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THE MAGICIANS' DUEL

By Victor J. Wasserman

It seems so long ago I dreamed of the magicians' duel. I was in a room that was, in every sense, the kind of place I thought of when I heard the word "chamber". With me were two figures, an old man, and a boy not much older than me. It seemed the three of us were somehow acquainted and the old man was very polite to me, smiling the wide, tight-lipped grin he always gave me and squinting his eyes as he leaned on his tall staff.

He called me by my pet name, which I only have in dreams and can never remember, and I called him Jo-jo, because it was impolite to say his name in front of other people. Jo-jo said that the boy had challenged him to a test, and the boy rolled his eyes and gave me a nasty look. He was dressed kind of funny, like Prince Valiant with a red suit and blonde bowl cut hair, but he stood so straight and looked so angry I didn't want to make eye contact, so instead I looked at Jo-jo.

It was then I remembered that Jo-jo was a wizard. After I remembered it was very obvious; he was dressed how I'd expect a wizard to dress, though he never wore that silly pointed hat because it made him feel stupid and at one of our tea parties he had told me he could never keep it straight and it would constantly flop over and get in his face. The boy was Jo-jo's apprentice and the two of them were going to have a duel, and Jo-jo had invited me to be the referee.

The wizard asked his apprentice if that seemed fair, and for an awkward moment, the boy glared really hard at me, sizing me up and I blushed and had to cover my face. But then he twitched his nose and that seemed to mean he was fine with it. So then Jo-jo told me to get comfortable and so I found a chair and brought it over so I could sit about halfway between them. The student reached into a bag he had tied around his belt that looked sort of like a limp fanny pack that I always saw Robin Hood had and he would keep money in it, so I was surprised when the boy pulled

out a wand that looked like it shouldn't have been able to fit. It didn't look like a wand, but it had to be a wand because what else could it be and he held it like it was the most important thing in the room and that was true.

Jo-jo had once told me, I suddenly remembered, that a wand is the most powerful thing in the world. It's more magical than any fairy and more powerful than any wizard. No wizard, not even Jo-jo, can be more powerful than the wand he uses, so it made sense that the apprentice was so careful. But he seemed awfully rude. Sure, he probably knew as much as me or even more about how strong wands are, but he didn't treat Jo-jo like that at all. He seemed to be laughing as he held it in his hands, wetting his lips just slightly, like he was hungry for a fight, like he was about to do something really bad and was excited about it. I didn't like him but I knew I had to be fair because I was going to be the judge.

But Jo-jo didn't get out a wand. He didn't even seem to be getting ready. He just leaned on his staff, looking sort of sad and distant, maybe just sleepy or maybe his wrinkled face didn't show what he was thinking anymore. I remembered having that thought before, when I had thought about why everyone thought he was so smart, and why everyone wanted his advice. I remembered thinking that's why the king sent his son to learn from Jo-jo about being smart. I remembered that was who the apprentice was.

But Jo-jo didn't move much. He just kept leaning, glancing halfheartedly at the boy across the room and once or twice looking in my direction, but never really at me, and that made me sad because I thought we were friends. This went on for what seemed like a really long time, because in dreams everything goes fast so that you're never bored but this was boring because nothing was happening and nothing happened even after I waited. Finally Jo-jo straightened up a bit, and he tapped his staff on

the floor and it made a lot of noise and got my attention as well as the prince's. Then they were ready to start.

The Duel

The old man's getting tired of reliving old memories. Even if they aren't real memories. Even if they are all just lies he's feeding to this girl, if she really exists. Fake memories of a past, of a relationship, of a dream and a life within the dream that hasn't happened and never will. An empty dream with nothing but happy thoughts. What a crock.

Even if the girl is real, even if she's from someplace I don't know about, some place that hasn't been unmade yet, it doesn't matter. Once he's inside her head, it's really just his dream. He says it makes people happy, that peace makes them peaceful, that happy thoughts make lives good, somehow worth living. Empty dreams in empty heads. Heads that can't support a crown. Better to have an empty thrown.

