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The Duelist

Eli spat on the ground and adjusted his stance. As he peered over to the saloon, he saw the patrons gathering around in front of it to witness the spectacle. Some of the folks milling about looked annoyed, most likely because the standoff in the middle of town was interrupting their game of cards. Either that or the man who was cooking their meals and serving their drinks was fifty feet in front of Eli ready to shoot him dead instead of tending to the stove.

Eli observed as Tuco threw his cigarette into the dirt, stomping it out with a malicious yet calculated intent. He then adjusted the bandana around his neck, leaned back with one boot forward, and hovered his hand over the holster. “You need a count, *pendejo*?”

“Yessir, I do indeed.” Eli could feel his gloves start to become damp with sweat. He winced from the unholy smolder of the Arizona sun beating down upon him. The sign above the saloon read “Tuco’s Infamous Cantina” and was swaying in the wind, making an awful creaking noise. The humidity intensified the aromas from the nearby butcher, who was most likely unaware of the bloodbath that was about to take place right outside his door. The dust kicking up in erratic patterns beneath Tuco and Eli’s feet was making it incredibly hard to see. He could hear the jingle of a familiar song dancing along the ivory keys of the piano from inside the saloon, as well as the cackling from the vultures that were perched on the nearby hitching posts. The wind carried whispers from the concerned spectators across town. As they started to grow louder, an angelic voice echoed out amongst them. “Ready?”

Eli felt his saliva dry up, leaving nothing but a coarse metallic feeling in his mouth. His hand shook as he unbuckled his holster, revealing his iron. When Eli was thirteen, his mother gave him his first real means of self defense. It was a small combat knife with a brown hilt that attached to his bootstrap. On his sixteenth, he inherited his father's sidearm, a Colt Peacemaker with a pearl grip and a lily engraved on the side. It would be a lie to say that it was seldom used prior to Eli's affairs with Tuco. "Set?" The voice chimed.

Tuco's posture was smooth like the back of a rattlesnake. His skin was like sand, contrasting a beard that was well kempt and smooth behind his rugged bandana. His eyes seemed to burn into the soul of Eli. It would seem that time was suspended until further notice. All Eli could do was breathe and wait. For a moment, Eli drifted into a daydream. *Would he be proud of me*, Eli thought, *even if I didn't win?* But before he knew it, the moment was gone. "Draw!"

Eli opened his eyes. A woman pushed past those that were frozen on the porch and ran into the middle of the road. Eli stared down the ironsights of his Peacemaker to see the woman rush to Tuco, who was laying on his side in the dirt. The woman dropped to her knees and raised Tuco's head up from the ground. His hand caressed her face as he revealed a smile smeared in blood. She shook her head violently as tears streamed down her cheeks, denying whatever Tuco was saying to her. The red pool that was forming beneath him started to migrate towards the rims of her dress. As it soaked in, Tuco managed to lean his head up for one last kiss, and then fell limp. The undertakers on standby approached him. They were met with resistance from the woman, clinging to what's left of the man. An older lady from the parlor made her way to the

widow and started to pull her back inside, letting the woman cry into her arms. The undertakers took a leg each, dragging him away from the scene.

Eli holstered his revolver and looked down at himself. He was unharmed; Tuco had missed him altogether. As the crowd solemnly shuffled back inside the bar, Eli noticed a man perched on a nearby whisky barrel serving him a keen glare. He was an older gentleman, with a thick white mustache that extended past the corners of his lips and hung below his chin. His hat was round and had a feather sticking out the top. Although his outfit was that of higher quality, it was wrinkled and worn, as if it was the only thing he owned.

Eli had a knack for weaponry, and could usually read a man solely by what their choice of sidearm was. This man was a hard read. At his side was a bulky revolver. He could tell by how it seemed to weigh down his belt. Some parts of the gun were different from the rest, with the barrel being a dark silver and the cylinder being a refined bronze. The man seemed to have put together the Frankenstein's Monster of revolvers, taking individual parts from different weapons and forming a custom sidearm. With a piece like that at someone's side, Eli could tell this man was not here to chat with him.

