

## Warriors' Respect: An Acquaintance Remembered

*Six Pence Pub, Blowing Rock, NC, Tuesday, January 7, 2020, Evening...*

He sat at the bar, almost wincing as the fool next to him ignorantly pontificated. What had started as a friendly “how ya’ doing, fella?” had morphed into a boring diatribe about brine and snow. Now, the geo-political malarkey deepened.

‘That thar boy was a murderous thug! He was a-plannin’ mo’ of them em-i-nent attacks. He alreddy dun kilt that thar ‘Murican soldiers and attacked our embassy with his militias. Cain’t have no more hostages from them Irans! Trump had to kill that boy and we dun did it! Ain’t nothing them tarrists can a do bout it now. Ha! But I’d love to see ‘em try. Wouldn’t you, buddy? We whoop they azz-’ His new friend, some fat, balding boomer, allegedly in town to sell the city road salt, babbled incessantly while pointing to the television news, featuring a dull rehash about a Tweet about the assassination.

‘Excuse me,’ Tom politely interjected, ‘But you’re a fucking idiot. You have no idea what you’re talking about. Please keep your profound stupidity to yourself. Thanks, *buddy*.’

‘I dun seen it all on tha news! Hannity, and Limbaugh, and good ole Binny Shapiru!’ The man exclaimed, taken aback as indignation strove against his copious alcohol consumption.

‘Everything you’ve heard, I won’t say *read*, is a lie,’ Tom instructed. ‘Everything you just blathered out, while it would certainly please the ears of your controllers, is utter horseshit. You wouldn’t know a terrorist from a Saint. Please, do shut up.’

The obese man sat stunned before his belligerence overcame his shock. ‘You-Well, fuck you, mister! You’s a liberal! I knew it! I sits down and sez to muhself, “I hope this feller ain’t no faggot.” But, shore as the Pope worships Mary, you is! You talks to me like that again and I whoop yo azz, fag! I dun served in Vietnam. The jungle! You probably a draft dodger or somethin’. Lemme tell you whut we dun did to-’

Tom listened for a minute more, grinning and quietly flipping through his phone. When bubba paused to gasp for air, Tom turned and showed him a picture of

Carmyn licking his face at a party. 'That's my girlfriend. She's an actress. You probably used to jack off to her. You know, back when it still worked, I guess.'

The tubby retard, still gasping and now red in the face, turned it up a notch. He most unwisely grabbed Tom's free arm near the wrist and pulled in closer, imparting some of his beer and garlic-scented breath. 'Smart azz, huh?! I'm bout reddy ta hit yo purdy mouth, boy!'

Without breaking his concentration on his phone, Tom quickly reversed gripped the man's flabby forearm and wrenched hard, cranking his elbow into a painfully awkward wrong-way bend. The man's squeal was met with a "shhhh" as Tom rolled to another, older picture. He held it up to his buddy's face. 'And, this is me and General Soleimani, uh, the murderous thug. Back in 2001, in Afghanistan, when we were fighting the Taliban together, excuse me, fighting *them thar tarrists*.' Releasing his grip and still being mostly polite, he tried to explain just a little of the unkind world to the loud drunk.

*Hotel Romandy, Geneva, Switzerland, Sunday, September 23, 2001, Late...*

A somber, sinister group of men walked through the terrace seating area outside the conference room, headed towards the bar. Two tarried behind the others, the two most dangerous-looking characters of the company. It was the admittedly tenuous beginning of a delicate working relationship. On that occasion, without any coordination, they were attired in understated fashion rather than suits or uniforms, both happened to be wearing black leather jackets. Tom thought of some way to soften the mood. He got an idea from glancing at the mountains surrounding the city, now illuminated beautifully by the waxing moon.

'I'd really like to visit your country properly, General,' he began slowly. 'I'd love to ski up north of Tehran. Maybe Darband or Abali, isn't it?'

Qasem Soleimani was as gracious as he was deadly. 'I myself am more fond of the area even further north, around Alvares, which you may know, is also near to the Caspian. Of course, if all goes - I won't call it well - you and I could cross the border back into Persia and visit Shirbad. It's just west of Herat, where we may have some ... business. Wonderful snows.

‘I know this must feel a little off, Colonel. You’ve been to Iran previously. We have a rather extensive dossier on you. Kill on sight orders, in fact. Uh, those I have, of course, belayed for the time being. You know, we missed each other a few years ago. These are, I must admit, better circumstances.’

‘Have you ever skied in America, General?’ Tom asked while thinking about, almost rueing his last vicious visit to Iran.

‘The White Mountains. Ages ago, before the revolution. It was, for me at the time, the chance getaway of a lifetime. My family had so little money; it was a great luxury.’ The man laughed at the faded memory. ‘If I remember right, that’s your, what you call, *neck of the woods*, no?’

‘Well, we might have missed each other then too.’ Tom said and chuckled at the smallness of the world. ‘Maybe some things are best left on the powder.’

‘Undoubtedly, they are. Now, soon our men will need to- Oh, we’re stopping again.’

Following a few perfunctory words with Crocker and the departing team from State, the lethal pair eased up to the bar, alone for the first time.

‘You’ll need to help me, Mister Ironsides, but *Glen-mor-angie* - the Scottish is always a jaw-breaker for me.’ The General studied the bottles on the shelf behind the bar, pointing to one.

‘Well, I didn’t know you guys partook of the single malt! Excellent choice though.’ Tom said.

‘Social settings and good company sometimes require good liquor. Allah is merciful, most forgiving at times and of good causes.’ The General studied a bottle closer.

