#### Airing of Grievances

*(By Ranarr Kul-Tarentae)*

Pow, bang, the two of them go at it like madmen, but the boys around them barely stir with excitement. It is a training session, and a bit crappy. They have always liked real fights better – lots more skill involved and more likelihood of blood. I turn to Tex, my apprentice. “Let’s go off and practice somewhere. This is weak.” Tex likes any fight, but almost always does what I say. His eyes linger ruefully on our Battleteam leader and the other boys – don’t know all of their names yet since we have only recently become part of the squadron – and then he follows me.

I run almost full tilt into our Quaestor, Maximus Alvinius, and he gives me a grin, like we’re best pals and he’s been looking for me. Maximus and I have a love-hate relationship, but he is my Quaestor and I respect him for that. We’ve beaten each other roughly the same number of times. Well, six to five in his favor, but one of my victories was a beauty, a flowing sequence of punches that even I couldn’t follow before I smashed his nose in nicely. Almost broke it. The satisfaction of Max’s watery-eyed submission that day makes me smile easily back at him. “Wanna mix it up?” Max’s eyes aren’t smiling anymore; he won the last one and thinks he’s on a roll. I know better. “Airing of Grievances,” I come back smoothly.

\*A few minutes later\*

I force a deep gulp of air into my lungs as I move towards the ring. Fighting angry is bad, so I calm myself. I give Tex, who’s sitting closely to the ring, a confident look. Max is not much one for warm-ups, he bounces from one toe to another like a boxer, rolls his head, then gestures to me that he’s ready. I already see a crowd of Odanites forming around us,

keen for a real fight.

He comes at me, neither quick nor slow, his arms wide. I fend him off easily. Maximus is good but he’s cautious. He knows I’ll not risk much in the ring. I could keep him off easily but I feel I’ve got to try one of my new moves. No one’ll attach too much to this particular fight

so I can afford to be bold. But I’m cunning too. That’s what got me to where I am. That and good reflexes.

I hold my left hand with fingers pointed forward in front of me and my right fist close to my body– an outdated form I know, but very good for riposting against an over-eager opponent. Here he comes, Max, a blur more from technique than power. In goes my right to break

that rhythm and then I bring my fist in to catch Max’s left. It is too bendy to give me much opening but I am quick, and I know not to go for a body blow; the opportunity is small and he’d be able to retaliate. I bang my knuckles against the outside of his wrist, the bony bit, all the while twirling my right hand to keep him caught up. I try for his cheek but he is no fool, our Quaestor. He pulls back a step, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. I watch him change his stance to match mine. There’s no sweat on me yet! He’s not angry

enough to make a serious error but I feel in my gut, now’s the time to let him – all the boys – see what I’ve been working on.

I bang my fists together once, and advance on him. This is me at my most fearsome: my speed frightens opponents and no one knows exactly what I’ve got planned so it’s now or never. Our fists clatter against each other left to left, right to right and cross-wise. I use my upper and lower arms to hold his every thrust and I am glad that I’m able to absorb much of the power. Max settles into a pattern and at the last second, I drop one of my parries, at the same time, lowering my left fist so that my face is unprotected. Max falls for it and doesn’t

try to halt his stroke, lunging at my face with gangs of force. Trust him to try and maim me.

His two fists, and arms, are up high, so I fall to one knee with both of mine

ready, my mind blotting out the murmured wave of anticipation from the crowd. I’ve thought long about this, long enough that there’s no need to think now. It’s not enough to go for the balls, the most vulnerable spot. No, a quick fighter can inflict double damage. I lunge at his crotch, relishing its rigidness and the pain it will cause, yet pulling the stroke a

little, for I am a boy also, I know what it means to strike full strength there. Better to kill

someone with a temple blow than that. At the same time, I bang my elbow on the ball of his knee as hard as I can and roll.

I come to my feet seeing Maximus Alvinius in the toils of agony. He hobbles backward a

step, clutching his balls howling, then falls to the floor. A deep voice rolls out, that of the judge: “We have a winner!”