As Eli started walking away from the scene towards where he hitched his horse, he could hear the jangle of spurs following behind him. He kept his head down and picked up his pace as he dipped into a side alley. When he looked back up to see where he was heading, his heart sank as he stared dead ahead into a brick wall. "Are you in a hurry to get out of here, partner?" The jangle asked.

Eli turned around to meet the gaze of the beady eyed man, but was instead welcomed with a weighted punch to the side of his face. He staggered back into the wall as the man pushed

up against him, his elbow bracing into Eli's chest. The man reared back to deliver another swift punch, only this time it was lodged into Eli's gut. Eli dropped to one knee from the impact only to be pulled back up to his feet. "Do you want to explain to me why a kid like you would just stroll into town," the man said, trying to catch his breath, "*my* town, challenge a man like the infamous Tuco Alvarez to a duel, kill him in front of his own wife, and then think they can just walk away?"

"If you're his uncle or something and you want revenge, just kill me. Get it over with," Eli spat back. The man tossed his hat and grunted as he pulled Eli off the wall, throwing him face-first into a pile of bottle crates. They shattered as Eli felt his face ripple with splinters and bits of glass. He rolled over onto his back, the warmth of blood covering his eyes and his cheeks.

Eli gently felt over his face, picking out pieces of bottle and wood from it. As his vision cleared, he noticed he was looking directly up into the barrel of a gun. "You're going to start answering some questions, boy," the man said. "Why the hell are you drawing arms with townfolk?"

"It ain't against the law, mister." Eli said. "I had a bone of contention with that man."

The man cocked the revolver. "So did I, but that ain't a good answer."

"I reckon I'm not getting out alive? Even if I did answer to what you want to hear, aren't I just going to end up like Tuco?"

"You talk, you walk, boy." The man's sweat was dripping off his nose, directly onto Eli's forehead. But the man didn't move to wipe it, nor did he flinch. He was a statue over Eli, the revolver aimed down into his skull. Eli sighed and took a moment to compose himself.

"I'm from Graybluff. You know it?" Eli asked.

“Passed through the place once, I’m familiar.”

“I’m looking for Jack Rivera.” The man didn’t answer. His expression was cold, but his eyes were running across Eli’s face.

“Mr. Rivera and Tuco Alvarez took part in the events that led to my father’s death eleven years ago; I’ve been looking for them across the tri-county for the past year. I hadn’t been able to find Tuco until now, and I hear his partner Mr. Rivera is somewhere around these parts as well.” The man’s expression relaxed and his eyes widened.

“Willie Marsh. ‘The Graybluff Guardian’. You his boy?”

“Yessir, Eli Marsh.” The man moved his thumb forward to push the hammer of the revolver up. He strapped it back in his holster and took some steps away. His face was white like a cotton patch. The man pulled his arm back to feel for the brick wall and rested up against it.

“Christ, boy. Had I known... Hell, I should’ve known,” The man pointed to Eli’s holster. “That Peacemaker...” Eli sat up and used the sleeves of his shirt to wipe off the blood that was left on his face. He unsheathed the gun and placed it on his lap, holding it with delicacy.

“Lily,” Eli said in a solemn tone. He felt over the engraving. Although the pistol’s polish was refined, the weapon was older and didn’t shine like it used to. “It was my father’s. I remember him going out one day and he never came back. I remember Mother crying, too, but that’s about it. All I know was that he was killed by those two men. He deserves to be avenged.” Eli put the gun back into its holster. “When Mother thought I was old enough, she gave it to me. I think Mother always knew what I was going to do with it, but she accepted it. She passed a couple months later. Mother had been sick for a while, but I thought she’d hold on a little longer...”

Eli looked up at the man. His eyes were blue like the ocean. Eli had never been to the ocean, but he's seen paintings and pictures in certain books and on walls in Graybluff; lighthouses, coasts, waves. The sea was comforting to Eli. Someday, Eli would like to visit an ocean. Maybe once this was all over, he could hop on a caravan that was heading South towards the border, or even West towards the golden shores. He felt his eyes start to water.

