Excerpt: Feint of Heart by Freddie Milano

"Again."

Cal's eyes stung as sweat poured into them, but he didn't so much as raise a hand to wipe his brow. He could feel Sir Taren Veretti's eyes on him and he refused to look weak. So he blinked the sweat away as rapidly as he could, took his stance, and lunged again.

Once again his thrust was easily parried, but this time Taren slapped the blade further to the right, slid into close range, and smacked the flat of the blade against his stomach. "Hit. Were I an enemy, Cal Caison, you would be dead."

Cal gave in and shoved both his hair and a river of sweat from his eyes, but he didn't dare use stinging eyes and perspiration as an excuse. He'd seen Sir Taren fight with injuries that would have crippled a squire, and probably even a handful of Queen Selvia's other veteran knights. If he wanted to be half as good at Sir Taren, he had to be able to fight through discomfort.

Taren's expression was carefully blank, like it always was during their training sessions. It made him impossible to read. Well, Cal grumbled to himself as he spun his blade and resettled into fighting stance, more unreadable than usual.

Sir Taren was generally well-liked. He was polite, genial, and often charming. He was a perfect gentleman when in court, but with Cal he was guarded and distanced, like he strove to keep their relationship as professional as possible.

As well he should. Cal was Taren's squire, which meant he was charged with training Cal into knighthood. Cal had been training with Taren for over six years already, which meant he was soon approaching his twenty-first year, and more importantly, his own impending knighthood.

"Cal." Taren's voice was quiet, but it snapped Cal out of his reverie, just as it was intended to. When Taren saw that he had his squire's attention once more, he nodded. "Let's continue, unless you're tired?"

Cal grinned. "I'm not falling for that. Even if I were too tired to continue, you'd tell me I must find my limits and seek to extend them daily," Cal returned, watching as Taren's stance shifted.

"Good. You've learned something at least." There was no smile on Taren's face then, but Cal almost heard it in his voice.

"Only took me six years," Cal quipped, and lunged, seeking an opening.

He didn't find it. Taren parried easily, and Cal let his momentum carry him around, following up with a quick whip of his arm that Taren seemed almost late to block. What little thrill Cal got at that was quickly squelched as Taren's riposte came. It was strong and Cal lost ground. Taren was larger, stronger, with endurance that came from years of practice, but Cal was dextrous, light on his feet, and full of energy. It meant their sparring matches could last hours with short breaks in between.

Sometimes, after the clashing of swords, when he was just as likely to pour water over himself as down his throat, Cal's mind wandered to how Taren's endurance extended to other pursuits.

"Hit," Taren said suddenly, his blade slapping Cal's arm. "Your mind's wandering again. You cannot lose focus in the middle of a duel. It could easily get you killed."

Cal flushed but didn't respond. Instead he lunged forward again, taking a series of moves Taren had taught him and, instead of following them to their usual conclusion, used his quick reflexes to turn what should have been one strong powerhouse swing into a lightning-quick set of cuts.

The very last one caught Taren's well-protected arm, and Cal grinned in triumph. A hit! If the expression on Taren's face was any indication, the knight was impressed.

Unfortunately for Cal, he took too long to be pleased about finally surprising Taren. Taren's riposte came quickly enough to knock Cal off his feet. Down on the ground, Cal tried to roll, but it was already too late; Taren's sword was at his neck.

Cal swallowed back a curse and glanced up, surprised to see that expression was still on Taren's face. "Well done, Cal," he said in his low voice, and removed his sword only to offer Cal his hand instead.

Cal took it gratefully and let Taren help him to his feet. "I think we're finished for the day," Taren added, his large hand warm around Cal's smaller one. "I'll see you same time tomorrow," he added, a statement and not a question. It didn't need to be; their schedule had shifted into a comfortable routine after less than a year and stayed little changed in the ones that followed.

Cal nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak; his hand felt hot in Taren's and he stared down at it then up at Taren's face. Taren's expression was still careful, guarded. It remained that way despite the warmth in his voice as he said, "That was a very clever move you did. Keep being creative. It keeps others on their toes and they won't know what to expect from you."

Cal nodded and then slowly withdrew his hand. His withdrawal from the room was much swifter. He had to leave before he made a fool of himself.

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