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The Duel

The sword flew from its owner's hand, landing on the stone path with a clatter. Its owner lifted his hands in surrender as the warrior drew his sword upon the fallen man's neck, a smirk on his face. Returning his weapon to his sheath, he lent a hand to his opponent, lifting him up. "It seems I am unbeatable," the winner declared arrogantly and gave a little bow to his audience.

The small crowd of women cheered and clapped for the warrior. He was the best swordsman in the entire city, and he made sure everyone knew it. With a name like Victor Hardcastle, he believed it to be his birthright. He had been undefeated for three years now, despite the many men who had dared to challenge him. He was a handsome man as well, with flowing brown hair to the nape of his neck, tall and lean from years of training, and owning a face that had soft features and dazzling green eyes. His appearance made him famous for conquering in the bed as well as the battlefield. Whether his adoring

fans, now swooning in their afternoon gowns and fanning themselves for air, loved him for his looks, his swordsmanship, or his money was unknown to him, but either way, he did not shy from their affection.

“Is no one else man enough to duel with me today?” he goaded the crowd of onlookers with a handsome smirk.

“I am,” came a voice from behind Victor, and he turned in surprise. The newcomer was dressed in black from head to toe, his garment simple and quite cheap looking. He wore long sleeves and breeches all in black, despite the afternoon heat, and had already donned his duelist’s helm, a mesh mask that protected the face and head during sparring. The only part of him left uncovered were his hands, which were quite small and delicate looking. In fact, the entire man was small and delicate, hardly taller than Victor’s shoulder.

Victor found he was oddly unnerved by the newcomer, despite his small stature and shabby appearance. It must have been the man’s voice, the confidence in it. “What is your name, good challenger?” Victor asked.

“I only give my name to those who can defeat me.”

Victor smiled at his adoring fans, who giggled stupidly, as if they had exchanged some private joke. Did he not know that Victor was undefeated? A simple little man like this would be no match for the professional duelist. But he decided to humor the poor boy, and lifted his sword to the challenger’s, so the blades met in an X, and bowed politely.

“Victor!” One of the ladies called to him. “You forgot your helm!”

“Do not worry, darling, I hardly doubt it will be necessary—” He was cut off by the challenger’s sudden attack, and the battle began.

Victor was surprised to discover that this newcomer was quite good. Being small of stature, he moved quickly and fluidly. He dodged or easily blocked all of the warrior’s attacks, springing back with deftly maneuvered counterattacks of his own. He was a natural at sparring, but so was Victor, and the warrior would not let this newcomer win so easily.

The duel quickly became heated and moved outside the designated area. They fell into the crowd, scattering the female onlookers. The spectators followed the men at a distance as they made their way through the garden, crossing the bridge over the small stream to the front of the manor. They ended up on either side of a hedge separating the gardens from the entryway into his manor. The gardener scoffed at Victor as he swept his blade over the

hedge, shearing the top of it but missing his opponent, who ducked down. The newcomer's blade thrust through the hedge, catching one of the buttons on Victor's shirt and ripping it off. The women squealed at his suddenly exposed chest glistening with sweat. But he had no time to strike a pose for them. For he and his opponent were now at the edge of the giant fountain that stood erect in his manor's entryway. The men circled around the fountain's edge, both trying to balance on its thin stone wall and trip the other at the same time. They had gone around it twice when Victor misjudged his step and fell into the water with a huge splash. When he looked up again, the challenger had the tip of his sword at Victor's heart.

"It would seem you are defeated by your own arrogance...and this carefully placed stone." The man tossed a rock in his hand lazily. So that's what Victor had tripped on!

"How clever of you to plant that beneath my feet," he muttered sourly. Victor stood, his clothes soaked to his body. He looked up at his defeater, only to find him walking away. "Will you not at least let me look on the face of the man who defeated me, good sir?!" he exclaimed in offense.

The man paused and turned to him thoughtfully. Then, with a shrug, he pulled off his helm. Victor stared in shock while the bystanders gasped. A long red mane of hair tumbled from the woman's head, strands of it sticking to her face from perspiration. Her angular features and sharp, quick eyes stared down at him with mild boredom, though there was a momentary flash of self-gratification at Victor's reaction. She smiled in impish satisfaction.

"What...what is your name?" he demanded harshly, forgetting his manners in the presence of this rather strange lady.

"I told you, I only give my name to those who can defeat me." And with a smirk, she turned and walked away.