"My condolences," the man said. "And I'm terribly sorry about this misunderstanding. I feared for my town; I wasn't keen on a stranger coming in and dueling, it's typically peaceful around here. But I must say, your father was a hero."

Eli wiped his tears. "You knew him?"

The man rubbed his knuckles and averted his gaze. "I was a dueling enthusiast when I was younger. Rarely did I partake, but I loved to watch. It's a fascinating sport. Hell, its art. Like a painter to its brush, a duelist to its gun." The man's lips pursed into a smile. "Your father was the greatest duelist in the state."

"What's your name?" Eli asked.

"Butch McCarthy," said Butch, scooping up his hat and placing it back on his gray hair.

"So you followed my father's career?" Eli asked. Butch stepped over and held out a boney hand. Eli gripped it and stood up. He made sure his bootstraps were tight and the fall didn't knock his knife loose. After that, he followed Butch down the alleyway.

"I did. Everyone did. It started with cocky outlaws; those who wanted to steal or pick petty fights with those in Graybluff. He was a protector of the people." As the men walked out of the alley, the town bustled once again. A stagecoach cruised past them, carrying tourists from out of town looking to buy and trade various knick-knacks and trinkets. The vultures loitered around

the now dry pool of blood where Tuco was lying, who were unfazed by the stagecoach until the driver nonchalantly shot his scattergun into the air, in which case they mosied off into the sky.

“When the bodies started to pile up, your father eventually took up a career in the dueling business, taking bets from spectators and sponsorships from the local gunsmiths.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about this before?” Eli inquired. Butch turned and placed a hand on Eli’s shoulder with a wide grin.

“Because,” he said. “You have never met anyone who knows the game like I do.” Butch patted Eli’s back and continued on.

“So what happened,” asked Eli. “How did Jack and Tuco defeat my father?”

“They didn’t, it was a set-up,” Butch noted, dodging a woman shooing a dog off her porch. “Jack and Tuco were both notorious duelers across the tri-county, but they were never renowned like your father. I reckon they were fed up with being in second. Tuco challenged your father to a duel to end all duels over in the town of Harper.”

By then it was evening, and the shops were closing up for the day. Eli and Butch continued down the main road of town and veered off towards the outskirts of town. As they walked, they found a bench that overlooked the chaparral and took a seat. Butch took off his hat and sighed. He continued, “When your father made it to Harper, Tuco was standing in the middle of the street. He laid out two pistols in front of your father, both flintlocks. He suggested that since this was a true test of skill, they must both be on an even playing field.”

“So what happened?” Eli pressed.

“I’m getting to it, boy,” said Butch, pulling out a flask and taking a quick sip from it. “Anyways, your father and Tuco each took their steps from one another. They turned, made a

count, and fired. Your father fell, the crowd gasped, and Tuco was recognized as the killer of the Graybluff Guardian. After that, he retired from dueling and settled down. Opened that saloon over yonder and laid low.”

“I don’t understand, where was Jack in all of this? I heard he was his partner,” Eli asked. Butch placed the flask back into his coat, giving it a little pat. He stared out into the vista, the golden halo of the sun hovering over the horizon, birds chirping and moving from tree to tree in the far distance. The scene made Eli think about the ocean again.

“That’s the catch, your father wasn’t killed by Tuco,” Butch corrected. “Both of those pistols were fakes. Neither pistol could kill a man, I reckon, but it came with all the flash and bang. Jack was hiding in the back of a parked stagecoach behind Tuco along the road. He was under the covers and out of sight from the crowd. I saw smoke coming out of that stagecoach when those guns went off. I’m sure he’s the one that shot your father, and nobody knew any better,” said Butch, turning to Eli. “The crowds were so distracted by the downfall of the Graybluff Guardian that they didn’t catch it, but I did.” He pinned his thumb to his chest. His eyes were cold like the arctic, but his voice was filled with a burning passion. “I couldn’t do anything about it either, kid. They were scum for killing your father like that and getting away with it. It was unjust, but calling them out in a duel, I... I just couldn’t do it.” Butch’s face drained, like he was carrying the world’s greatest burden on his shoulders. He didn’t continue, but instead returned to looking at the sunset.

