

Michael Bruno

The Seventh Duel

They first met beneath masks at
the Palatine's fete in the days
just before the shattering;
a friendship fashioned in the
timeless moments before the
world came crashing down.
But, as the Emperor's Folly proved,
this world has no place for things
that last.

THE SIX DUELS OF THENIUS BERET AND ASHAM LATURAI: PREFACE
ANONYMOUS

Asham couldn't clearly remember what had started all of this nonsense. Too much wine, and a foolish dalliance forgotten about as a result; a misplaced word here or there, maybe even the inopportune brandishing of a sword (Gods, maybe all of it); whatever the case, he had no idea what had Thenius so perturbed, and he really did not have the time to figure out what it was. His eyes crossed, everything in his periphery blurring as he focused on the point of his greatest friend's rapier resting an inch from his nose.

"Are you not even going to defend yourself, coward?" There was an edge to Thenius's words, one that Asham had never heard before, and was as sharp as the one a thrust away from his skull. Slowly raising his hands, he looked around the room. The party had been going so well; a happy masquerade as a way of forgetting the madness outside. It had only been a week since Zaakk's foolhardy journey to the temple of Tryndeg'g had riven the land apart, and the public had taken to that as well as could be expected; Asham figured they were tearing apart the capital right now, stealing whatever they could find from the burnt out buildings, Altogether an unpleasant notion. Dark wine slowly pooled around an overturned goblet on the floor, and the

silent revelers stood in a ring around the two former friends. “Is this it then? Do you accept death as would a coward?”

“Certainly not,” Asham replied, staring straight into Thenius’s implacable face. He lowered the rapier, and a cold smile preceded his words.

“Then take up your sword, swine, and meet my challenge; to the death.” Slowly Asham stepped back, arms still raised. When he was a safe distance away, he unclasped the cloak from around his neck, letting it fall to the ground. The crowd was silent and still, eyes racing along the invisible ties between the two men that had been irrevocably severed.

Taking his white gloves from their place tucked behind his belt, he tossed the left on his cloak and donned the right, before reaching down and removing his scabbard as well. Drawing the basket-hilted rapier, he tossed the sheath to the side. The thin Firewell-forged steel, so pale as to almost be white, radiated in the light from the crystal lamps. He lowered the blade and watched as Thenius prepared for the duel.

“Honestly, Thenius, I have no idea what’s made you so upset.”

“Then it seems, Asham, you do not know me at all.” Asham licked his lips, rolling his shoulders back. Thenius moved forward, raising his rapier, identical to Asham’s. “It matters not anyway. You have made your choice.”

“Indeed, it seems I have.” Asham turned, facing his right side towards Thenius, raising his sword to meet its twin. They both stood still, eyes locked on the other, Asham slowing his breathing to almost nothing, as he knew Thenius was as well. The crowd had grown even quieter, if that was possible, and in that moment, it seemed as though no one in the room was

there. With a rush forward, Asham slide his blade along the length of Thenius's, lunging forward, point aiming for the throat. Thenius ducked forward, pushing his sword upward, knocking Asham's to the side, and the duel began.

Those who saw said it was
the most remarkable display
of swordsmanship they had
ever witnessed. They flowed
like water, back and forth
across the floor. It seemed to last
forever, a steel pair dancing
through all eternity. And when
Thenius Beret lay defeated on
the ground, his shouts followed Asham
Laturai out of the party as he left
him there, very much alive.

THE SIX DUELS OF THENIUS BERET AND ASHAM LATURAI: TO THE DEATH
ANONYMOUS

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It had been ten years to the day when
They found each other at the
Emperor's feast. Some say he arranged
for them both to be there for
his own amusement, but all agree that
when they finally met for the sixth time,
it was with a red crescendo.

THE SIX DUELS OF THENIUS BERET AND ASHAM LATURAI: THE FINAL DUEL
ANONYMOUS

Asham ran a finger along the scar along the back of his left hand, careful not to brush it with his blade. It had not pained him in two years, but the moment Thenius entered the party, it had started itching and had not stopped. He stepped forward, eyes roving the room; he saw the Emperor, barely a man, smiling with glee; the bastard actually thought Asham wanted to be doing this? No, it was innocent mistake, a gesture to entertain an empire at its wits end, a happy

masquerade to hide the madness inside. *Yes, Your Grace, this is for you, and for them, but not for me. I know I have tired of this long ago.*

He moved past the Emperor's, eyes sliding over people that he knew, had known, and did not. Men he knew from the Provincial Council; noble friends of his father's; women he had once thought he might marry. They all drew back sheepishly from his gaze, backing into hushed conversations; all but a small boy, no older than five, with one brown eye, and one blue eye. Asham did not know why he held his gaze, but he did so until Thenius approached. He had dark circles around his eyes, and new lines creasing his forehead. He had let his greying brown hair grow long in the two years since Asham last saw him, and he had a beard where before he had always been clean shaven. Asham wiped the sweat from his left hand on his pants, and then readied himself in the proper form, as he had done many times before.

Thenius did not. He lunged forward, straight for Asham, who wheeled to his left, dropping his right arm under the thrust. He righted himself, and raised his blade to parry a backslash aimed for his head. The crowd was backing up as the two men circled each other. Thenius charged forward, swinging his rapier down at Asham's head.

They fought as uncaged animals; as a vicious torrent where before they had met as powerful rivers. Rapier thrusts and slashes gave way to punches as they flung each other around the room, smashing tables and exquisite tableware. By the time they steadied, blood trickled down the left side of Asham's face, and long gouges ran through his clothes. He wearily raised his blade, swaying back and forth. Thenius looked more fatigued than he was, and he was barely able to parry Asham's thrust. In his exhaustion, Asham forgot about the riposte.

