

THE FENCER

L'Esgrimieur



Ayala R.

L'ESCRIMEUR

A novel by Ayala R.



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L'ESCRIMEUR

*To Carmen: I still cannot find the
meaning of your sudden departure.*

I miss you.

J - Les Adieux

Francis waited at the park that he always visited on these occasions, standing in front of the statue he knew all too well.

It was one in a series of twelve surrounding a fountain. He had never known the theme of the twelve statues. No one had ever told him and he had never asked. He didn't need to. To him, there was only one truth about that statue, only one message conveyed by it: a man, fiercely fighting a serpent, protecting his two sons from it even at the cost of his own life.

Francis stared at the statue each time that he visited the park. The father's strong arm strangling the serpent, wrestling its poisonous bite away from his young ones, away from his own flesh and blood. The look of courage, strength and determination on his face. And then the feebleness and hopelessness expressed by the children, especially by the younger of the two, too frightened to even show his face, hiding behind his father's leg, holding it with his two fragile arms as tightly as he could.

Every time Francis looked at that statue, a melancholy mood descended over him. Every time he looked at it, he tried to find long-sought answers in its carefully chiselled shapes. For Francis, it was not possible to separate the park from the statue, as it was also not possible for him to separate the statue from the reason why he always summoned them to that park.

Francis remained standing there, under the threatening grey sky, taking cover with his coat, sheltering himself from the cold wind blowing that day. He looked at his watch. He hoped it would not take much longer, for he had other things planned

for the day and he did not like being kept waiting. Yet the day was young, for he always met them early in the morning, when the gates had just been opened, to avoid the masses that would walk the gardens later. He enjoyed having the place mostly to himself, the solitude of it.

It would be time soon.

How to break such news? Francis had asked himself that question once or twice, only to reach the same conclusion: that there is no best way, no easy way, no painless way. One could come up with lame and pathetic excuses in the hope of mitigating the suffering. One could pretend to be caught up in a series of unavoidable events outside of one's own will and control, to try and take away some of the guilt... yes, a victim oneself. But why play the role of a gentle person when one is not? Why pretend to be someone else? Better to look that person in the eye and tell things as they are.

Be heartless, be ruthless, be a cynic! At least one will remain true to oneself and not turn into a hypocrite. That was the minimum courtesy Francis would expect for himself, were the tables to be turned one day.

There, she was finally arriving. She waved at him from the distance, thinking that a romantic day lay ahead of her, just the two of them, hand in hand.

Francis took one last quick look at the statue, as he felt a warm hand gently caressing his cheek.

"Bonjour, mon chéri," said the young woman, with the habitual tenderness in her voice and glow in her eyes that appeared every time she was close to Francis. He didn't answer. He only grabbed her hand and lifted it slowly away from himself. He looked her straight in the eye.

"Are we taking a walk?"

Once again, there was no answer from Francis.

“Oh, we are having breakfast together?” she cried, excited.

But there was still no reply from him.

“What are we doing, then?” she asked.

“You don’t understand. *We* are not doing anything together because there is no ‘*we*’ anymore.”

At first she stood there, appalled, thinking it was simply a cruel joke that he was playing on her. She even managed, with difficulty, to come up with a timid smile. Then she gave a nervous laugh. Finally, she stared at Francis, confused, waiting for some kind of reaction from him, only to see that not a single muscle in his face moved. It was then that she finally understood.

“But... but I love you...” she said in a trembling voice.

“Mélanie, I know,” he replied, “and that is why I don’t wish to see you again.”

“But I can’t live without you...” she insisted, thinking that her plea would make Francis change his mind. But no matter what she said or did, it would not change a thing.

“That’s your problem, not mine,” was the short response.

“*Mais... pourquoi? Je ne comprends pas...*” she said, tears starting to build up in her eyes.

“There is no *why*, and there is nothing to *understand*,” said Francis with frightful coldness, making her wound even a deeper one.