And now we do. Now there's no king, we have no despotic ruler, no tyrant, and that's what he wanted. Now there are no people, we don't need to placate them with happy thoughts, make them dream of a life without mud and shit in their teeth, and that's what he wanted. Now there's no land, we have no invaders, no turmoil, no fear of being pillaged, and that's what he wanted. I've made my master's wishes come true. I brought a lasting peace. And I did it without lies.

I can get into heads too. I saw each one of them; saw them dreaming his dream, each as blind to the world as the old man himself. I've seen the perfect world that doesn't exist, that I've never believed in and then I showed them what I was going to bring. I showed them a real peace, the peace that would follow when I had sent everything away. When sound is banished, you can't hear a scream, so it was quiet. When emotions are quartered in the oblivion, all the world is tranquil. When people have no bodies, pain stops. I made this happen, and each of them understood it before they became a part of my eternal peace. Unity through abolition, oneness out of nothing, the only eternal choice, the only honest choice.

Now there is just us, just this semblance of a room and that shadow of a girl, perhaps the shadow world she comes from, but no, I'm too close to being able to rest to weigh that chance, to risk playing his game if she is an illusion. This wand is strong enough to unmake reality; I don't need anything more to kill him.

My mentor taps his staff, my mentor calls for attention. My former master accepts my challenge. He explains in that friendly manner by which he enslaved my world that the contest is between wizards, and as such, subject to different rules. The wizards play a game, chosen by a spectator. The spectator then acts as the judge, responsible for announcing the end of the duel. The referee has no other duties. The duel ends when a magician falls.

My master and I turn to our spectator. The girl is tiny, young, misplaced from her bed in the dead of night. As I stare at her, I hate her. I hate her for not understanding how vital she is. I hate her because she will never fully grasp that there is nothing beyond these walls. I hate her because she is the last living thing left and she may not even be real. I hate her because she is a trick, I hate her because she thinks she loves the old man, I hate her because when I've finished with him I will have to deal with her and when I go to peace, her fear will be the last trouble I know. And yet still, she does not speak!

The Game

I knew they were waiting and it was tough to think on the spot. Jo-jo had asked for a challenge, not a fight but a contest, something difficult. But what's difficult?

I could have thought of a bunch of difficult things, tasks that were challenging for me at the time. Learn all the words to the national anthem; pull all the weeds in the garden. But then there were things that were too hard for me to do too, like when I had to flush Philip because he died and mom said it was part of growing up, but I couldn't because he was my friend and I didn't want to do that to him, even though I knew he was dead, so dad had to do it and he wasn't happy about it.

But that wouldn't be very fair. One of them would probably be able to do it already. It had to be challenging now, so it had to be something new. But I couldn't think of something new that didn't seem silly, and I felt like I did whenever we played truth or dare and I could never come up with anything on the spot. I was stuck. I couldn't think of anything.

I apologized. I said I was sorry and that I wanted to go home and the prince sneered at me and I wanted to cry. But Jo-jo smile and calmed me down. He said it didn't have to be something strange. Or something magic. Wizards, he said, can do all of that on their own and what he and his apprentice wanted was something neither of them would have come up with. He asked me, what was I better at than anyone else I knew?

So I thought, and I thought about flushing Philip because I was still sad, and I thought about how Dad had been angry that I couldn't handle the responsibility. He made me want to cry and so I ran and hid in the woods behind the house for what seemed like a really long time until I was less angry and sad and more scared because I was getting cold and it was dark, so I went home. And my dad said he had been wondering where I was and I told him I had been hiding in the woods and wanted to know why he had not tried to find me. And he said, I was so good at hiding that he didn't even know I was hiding and so he didn't know he was suppose to look for me. So he kissed me on the forehead and said he was sorry he made me want to hide in the woods. And he asked me to tell him next time so he would know to count to one hundred and come find me. So I told Jo-jo, hiding.

The Prince's Turn

I do not need to ambush you to best you in a fight. I do not need to hide from you to survive your attacks. My honor is not so flimsy as to need protection from challenge, my courage not so soft that it shies from a test.

I've come too far to fear you and there is nothing left to fear; I've made ruin of all other obstacles and have done so plainly and without deceit. If this is another of your tricks, then you should cower from my wrath, but willing it is a fair challenge, I hide myself in the last place that is.