Eli looked at the man sitting next to him, then his revolver. When Eli first saw Butch, he couldn’t read him. But in that instant, it clicked.

“I understand,” Eli comforted. “But there’s no need to spend your life in guilt, mister. There’s nothing you could have done about it. I don’t blame you for not calling them out.”

Butch took a long swig out of his flask. “No matter the outcome, both parties that partake in a duel are honorable. They had the courage to face each other in a life or death situation. I love the game, but I don’t have that.” Butch poked his finger into the chest of Eli. “You got your father’s courage. You have what it takes to be a protector of the people.”

Eli looked down and shuffled the dirt beneath his feet. “I don’t want that duty. I’m here for Rivera, and then I’m leaving Arizona. Going as far out as I can.”

Butch nodded and pointed out over the chaparral. “If you really want to go after Jack, he’s been holed up in a shack a couple miles north of here. I reckon he’s been moving around, only been there for a day or two. Overheard some trappers talking about it. Once you cross over that hill, its right smack in the middle of the woodlands.”

Before Eli could turn to leave, the man grabbed his arm. “Wait,” warned Butch. “Jack Rivera may have been a cheat to your father, but he’s one of the deadliest sharpshooters in the tri-county. Not many men walk away from a duel with him. I’d hate you to inherit the same fate.”

Eli didn’t say anything. He simply nodded and walked towards where he left his horse.

Eli approached the shack and pulled his horse to a stop. Although the area was forested, there was still no escape from the harsh heat of the sun. The shack was made of a combination of wood and various metals. Despite its wobbly appearance, the wood seemed taken care of and the metal new. There was a horse out front tied to a post, and Eli could see smoke coming out of a

thin pipe through the roof. Eli stepped down from his saddle and approached the door. It was painted an opaque red with golden swirls. Upon closer inspection, Eli concluded that Jack had ripped off a portion of a Wells Fargo wagon for his home decor. Eli knocked on one of the swirls.

The door swung open to reveal a man with bright blonde hair wearing long johns and suspenders. His face was split down the middle, one side with rugged stubble and the other with a smooth shine. Eli presumed he was interrupting his morning routine. "May I help you?" Jack asked. His tone inferred he was not expecting visitors.

"Jack Rivera?" Eli queried.

"Yessir," Jack responded. From the doorway, Eli could see the inside of his house. It was tidy. There was a mug with steam rising from it on the table in the center of the house. Eli thought he was dreaming. Here was the man he'd been searching for, the man who killed his father in cold blood, standing in a doorway right in front of him. Just doing his morning shave and getting dressed for the day while enjoying a cup of joe. He wanted to shoot him dead.

"Do you know who I am?" Jack looked Eli up and down and shook his head.

"No sir, I do not."

"My name is Eli Marsh. My father is Willie Marsh, the Graybluff Guardian." Jack's expression shifted.

"Is that so?" Jack inquired. "I suppose we have a lot to talk about. Come on in." Jack waved Eli into his home and walked deeper into the shack, but Eli did not move.

"I'm done talking, Jack. I'm done riding around the tri-county. You know damn well why I'm here, and it's not to make chit-chat. I'm here to call you out, Jack Rivera." Jack turned around with a stern look on his face.

“You want me to do you in like I did to your daddy all those years ago?” Jack nodded in approval, taking a sip of his coffee. “So be it. Wait out there.”

Eli sat with his thoughts out by his horse. Beating Tuco was luck of the draw for Eli, but Jack was supposedly a dead-eye. He didn't come all this way to die out here, however. He came to do his father proud.

