir Aunri the Kind. My friends, once. Now they will not even look me in the eye. It was said that they, despite grand efforts (lies, all of it!), couldn’t put me back together again when I fell from atop the Red Tower. *Wouldn’t*, more like it. Sir Rodinger

wouldn't dare touch a Defiled if it was his own Nine-blessed mother, and Sir Aunri used to throw eggs at the Defiled beggars at the King's Gate simply because he could.

In the distance, the Red Tower peeks through the morning's fog. Twenty-and-one moons ago King Luyer's cutthroats shoved me over the balustrade of the Eastern terrace. Luyer made no secret of his involvement. Said I'd grown too fond of the Defiled. All I had done was express displeasure of Sir Garral's dismissal from the King's Men simply for losing a hand in battle. But that was all it took for Luyer to require my life of me. A Defiled, it was said, would never be fit to serve amongst the King's Men.

The King hoists his red lance, blunted with a silver Lion's Paw, high overhead. The crowd lets loose another torrent. For a moment, Luyer drinks in the praise. Then he motions for the crowd to be calm.

"Who is this defiled cripple that names his King in Law of Revenge?" he calls out. "Tell me, Defiled, how do you plan to joust if you can't even control your own bowels?"

"Kill the Defiled!" the unruly rabble screams from the grandstands. "Death to Humpty Dumpty."

I grimace at the cruel name, a vulgar rendition of my true Nine given name.

From somewhere to my left, an egg arches its way through the air and leaves a yellow splatter upon my face shield.

They mean insult by the name and by the thrown egg, but if in the end it silences the mass, I will accept the name. I will wear the seal of the Broken Egg proudly upon my armour. I will let the blunted, egg-shaped cap of my lance remind them that even those things which are easily broken can strike a blow to the spirit of the strongest men.

I am Humbert Dumas no longer. I am Humpty Dumpty, Knight of the Broken Egg.

Broken, but not beaten.

Cracked, but not shattered.

Finally, the noise softens, and I answer. “The Priory of the Nine decrees that a man is granted one chance of revenge on the twenty-first moon after his life is stolen from him. I am here to have that revenge.”

Hissing from the stands at that. Another egg breaks near Cassa’s feet.

“You seem alive to me, *Humpty*. Tell me, who’s life have I taken from you?”

“My own,” I say. “You know full well, Honored King, that I was the best of your King’s Men. None more honorable than I. And yet you had me knocked from atop your tower simply for advocating mercy on behalf of a man who lost his hand fighting in your damned wars. And now,” I say, looking to the Sisters and the Brothers of the Priory who nod their solidarity with me, “the Priory of the Nine have granted my petition for the Law of Revenge.” The King’s Men loath the Priory, but the Priors took me in, fed me from their tables, cared for me when not one of the King’s Men would. The Priory of the Nine is the only reason I am still alive today, the only reason a Defiled can sit proudly atop his one-eared horse.

“Fine,” Luyer grunts. “Name your revenge, Humpty Dumpty.”

“Grant that if I knock you from atop your mount, you will allow a Defiled to rise to the rank of King’s Man. Grant that the Knight of the Broken Egg will forever stand in the King’s court.”

A murmur of displeasure ripples across the field and through the stands. A Defiled had never been a King’s Man.

But Luyer is trapped in the vice of tradition. The Law of Revenge compels him to agree to the terms, or else live in fear of the Nine and of the Priory.

The King raises a hand for silence. “And how shall one without use of his legs be a member in good *standing* in my court?”

I ignore the laughing that spews forth all around me. I wait for a long moment for it to fall away.

“If I fail in my quest to knock you from your mount,” I say, “I shall grant you the opportunity to dispense of the rest of me, as you no doubt meant to do twenty and one moons ago.”

Now the crowd roars. A chance to rid the world of the Defiled who so insulted their beloved King by naming him in the Law of Revenge. They’d love nothing more than to see my head removed from my defiled body.

Luyer smiles. And then nods. He’s accepted my terms. Without another word, he lowers his face shield and turns his horse to take position upon his starting line.

The time has come.

I click my tongue at Cassa, and though I cannot feel a thing, in my soul I feel Cassa’s power underneath me, ready to propel me toward the bastard King like lightning toward the lightening rod.

I stare downrange through the blunted tip of my egg-capped lance. Such a fragile thing, an egg, more fragile even than my skull upon the pavement.

And today the Broken Egg will have its glory.

A squire stands at the center of the field with a flag up in the air.

“It’s just us now, Cassa,” I say. “You and me.”

I breathe in. I breathe out. A broken egg willing to be cracked one last time.

The flag drops and Cassa is off the starting line. Only at the base of my neck do I feel her hooves thump across the packed field, but that's enough to know the power in her. We are joined and it is freedom. Her legs are my legs. Her spirit my spirit.

A long tail of dust trails Luyer's horse as they both barrel toward me and Cassa. Though he seems leagues off, the revenge I seek is only mere seconds away.

A quarter of the field is now behind me, and through the slits of my helm, I lock onto Luyer at the very spot where I mean to hit him.

But I cannot aim true with these impotent arms that cannot maneuver the lance. I only hope that Brother Nichlaus measured true when he forged my armour, honed the spot perfectly where my lance would clasp into my vambrace so that I could land the lance right where I mean to.

I give Cassa two clicks of the tongue and my one-eared mare lurches ever so slightly, closer to the barrier that runs the length of the field. Suddenly Luyer fills my entire vision through my eye slits.

I let out a yawp from deep inside a chest that I cannot feel heaving, force a tempestfull of air through lungs that I cannot feel burning.

A sharp explosion as Luyer's lion paw lance pummels the visor of my helm, wrenching my head painfully around. But with my head forced around, I see it.

Even those things which are easily broken can strike a blow to the spirit of the strongest man.

The hollow, egg-shaped cap of my lance bursts into pieces as it hits the inside of Luyer's thigh right upon the narrow strip of flesh that his cuisse leaves exposed. The sharpened, steel spike hidden inside the hollowed cap slices through his skin, bone, tendon. Blood courses through the back of his leg as he lets out a shocked croak.

As my lance pierces the King, it unclasps itself from the vambrace exactly as Brother Nichlaus designed it to do.

“Ride, Cassa!”

I do not—cannot—not look back to see if Luyer is on the ground or not. It matters not. The lanced landed true.

Cassa gains speed across the field.

King’s Men on King’s Horses now make for the North Tunnel to cut me off, but I am through the tunnel before they can block the way.

A moment of shock wells through the grandstands. Angry shouts and dismayed panic boil over the top of the stadium, but I only hear it from the streets outside where now Cassa and I charge toward the King’s Gate.

Soon we are riding through fields of tall grass. Cassa, far from being finished, gives the wind a close contest as ten King’s Men, Rodinger and Aunri among them, trail behind. But I don’t worry. Cassa will lose them. Soon we’ll reach the Yellow Wood and then it won’t be long until we find ourselves crossing the River Bridge to the Priory of the Nine, where the Priors will stand ready to take me in. The King’s Men wouldn’t dare enter the Priory unwelcome. No matter how much they hate the Priors, they fear the Nine far more.

And Luyer—Luyer will never walk again, Nine willing. Though it cannot be me, someday I hope that a Defiled will stand amongst the King’s Men just as now a Defiled will sit upon the throne.