At the far end of my father's realm, there is another. Beyond that region is a third and a week's journey from there is my uncle's land. All of that no longer exists. Stretching out from that point, which is no more, were three more lengths of the distance between my father's throne and his brother's. Those four lengths, redoubled and that whole expanse laid down once more past its own tip, stretch to the last point I know of. Beyond there, an imperfect nothingness, populated sparsely in the most conservative sense, reaches out for an unknowable time before it abruptly ceases. Beyond there is nothing. It would be months to reach the beginning of that nothingness. Lifetimes to cross it. But at that final end, there is an indestructible boundary, which marks by its existence the true nothingness beyond. This boundary is like the space between the air and water. It is a surface, composed of nothing but the shift from substance to absence. It cannot be crossed nor can it be seen through. I hide behind that.

The Wizard's Turn

There is a place, and it's not where you're thinking of. It's not a lofty tower rising over a windswept plain, built stone by stone with the raw strength of its barbarian masons. Each stone carved from mountains long crumbled to dust, the tower a mausoleum in memory of what no one recalls. Nor is it a fortress deep below your feet, perched on a black rock of pitch and ash and obsidian, all around it over come with a lake of fire and liquid stone that splashes and burns with a single wave. Windowless, entryless, no one comes, goes or knows of this prison any longer. Warden and flock are but dust in the stagnant air which chokes within and burns without. No, not there either. Nor will you see it if you turn your face to the sun, in search of that speck you know must be there, the minor eclipse which crowds the light so it cannot be seen: you are thinking of that floating isle where only flightless things live, creatures that could never be there yet are the only ones living at that great height in that lost land. There, flowers grow, ants crawl and horses run, but that place knows no nest or tree and nothing stands higher than a stump. No, not even there. The place I mean is nowhere you can see so easily, reach so easily. The place I choose to hide is in a speck on the small of your back, so close you'd never search it, so far you could never glance with even a fingertip, hidden so as only a friend could seek me in your stead, and of

those, I am the last.

The Waking

I remember thinking how strange it was to wake up in my bed that morning. I remember my pillow being wet, as though I had been crying the whole night. I felt exhausted, as though I hadn't slept at all but tossed endlessly, though really my bed looked as though I had hardly been there. I looked out my bedroom window and saw there was still light shining in. The prince hadn't unmade this world too while I was asleep.

I remembered feeling so sad as I watched the magicians duel. I remembered the illustrations the prince conjured, the fierceness with which he mapped his voyage to the furthest point, biting at the words he spoke as though he was loath to surrender his secrets, but even more afraid to seem a coward for playing my silly game.

I felt the exhaustion of his trip as though I had taken every step myself, and he too was choking for breath by the end. It's hard to express how sad he was. He knew this place he wanted to hide in as though he'd been there every day of his life. As though it was where he looked forward to going some day, the place he wanted to retire to, the place he dreamed of at night. Something about it was special, secretive, his every action was in pursuit of something like this place, and it was killing him to have to relive it in front of me and the wizard.

The wizard. Dreams are funny things. I don't know what the wizard said. I don't know where he chose to hide. I know I heard him say something. I know he gave a reason for his choice and I know I felt moved by it, like I did when I heard the prince speak, but I know what I remember isn't what he really said, just like how I know I didn't really call him Jo-jo. I called him something, but that part my mind filled in after. Wherever the wizard chose to hide, I'll never be able to know for certain, but the prince heard the real answer and when the magicians had both taken their turns, only the wizard was left standing.

The prince had fallen to his knees, tears pouring from his eyes. The duel was over and I announced this to the room. One of the players had fallen.

What followed was a conversation I was too young to understand, so I can't trust myself to say I didn't fill much of it in over the years with my own ideas. I don't know the circumstances of the duel, I don't know what was at stake, but as the wizard helped the prince to his feet, he said something that I know I did not make up. In that pleasant voice of his, the wizard, holding the prince's wand between his fingers as if it were any old stick he had found, said "There's no harm in wanting to destroy the world every now and then, I've done it a couple of times. The trouble with the world is that it keeps coming back." And this, for me, has always been true. I still dream about the prince.