While Eli was thinking, he heard the heavy click of boots on wood. He looked at the red Wells Fargo door to see Jack come out of his shack. He was still wearing his long johns and suspenders, but he was fully shaved and his hair was slicked back. He had put on a white cotton shirt and a bandana, one similar to Tuco's. His boots were made of cracked leather, the kind that have been out in the sun too long.

Eli noticed his bandolier, it was black leather and strapped with odd metal bars. When Eli looked at Jack's waist, he froze. On it was a gun he's never seen before. It didn't look like it was a revolver, it had no cylinder or hammer. It certainly wasn't a flintlock, the muzzle of the gun was thin and narrow, extending far past the holster's opening at the bottom. Its grip was similar to that of a box, and Eli couldn't tell where the ammo went into the gun. It was the most mysterious piece of weaponry he's maybe ever seen in his life.

“What's that piece there?” Eli questioned.

“Some little German thing. Semi-automatic, brand new. Picked it up from some dead fools along the road, their wagon had been overrun by savages. Fancy little thing, ain't it?” Jack pulled his bandana up over his nose. However, he didn't get into any sort of stance. His hands were in his pockets and his knees were buckled. “You ready?” Jack asked.

Eli spat on the ground and adjusted his stance. “Yessir.”

“You need a count?” Eli hovered his hand over Lily.

“No sir, I do not.” Jack nodded.

Jack hasn't moved. At this point, it's quickdraw, no holds barred. Eli could feel the sweat from his forehead slowly make its way down his cheeks. All he could do was to breathe and wait. Jack wasn't like Tuco. Jack stood tall and proud. His arms were patient, like they had nowhere to be that day. His gaze was not cold or threatening, it was at peace.

Eli's gloves dampened with sweat. His horse became uneasy and started shifting. The forest fell silent and the breeze stopped blowing. Eli's ears began to ring white noise. The forest could've been a warzone and he wouldn't be able to hear it. As he stared Jack down, his mind drifted. *Would he be proud of me*, Eli thought, *even if I didn't win?* Thinking of his father sent a ripple of warmth through his body. It started from his knee and flowed up towards his chest. Eli looked down and saw his right leg started to change colors and become hot. He switched his vision back to Jack, who was now pointing a smoking gun at him.

Eli fell onto his knee and applied pressure to his bullet wound. His leg was pulsing and was pouring blood onto the Earth, turning its green grass into a damp red color. “Its a real shame,” Jack said, twirling his gun around a finger and strolling towards Eli. “I thought I still had it, but I guess I need to work on my aim. Now, on any other day, if you were hit and still breathing, I'd let you go. That's just the typical rules of a duel. But this isn't a typical duel, I'd say. You're in my neck of the woods, you play by my rules. My rules say I get an extra shot, and you know what? I'm going to make sure I hit something important this time.”

Eli's leg felt like hot gel, its pain intensifying every second. He took off his now blood covered gloves to try and use them for absorption, but it wasn't working. Eli was losing a lot of

blood fast. As he looked down at his wound, Jack's shadow came into view. Eli felt Jack's hand grip his neck, forcing him to stare up at him. "Your father would be very proud if he was here right now." Jack pushed the barrel of the gun to Eli's temple. "But don't worry, you'll see him in a bit."

"I can wait," Eli grunted. He pulled on his bootstrap and gripped his combat knife, the one his mother gave him for his thirteenth birthday. He thrust it upwards, driving it through Jack's torso. Jack loosened his grip on Eli, allowing him to roll forward away from the gun. In his peripherals, he saw Jack peer down at the knife embedded in his chest. Jack looked at Eli in disbelief and pulled it out in a slow and agonizing demeanor. He stared at the knife, dropped to his knees, and fell forward.

Eli fell to his back and watched the clouds go by. He felt his leg pulsing, and it still hurt like hell. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. The tree brush provided shade from the heat and made it easier to see the clouds. The cool summer breeze chilled Eli's wounds ever-so slightly, and it felt heavenly. Eli observed the clear blue sky and imagined he was on a boat, cruising on the ocean current towards a tropical island. He knew Jack was right. His dad would be proud.