

III

WHEN I ARRIVED BACK at my flat, Uncle Friedrich was ready to duel. He was practicing his counterattack on his weak foot with an épée, a sword that is a bit heavier than the foil which is typically used when practicing fencing. The heaviest is the saber. The saber was my favorite weapon, but it was also the weapon with which I was the least skilled.

When my uncle saw that I had returned, he stopped fencing the air and took a few deep breaths as he rested on his sword. He wiped the sweat from his brow and pushed back the wet hair that was stuck to his forehead.

Out of breath, he asked in German, "Are you ready for a duel, nephew?"

"You seem to be beaten by your shadow already," I returned in German.

He waved me off. "I'm just warming up. I only started five minutes before you walked in."

"Shall I warm up while you catch your breath, old man?"

Friedrich took an épée out of the glass case, which held his collection of swords, and tossed it to me. I caught it by the handle, pommel up, and spun it once around my thumb.

"An old man I am, and I need to warm up. You are young; you're always warmed up."

"I might pull a muscle. My muscles are cold from being outside," I protested.

Friedrich was growing impatient. "Do you warm your muscles before you lay with a woman? No. You'll be fine. Take your position."

"Yes, sir. I'll put on my equipment." I started to make my way to the protective gear.

“Damn your equipment. I’m not going to hurt you. Let’s fight!”

“How will we keep score?” I asked, confused by Friedrich’s eagerness.

“By the blood on our blouses, my boy!”

With a dramatic laugh, Friedrich attacked with an over-cut. Instinctively I defended myself. He came at me fast and hard and with a mischievous smile on his face. He was faster than I had ever seen him. Each stroke was swift and crisp and began and finished precisely where he meant it.

It took every bit of the skill I had acquired from my uncle’s lessons to defend myself against him. I could barely keep up. What had come over him? Had he just been taking it easy on me over the years? On the day of my first lesson, he had warned me that when it came to dueling he would not hold back. I trusted that he had not. Maybe he had not reached his peak, as he believed he had many years earlier. Maybe by teaching me he had learned a few things himself. Maybe I was witnessing his absolute best at that very moment. He was in his prime; he was peaking, and I was a part of it.

At the perfect moment, I took a skillful step forward to stop his attack, which had quickly pushed me back the entire length of the room. Without hesitation, Friedrich raised his front foot to my chest and pushed me back to the wall.

I looked at my uncle in confusion, as he continued to grin that mischievous grin. I could not help but smile back.

Friedrich began walking backwards to the center of the room. I pushed myself off the wall and followed him.

“We are kicking now, huh?” I asked, still speaking German.

“Let’s not be concerned with rules today. Let’s make this duel a little less predictable than usual.” He was speaking Latin now.

I shrugged and lunged forward to attack.

“Wait!” Friedrich yelled.

I quickly withdrew my stabbing motion. He did not flinch. I put the tip of my sword on the floor and leaned on it irritably.

“What is it now?”

“In Latin.”

I repeated my question in Latin. With a quick sweep of his épée, Friedrich knocked my sword out from under my hand, sending it flying to the wall and causing me to stumble a step forward. He tossed his épée away as well.

“What are you doing?” I asked, beginning to grow impatient with his strange behavior.

Friedrich opened his sword case and took out two sabers. However, these were not the small sabers normally used to practice fencing. These were real briquets used for combat. I knew Friedrich had killed many men with his saber from the Napoleonic Wars. He tossed the other saber to me. We took off the scabbards and set them aside.

“Have you lost your mind in your old age?” I asked him, as we began to circle each other.

“I still have my wits about me, my friend. I’m just not listening to them!”

I knew he wanted to attack with the completion of what he thought was a clever statement, but I beat him to it before he finished his sentence. I attacked with an under-cut, which he hated for me to do since it left my torso more exposed for longer than any other attacking cut. Friedrich defended himself against my under-cut attack with expert technique and creativity. When an unexpected move was made, instead of quickly flipping through the pages of strategy in his mind, he threw out the book and created his own style. This skill certainly had taken many, many years to perfect. However, in order to perfect it, one must have a certain kind of mind, and I did not believe my mind worked that way.

As our duel progressed into the tenth minute of incessant clashing, I realized that I had only been on the attack four times

(two of which were no more than three strokes). The rest of the time, I had been on the defensive. For a moment I lost confidence, but I quickly brought myself back up when I thought about how well I had defended myself.

With my newfound inspiration, I created an opportunity for a counterattack. My counter was executed perfectly and sent me on my longest attack yet. I saw the confidence in my uncle's eyes fade slightly. His mischievous smile shifted into a puckered opening in his lips to control his short, quick breaths as he analyzed my technique.

I kept my technique simple by using textbook cuts and stabs with a master-cut when the opportunity presented itself, but I used my moves in an experimental way that surprised me. Even better, it surprised my uncle.

After a long series of many cuts, I was able to force my uncle to expose his chest with a wrath-cut. I quickly thrust my blade at his open chest, but somehow he was able to displace my move. I mutated my thrust into a cut and landed the point of my blade on his right shoulder. I dragged my blade across his flesh for about an inch and a half and quickly pulled back to acknowledge my point. I had drawn blood — and first blood at that. That was a victory in itself.