Four inches of Firewell-forged steel buried itself in his left shoulder. It shot out, and cut deep beneath his left eye. Pain lanced down his arms and through his chest, and he dropped his sword as he grabbed his shoulder. He had lost feeling in his left hand, and when he withdrew his hand, it was covered in blood. He fell to his knees, then to his side, and the room darkened around him.

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The rapier glanced off the blade of Asham's own, and if it had not, he would no longer be living. The Captain danced back, resting in a two handed grip, planting his feet on the stones. Asham straightened, and extended his own sword perpendicular to the Captain.

"We've warmed up enough for this morning, Captain. Now is the time." The Captain loosened his shoulders and readjusted his feet.

"Yes, my Lord." A breath later, the Captain whirled forward, his blade a blur, and Asham ducked to the left under the blade. His knees ached as he pivoted to meet the Captain's attack. The steel slid along the steel to the basket hilt, and the Captain pushed forward, rattling the sword in Asham's hand. He raised it up to meet the Captain's sword, but before he could it poked the top of the scar beneath his left eye.

"Someday you'll get it, my Lord." Both men lowered their blades, and Asham sighed. *Someday*. He'd been hoping for someday for nearly thirty years. He wiped down the blade of his sword before sheathing it. A shirtless Orialian servant stepped forward and took the sword, plain Borealian iron, and then bowed and hurried off to the armory.

“I must beg your leave, my Lord. There are things I must see to in Lactua.” Asham nodded and waved him off.

“We shall duel again tomorrow, Captain.”

“As ever, my Lord.”

Asham clasped his maroon robe over his right shoulder and ran his hand through his hair. The air along the Varamior coast was crisp this morning, and Asham looked out over his estate. Workers meandered along the dirt paths, many dragging wagons behind. There had already been three deliveries from the estate vineyards, and the sun was not even halfway through the sky.

A silver platter of fruits was laid out on the octagonal oak table along the veranda, amidst scattered scrolls and a lute. Asham sat, and pushed aside his copy of Magister Verius’s *On the Majesty of the Old Dulkari Kings*. An appropriate text for the time, he mused. He had been long from the capital and his retirement from public life and policy making some would say coincided with the Zaakk’s ascension as King too precisely to be a coincidence, and as far as Asham cared they were welcome to that belief. The empire was falling apart, but all on his estate was well, and he intended to keep it that way.

The wind blew off the sea through the uniform trees that lined the shaded courtyard below him. As he ate, a guard ran up behind him and stood rigid. Asham looked at the man, swallowed, wiped the juice from around his mouth, and then spoke.

“What is it, Soldier?”

“My, Lord, he is here.”

“Who is?”

“Thenius Beret.” Asham dropped his fork from his shaking hand.

“He has he stated his purpose.”

“He only said that he wished to see you. He comes armed with his rapier.” Asham nodded and waved the man off. *Thenius, by the Eight Dragons, here, now.* Thirty years, or as close to as mattered since he last saw him, when they’d fought their now legendary sixth duel; when Asham had suffered the only lasting injury of their altercations. A dull pain settled over his arm. He was old now, and his body ached, an old plague of memories he welcomed as an old friend during the day, and cursed for haunting his dreams at night.

Thirty years he had been waiting for someday, when he could finally defend against the one strike that had ever wounded him. He had waited into his old age, and now Thenius was here, at his estate, and it seemed he wanted to finish what had been started so long ago.

I am hopeless. Someday is today, and it is the day I die.

How auspicious.

Thenius Beret had lost weight in the thirty years since Asham had last seen him. He wore a mask that covered his whole face. Asham had heard years ago that he had suffered an accident that had left his face disfigured, and taken all his hair. In his hand was the Firewell-forged rapier that Asham cursed daily, a red stain over the end of the blade, a memory of his blood. The servant who had escorted Thenius in ran up to Asham, handing him his own Firewell-forged rapier. He drew it for the first time in thirty years.

“Why have you come after all this time?”

“No words, Asham.” His voice had grown deeper as a result of his disfigurement, and he lunged forward. Asham raised his blade to parry, and did so with much more ease than he had expected. Thenius stepped back, raising his sword across his chest. Asham stepped forward, swinging for Thenius’s exposed head. He raised his sword to block, leaving his chest open. Asham lunged at the opening, and he knew it was too late. This is what had happened before, thirty years ago, and this time he would not survive.

His rapier buried itself in Thenius’s heart. Stunned, he let go of the hilt, watching it swing wildly back and forth as its host hit the ground. Asham ran to his side, kneeling down, pulling off the mask. He froze.

Asham looked down, the mask dropping from his hands, as he stared down at a young man, no older than thirty-five, with one brown eye, and one blue eye. And he wept.

It was said that Asham
stood vigil over the body
until night fell, and even then
long after until the captain
found him there the next morning.
Asham sent him away, with a task
he told no one. When he returned,
there was sorrow on his face;
Thenius Beret had died ten years
earlier, drunk out back behind a tavern,
destitute beyond hope of salvation.
It was said that Asham wept for the
rest of his life.

THE SIX DUELS OF THENIUS BERET AND ASHAM LATURAI: THE SEVENTH DUEL
ANONYMOUS

The bard set his lute down as he finished his tale, reaching down for the pewter mug at his feet. He drained the last of his ale as he looked about the common room of the tavern. Everyone had stopped paying attention a long time ago, as they carried on with their own conversations and their own troubles. He looked down into his lute case, and, satisfied with the night's haul, he stood.

Slowly, with aches and pains, he packed up his things. He slung the lute over his right shoulder and made for the back door of the inn, fingering his dagger with his left hand. Somewhere in the tavern behind him something shattered, and he opened the door. In that timeless moment between when the door opened and when it closed, the bard looked back and smiled, and then was gone.