Instinctively, she clung to him, putting her arms around him and covering him with kisses, begging. She could not hold back her tears anymore. But no matter how much she implored and no matter how full of grief her pleas, he would not cede.

Francis held her by the shoulders and pulled her away from him. He saw how tears were running incessantly down her cheeks, yet he stood there in front of her, saying nothing.

Everything that he had to say had already been said. There was no sound to be heard between the two, but the silent whisper of the wind.

He got close to her, one last time, and kissed one of the bitter tears coming out of her eyes. It was only then that the features on Francis' face changed, turning the stiffness of his lips into a sadistic smile.

The taste of sorrow and desperation. The taste of suffering.

Francis had already turned his back on her and started to walk away, when she pulled together whatever force and will she had still left in her.

"Lâche!" she yelled at him.

Francis turned around, as if driven by a powerful reflex, and seized her roughly by the arm. How dare she call him a coward!

Francis' face was distorted, his eyes fiery. Seeing him like that, the man she loved, she grew frightened and speechless.

Francis tightened his grip more and more, finding it difficult to control himself. He pressed to the point of squeezing an expression of pain from her. But then he looked at her and felt sorry for her... the way one does when looking at a stray dog, down to his bones, searching for leftovers to feed on. She was, after all, someone who was just sad and hurting.

And so he let go of her and walked away, never to see her again. He left her standing there, helpless, alone with her tears, next to that equally sad statue.

Tableau de 64

Every time Francis put on his mask, it stopped being a sport to him and turned into something real: as real as it had been at the time when people used to demand satisfaction after witnessing their honour and pride compromised and thus blood needed to flow in order for the offence to be washed away. And so, every time that Francis found himself on the *piste*, he was determined that the blood to be shed would be that of the person in front of him and never his own. A combat to the end!

It was down to the sixty-four finest blades in the world, and Francis was present amongst them. It was his birthright to be there. Years of sacrifice and deprivation he had endured in order to make it that far, yet to stand on the podium meant nothing to him compared to the contentment that he would experience when his triumph proved wrong the one person who had once disavowed him.

Francis was the stronger of the two, the faster of the two, the one with the better technique; and despite being paired against the finest that a great nation such as Hungary had to offer, the combat was already poised to be one-sided, only a few minutes into the assault. Every attack from his opponent was met by a swift *parade*, followed by a strong and decisive *riposte*. And every attack that Francis began always met its target, up to the point that any offensive movement that he made was greeted by a desperate retreat from his adversary, who tried to keep as much distance between them as possible.

Francis always waited with the point of his *épée* downwards, in the *seconde* position. He would then bring his point up into *sixte* with an outside semicircular movement every time that the

Hungarian prepared an attack and then back to *seconde* with another circular movement just as his opponent fell short of an engagement. Francis continued the *seconde/sixte* movement, always trying that way to find the threatening blade in order to turn the rival's offensive action into an attack of his own, always measuring the distance between the two.

“Your tempo! Pay attention to your tempo!”

It was the voice of his *Maitre d'Armes* breaking through the clamour of the crowd: the only man that Francis obeyed without questioning or hesitation, the only person he respected.

But Francis could listen to nothing but his own breathing from behind the mask as he tried to predict his adversary's next movement with all of his senses.

The Hungarian tried to get closer, but stopped when he saw Francis' weapon going from one position to the other as he tried to shorten the distance. Francis advanced with the repetitive movement of his blade and then retreated in his solid *en garde* stance, inviting his opponent to come closer, but then pressed him away.

The Hungarian took then an energetic step forward, and Francis' point went again into *sixte* and then not back down to *seconde* but straight into his rival's hand, just as he was starting to extend his arm in an attack, catching him unprepared! The green light went off.

“Halte!... Touché à gauche... 8 à 3...”

“À vos places... Messieurs, en garde... Êtes-vous prêts?... Allez!...”