Friedrich took no time to acknowledge his wound or my point. He quickly attacked. His attack was controlled, yet mad. Each move was deliberate, but there was some sort of chaos to it.

His attack progressed with the difficulty of the technique. It was something I had never seen before and combinations I had never imagined putting together. Then, suddenly, he broke into an unprecedented series of the five master cuts. He began with a wrath-cut, followed by a crooked-cut, which I barely defended. He followed that with a squinting-cut, to a horizontal-cut. The horizontal-cut caught me just below my left shoulder and was

quickly followed by a part-cut that sliced me across the side of my neck.

Friedrich pulled his sword back with a proud smile on his face as he observed my wounds — or rather — his points. The cut below my left shoulder was about two inches across and had barely broken the skin, showing very little blood. The cut on the side of my neck was about an inch across and was bleeding quite a bit. It was far away from the artery and not deep. I don't know why it bled so much.

Friedrich took out his handkerchief and handed it to me. I held it to my neck and winced as I put pressure on it.

"Two to one, my favor. Shall we continue?" Friedrich asked breathlessly.

"If I could lift my sword, I would gladly continue, but I'm afraid you have me beaten."

After pausing to address my wounds, I realized how tired my arms were as they throbbed at my sides. I could barely find the strength to hold the handkerchief to my neck.

"I'm glad you said that. I can't make another stroke." Friedrich looked at the clock. "I do not know what time we started, but we could not have dueled less than a quarter of a hour without stopping."

"It felt like an eternity," I complained.

"Let me look at your neck." Friedrich moved my hand away from my wound. "It's just a scratch, something to remember me by, to remind you how sloppy you will get when you tire. It will teach you to end your fights quickly."

"You did not win because I was sloppy. You bested me, Uncle. I've never seen you fight like that before."

"Likewise, my boy. I may have bested you in the end, but you bested me a few times in the middle. But most of all, you bested yourself. Congratulations, Konrad."

"Thank you, Uncle. And congratulations yourself."

Friedrich laughed and shook my hand firmly. He took my

saber, sheathing it along with his own saber, and then he walked back to the sword case and placed my saber inside. He started to put his saber in also, but stopped. He stared at it for a moment. He smiled, took it out of its scabbard, and walked over to me.

He stopped before me but did not look up from his saber. He studied every inch of it from pommel to tip.

“I’ve had this sword for thirty years. My father had it made special and gave it to me when I joined the Lutzow Free Corps to fight Napoleon’s army. It is the greatest gift he has ever given me. You see the engraving here at the bottom of the blade? *Justicia Per Deum. Verum Per Animum. Officium Per Pectus pectoris.*”

“Justice by God. Truth by will. Duty by heart,” I repeated.

“Yes, and do you understand what it means?”

“Yes, I think so. What does it mean to you?”

Friedrich chuckled. “To me, it means to leave justice in the hands of God. Do not let the injustices of the people around you irritate your mood and fill you with anger. It means that you will find truth in your life by your strength and determination to seek it. And, finally, it means that your duty to man and to yourself comes from what your heart tells you is right. No man can know another man’s duty. Do you understand this?”

I nodded.

“Good. It is yours now.”

Friedrich held the saber out to me. It was lying across his open palms, glistening in the candlelight. The Latin engraving flashed in my eyes.

“I can’t. I couldn’t possibly...” I did not know what to say.

“You can, and you will. It is a parting gift.”

“But—”

“My father gave me this sword as a gift before I left on the greatest journey of my life. He promised that it would guide my way. Now, I give it to you as you embark upon your greatest journey. It will guide you as it has guided me.”

I slowly took the sword from him and held it before my

face. I eyed it up and down in awe. It felt so light and so natural in my hands. It was a perfect sword. I had never seen such craftsmanship.

“Uncle, my journey is on a boat from Britain to America. It hardly calls for such a gift.”

“So, you plan to go home to New York and get a job, do you? Work with all of those rich friends of yours, hmm? No, I think not. You will not sit still for long. There is great adventure in America, and I know that you will seek it. I am giving you this sword for a reason. It belongs with an adventurer. Those days are over for me, but yours are just beginning. I know you will not disappoint me.”

I was struck dumb by his words, my mouth agape like a young boy who had just seen his first naked woman. I could not force any words to take form. I had not made plans upon returning home to New York and had no idea what I would do. As the day of my leaving approached, I felt that I had progressively been losing my mind while trying to figure out what in God’s name I was going to do when I returned home.

My uncle’s words had not made things more clear but only more confusing. He could see that he had made my mind race. He chuckled as he looked into my glazed eyes.

“Do not think so hard right now. You have a long boat ride ahead of you. For now, you must pack your things. We leave at sunup.”

“Thank you for the sword, Uncle.”

Friedrich smiled and bowed. I turned and went to my room to pack, all too aware of the fact that I had just received my final lesson from Uncle Friedrich.