

Duel on a Rainy Bridge

A chorus of clangs rang through the late eve, singing from the centre of that famous drawbridge in the town just north of Boralus and played to the rhythm of raindrops. Each drop was counted, one-two-three, strike, parry, one-two-three. The two artists wove a melody that drew crowds on both sides to listen; and to watch.

One singer stopped to catch their breath, and redoubled ever louder. He lunged forth, blade thrust out while his opponent flicked it away. He swung again, a vertical slice, and yet it was swept aside. He hammered downwards, and she caught it and redirected.

So it went in their duet. For every strike, a response.
But that rhythm grew tiring.

In the middle of his next attack, as he drew his sword back, she flipped and caught hers to drive the pommel into his chest. Winded, he caught himself. She has barely broken a sweat. "When you fight, you need to think two steps ahead. Always prepare for your blow to be deflected, but force them to deflect in a way that will leave them open for your next strike. Make me parry your sword aside to the left, then come at me from the right." He shook his head. "You're wasting your time on me. I'm sorry, maybe I should go home." She put a hand on his shoulder and gave a warm smile. "You came to me with a dream. That is worth fighting for. Isn't it, Reiner?" She chuckled and glanced aside to the people who had gathered. "Besides. We've got company. Shall we give them a good show?" Her words filled him with resolve, and he took up his blade once more. "Thank you, Alaina. Let's do this."

They returned to their positions, hair sodden, armour gleaming in the sunset that fell over the mountains across the bay.

Reiner drew his sword up in high guard, but shifted through side and longpoint too and readjusted his grip many times and took a deep breath.

Alaina took her beloved ox stance, and held it resolutely.

And then, they danced.

Flashes of steel carved through the night, whirling like pinwheels. The shapes of their blades smeared into long fans as they crashed and bounced off one another. Reiner first struggled on the backfoot, but soon found his tempo. Alaina was dramatic, and despite her size, elegant. She flurried and flourished, pirouetted just to show she could. Their boots splashed in the puddles of rain underneath them back and forth, side to side, frenetic and fast and energetic. Reiner parried Alaina as she swung, and she used the momentum to turn on her toes and twist into a kick that knocked him aside. She let him recover, and faced the crowds as they cheered in glee.

Through the crowd, though, Alaina spotted a face.

She was an old woman wearing a foppish sort of garb with an embroidered cravat and a long felt hat with an arcing upturned brim that almost covered her face like a veil.

"I must have suspected she would turn up here of all places." Alaina said to herself
"Very well. See who I am without you."

A thrust shot out of the dark, deafened by the rain and hidden by darkness which Alaina barely managed to dodge back underneath for.

Reiner stammered, and planted his feet. "Sorry! I thought you were still fighting."

Alaina held her blade up over her eye and then pointed it out. "I am. Let's go!"

Their battle was thrilling to those watching, dangerous and playful. They saw how Alaina used the environment, ducking under the ropes of the drawbridge, climbing atop them to battle Reiner from above, swinging down to dodge a strike and yet never losing her footing. Reiner too had begun to feel his own tension, his own battle-blood boiling. A fast study, this boy from Stormsong had never had formal training but his willpower was what counted. Alaina felt every swing sharper than the last, more focused, he was finding his clarity in the midst of this duel and it was exhilarating. This is what she fought for; to be among the great next generation, to be part and not to rise but to raise with her the warriors who would save the world and carve their names into its fabric. To make a difference.

Alaina found herself, in the middle of Reiner's next blow, glancing over.

Despite his growing power she had no particular fear she could not deflect it.

But it was almost by instinct she looked over and saw the old woman's unflinching, unfeeling stare.

"Why, still, do I find myself seeking your approval?"

Why, after all this time?

I have travelled the length and breadth of the world,

I have befriended dragons and battled kings,

I brought low foes from the beyond,

And when to both Hells I came to,

I was not thrust into them.

I leaped.

So why should your opinion matter to me still?"

Reiner's strike was just about to land, and Alaina blocked it at the last minute. Their blades were locked together by the friction, but neither of them wrestled like thugs. There was a dirty, brutal side to swordsmanship neither of them entertained. This was a spar dressed up in gold curtains, as was Alaina's condition. They saw no need to despoil it.

Alaina twisted her blade and used her forked guard to find purchase on Reiner's ratty old longsword and twisted it out of his grip before tossing it back to him.

"You seem distracted." He said. "I really appreciate this... so if you're busy I can come back another time?"

Alaina had started to become a little frustrated. Could she not just immerse herself in this?

She slicked her hair back and raised her sword with both hands into hanging-right.

"One more round."

The feeling in the air had changed, and become intense. This battle was no longer one of enjoyment, no matter how much either of them wanted it to be. It was serious.

The crowds frenzied as they felt the heat rise, as local tradesmen and dockhands who should have been working stumbled in and pushed forwards to see. One, carrying a pot of

oil off the ferries, dropped and spilled it across the bridge and quickly swept away the shards. Surely he could write that off as lost-in-transport.

Reiner fought back with all his strength, and yet even he had begun to wane. His limits had already been thrice-broken in this battle and his body began to fail, pushed to its breaking point. Alaina flicked her hair back as she tried to keep the rain from her eyes and met his blade, curled hers around his, drove her shoulder into his chest as he gasped for air. Reiner struggled to return the blow at her, but as she retreated her boot met the oil slick created at the arena's end and slipped. She flipped, landing with a heavy thud on her back.

*"As I meet the ground, why do I turn my head to look for her?
Why am I so obsessed?"*

The Old Lady from Bridgeport turned her head, emotionless, ever disappointed. She walked away and did not stay to watch.

"Why is it no matter what I do, no matter how hard I fight, you can NEVER see me?"

Reiner held his sword down to point it at Alaina, a pose of victory. But she lashed out. She drew her sword and like a flash of thunder, a wrathful dragon, she rained three thunderous blows upon his sword and beat the third in with ferocity in the centre to turn his whole blade to dust.

Alaina didn't mind the crowds as they dispersed, whether they cheered or booed. She ran to catch Reiner.

"I am so sorry. I should not have... you won, you did win. You did so well. It was an excellent fight, thank you for..."

He smiled faintly as he turned. "Yeah. It was great." But his face was dour, his voice weak as he looked at the empty handle of his sword. "I should go."

"Let me find you a new one at least." Alaina said. "Get you one forged from a master dwarven smith."

"It's alright." Reiner said. "I think I'm done."

Alaina felt that hollowing harrowness in her chest.

She glanced one last time where she stood in the crowd, and sat with her legs dangling off the bridge and let the rain consume her.

"Why, after all this time, has nothing changed at all?"