“Attack and riposte in single tempo while stepping and taking the outside line in the bind.”

Ryan followed the instruction with dancelike grace as he slipped to the side, meeting his teacher’s rapier with his own and sliding down with a slick, gliding action, the shimmer of steel on steel echoing through the training hall of the Hawkins family, longtime allies of the coalition of House Pelagia. His instructor deftly parried Ryan’s blade aside with the palm of his free hand, freeing his blade and delivering a harassing cut towards Ryan’s scalp. Ryan sprang back, sweeping his blade in a circular parry and returning the attack, slipping under his opponent’s parry like a cunning and darting snake. The blade jarred as his instructor snatched it like an eagle with his free hand. The wiry, grey haired man had a flash of eagerness behind his pince-nez as he thrust sharply for his left-handed student’s now exposed flank as the grabbing and pulling of Ryan’s blade twisted him out of position. Ryan grabbed strongly with his free hand and seized his master’s blade in turn, leaving them locked as each struggled to budge his blade to slice the hand of the other. After a few moments of wrestling at each others’ blade, wiry athletes playing at a life or death struggle, Ryan smirked and his teacher laughed as they relaxed and lowered their weapons.

“I told you practicing my fencing would always prove a payoff, Gregor.”

“Your father would be angry. You already skip enough of the lessons on finance and business. If you didn’t train with me for free you’d have squandered your allowance on fencing lessons long ago“ the steel-haired retainer of the Hawkins family replied.

“That drunk can be angry as he pleases. I’m old enough now to best him. I have other priorities”

“A man is not the sum of fencing and womanizing, Master Ryan.”

“I’ve cut back on the latter, and in a pinch a man is *only* the sum of the former. When lightfoils come out, my skill as an account will avail me naught.”

“Master Ryan…”

“Besides, I intend to have you around to advise me, Gregor. You’re as good man as any on Pelagon.”

“I’m honored sir…” Gregor’s wizened brow furrowed, “has there been any word yet on Miss Donatus’s condition?”

“I’m afraid not. The virus attacks her tissue and has caused wasting more rapidly than the Donatus familyphysician can handle. Her mother died last week and their servants and neighbors are similarly afflicted. I’m afraid my own funds have proven insufficient in finding anything.”

“Is that where your allowance has gone sir?”

Ryan turned away wordlessly.

“You are not your father’s son. No wonder your mother takes such pride in you.”

“After he left, he was dead to me, I am no man’s son. That’s why I don’t give a damn in Chaos about his opinion.” Ryan turned back to Gregor, an intensity in his eyes.

“You were born to nobility, Ryan, through his line. There is something to be said for it.”

“No Gregor, nobility in name is inborn, nobility in character is built on the dueling ground. He gave me a name. You gave me swordsmanship, and philosophy, and virtue. You introduced me to…” Ryan’s face grew pained.

“Thank you for your kind words, Master Ryan, but my service is reward enough, along with the practice.” Gregor moved to the longswords, taking the rapiers with him.

“Shall we begin your favorite, sir, then afterwards some wrestling or pugilism?”

“I love them all Gregor.”