‘And an interesting choice of words. *Jawbreaker* is our callsign for the initial operation.’ Tom said while trying to read a label.

‘I know. We’re not so completely in the dark.’ Soleimani said with a smirk.

‘Well then, know that we’ll be inserting, likely on Wednesday night. I’ll be there with the SADs and the Deltas. Who can I expect from your Quds? Maybe someone else willing to overlook past indiscretions, I’d hope.’ Tom did look a little hopeful.

‘I should be able to join you and our men later. For now, immediately, look for my-’

The men talked and drank deep into the night. Plans were made, logistics explored. Soleimani was, as promised, a walking encyclopedia of the terrain, the local tendencies, and the ways of the enemy. They shared multiple strategies and a few misgivings. They talked about Hammurabi, Solon, and Caesar. They spoke of family relationships, of children, spouses, and parents. On matters of state and religion, they agreed and they agreed to disagree. A tedious friendship was born. Respect flowed haltingly with a burn like the whiskey. They did, in fact, meet again twice - once soon after in the hills of Afghanistan and once years later in Baghdad during a meeting that Washington denied ever happened. However, they never did rendezvous on the slopes. Even after his retirement, Tom followed the general's quest to defeat ISIS in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. A worthy defender of his nation and people, he thought Soleimani. He'd cursed the administration aloud the week before when he'd heard the news of what he considered plain murder and a despicable war crime.

*Back in Blowing Rock, another bar...*

'So, just shut up about it, already,' Tom said at last. He was finished with his unheeded educational lecture and was now checking his email and something else. His new friend still didn't grasp any of what he'd heard.

'All that thar tells me is that you'se one a them tarrists! And, whut do you know, you lying shit?!' The dim visitor demanded.

'I know the shit is already hitting the fan,' Tom said as he again presented his phone. 'Watch this.'

'Whut in tha hell that is?!'

'That is live satellite feed from over Iraq, over Ain al-Asad Air Base. You said you'd love to see them try. Well, they're trying right now. The news up there will have it in an hour or so once Langley puts the right spin on it. Watch now if you'd like the uncensored version.'

'Whut am I a watchin'??' The tubby man growled as he squinted at the little screen.

'Those flashes are missile impacts. Probably Qiams or Fateh-one-tens. Latest generation guidance. Extremely accurate. Pinpoint, I'd say. Right now, every time one flashes, they're hitting our hardware. I'd guess they're knocking out the drone

hangers, the smaller ones clumped here and there, center. That base is where the strike last week came from. Makes sense. What I would do.'

'Whut you'd do?! I know you. You'se a Democrat or something! Love nuthin' better than helpin' yo tarrists friends, huh? Stand up! I'm bout to beat some sense into yo liberal azz!'

'No, you're not.' Tom said, looking down at his glass.

'I'm a-gonna do it!'

'No. You can't. Sorry.'

'And, YOU'RE DONE, sir!' yelled the pretty bartender at the heavy, sweaty, woefully-overmatched moron. 'You don't know what you're messing with, with this one.' She gave Tom, who was unconcernedly addressing his Oban, a wink. To the fat drunk, she instructed: 'Before you get yourself killed, get out! Don't come back. Now!'

Tubby mumbled something about a town full of queers and sympathizers and shuffled angrily out into the light evening snow.

'That fat bastard didn't even leave a tip!' The barmaid announced with a hint of regret.

'I got it. Mine too, in a minute,' Tom replied.

'So, professor, is this World War Three?' The young woman asked with slight concern in her voice.

'No. Don't be too alarmed, darling. It'll all blow over, for now,' Tom reassured. 'It's not world war, unless something utterly stupid gives way between now and morning. This was, is a very measured response. Making a point or two. They'll be done in a few minutes, although CENTCOM just registered something odd on domestic air radar around Tehran - probably nothing. The missiles are a show of force, directed at our equipment, not our men. Neither has any business being in-country anyway. Maybe this is the beginning of a withdrawal. Hell, I'll have my last toast to that. That, and Qasem. Maybe not the best man - none of us were - but maybe the one his people needed. Salute!'

After paying off his tab and leaving two tips, Tom mosied outside. From the sidewalk on Main, he heard the old jungle fighter yelling incoherently from down the street. *Gotta give that one credit for persistence*, Tom thought as he raised a one-fingered salute over his shoulder. Next, he heard a city police officer ordering the old drunk off. He slowly walked on towards his little rental flat. It was getting cold. His

phone rang. Carmyn was watching the breaking news. He soothed her nerves and thanked her for a lick while requesting another at her earliest convenience. Just before he reached his door, Vicky called. He was calming her fears as he walked into the living room, where Ari and Maddie were waiting with the television blaring. Upon hanging up, he directed his placidity to them, first asking them to turn off the tube.

‘Uncle Tommy, do you know what’s going on?’ Ari pressed.

‘Yes. That foolishness on the talking screen is only more propaganda bullshit. Some ancient Greek once said, “Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.” Some say it was Euripides, though I’m not so sure. Anyway, watch that stuff and you will go as mad as your President and the Iranians. What it’s designed for. Maybe Qasem was mad to go in like he did, to keep this up for so long. No, we’ve all of us got enough madness.’

‘What are you talking about, Tom?’ Maddie asked as she turned off the set. ‘We know you have to know A LOT about what’s behind all this.’

Tom was tired and tried to move towards his room, several wistful thoughts plaguing his mind. ‘Goodnight, girls. Of the business behind it all, I know more than I care to repeat this evening. Respect for the dead.’