

When the combatants clashed for the second time, Sheylds brought his blade around in a wide sidestroke bearing every ounce of strength he could muster with one arm. Jyk noticed the increased draw on the longsword and sensed his opening. Waiting for the last moment, he abruptly brought his left shortsword up to parry the sidestroke and raised his right to catch the hooking shield bash Sheylds threw in parallel, stopping both cold. The Lieutenant overextended himself with both arms and for a moment too long and Jyk's boot leapt to fill the opening. He threw another front kick, but this time he had a clear line of sight by which to aim.

Jyk's boot heel drove into Sheylds' front leg just above the knee. The snapping of bones as well as the far more subtle sounding blown tendons could be heard as the top half of the Lieutenant's leg jerked back, dragging the loosely connected lower portion along with it. Sheylds let out a strangled cry of pain as he attempted to maintain his balance, sword and shield alike sliding groundward from Jyk's parries even as his torso tilted precariously forward.

Jyk took a step back to allow Sheylds enough room to bow in front of him, raised both shortswords above his head, and brought the flats down just to either side of the Lieutenant's spine. Sheylds crashed to the ground chest first, the force of meeting with the hard-packed dirt driving out what little air remained in his lungs. Jyk retreated a couple more steps as the Lieutenant rolled onto his back and commenced sucking air and grasping the tattered remains of his knee. He cried out in agony whenever air enough managed to reach his lungs.

Jyk turned to Master Varlin and found him scowling darkly. “What?” exclaimed Jyk. “What'd I do?”

Varlin shook his head disparagingly. “I thought I told you not to permanently cripple.”

“Huh?”

“Looks to me like you when you broke his leg you took all of the tendons that make his godsdamn knee work with it. That's pretty godsdamn permanent, if you ask me.” Varlin's eyes narrowed angrily.

Jyk threw his hands up in frustration. “Oh, come on, how the hell am I supposed to know he put all his weight on his front leg? Only an idiot would plant a vulnerable leg so strongly that his knee gets destroyed before it gets knocked out from under him.” He sheathed his blunted shortswords with a loud smack.

Varlin begrudgingly relaxed his glare. “I guess you've got me there.” He glanced down at Lieutenant Sheylds, still loudly writhing in pain. “Oh, just shut up and be glad you didn't fight with live steel. He could have killed you a half- dozen times if only he had a sharp edge to do it with.” When the moaning didn't subside, the master- at- arms took a pair of quick steps in the fallen man's direction. “Make me repeat myself and I'll let Jyk knock you unconscious and save the healer some herbs.”

Sheylds clamped one hand over his mouth to muffle his moaning, his other hand still clasped to his knee, seemingly unsure whether or not it to attempt righting its direction.

Jyk turned towards the armory, catching Varlin's eye and tilting his head in that direction questioningly. When the master- at- arms nodded, Jyk took his leave of the training yard and headed indoors. He was surprised when Varlin joined him before he so much as got his proper swords belted around his waist.

“I sent Kal to get the healer and I can't stand that bloody screaming anymore.” the master- at- arms said, making a beeline for the liquor shelf in the corner of the armory's front room. “You really buggered his knee up good,” he added, turning around holding a bottle of whisky and two small glasses.

Jyk finished belting his swords around his waist and shrugged as he crossed the room to take a chair across the desk from the master- at- arms. “I expected my insults would get him to overextend on the next pass, but I damn sure didn't think he would leave all his weight forward. The twit.” He nodded his thanks to Varlin as he lifted the proffered glass of whisky and took a small sip. “Has he really killed fifteen swordsmen?”

Varlin nodded. “The duelist subculture stretches across most of Tathren, so it's hard to bullshit about that sort of thing. Lieutenant Sheylds was a certifiable heavyweight; the best his barony had to offer. Twenty- something duels without a loss, fifteen of them to the death.”

Jyk's jaw went slack. “But...that was *easy*,” he said, incredulous.

Varlin heaved a shrug and sipped at his whisky. “I stopped trying to understand your ability to improve months ago,” he said evenly, leaning back in his heavily padded chair. “Prodigies like you come around every so often. The trick is not letting your talent go to your head.”

Jyk sighed heavily. “I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about this.”

Varlin raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

Jyk leaned forward in his chair and drained the remaining two fingers of whisky in his glass. “Gods above, Master Varlin, I have yet to come to terms with being able to cut down *average* swordsmen with ease. Now, I come to find out that skilled and experienced ones may prove just as easy.”

The master- at- arms furrowed his brow in confusion. “So, you're uncomfortable in the knowledge that you're extremely hard to kill?”

Jyk rolled his eyes in exasperation. “No, I'm uncomfortable in the knowledge that it's so bloody easy for me *to* kill. The fact that the first few were easy was bad enough, but to be capable of that every time I find myself in a fight?” He shook his head slowly from side to side, exhaling a large breath in a rush.

Varlin sighed lightly. “Well, that's about the grimmest way you can look at it.”

Jyk's eyes narrowed as he fixed Varlin with a hard, yet oddly vulnerable look. “In my personal experience the grimmest perspective is usually the most accurate one.” He slumped back in his chair. “Let's be real about this – I killed nine men in a couple minutes. How many am I going to kill during a drawn out war with the maynese? A hundred? Five?”

Varlin raised both hands in front of himself, palms out. “Back the wagon up,” he said firmly. “It's not about how many people you kill, it's about *why* they are dead. For battles to be fought, men on both the enemy's side as well as your own must die. In war people die because they are in a battle, not because a man killed them.”

“So, it doesn't matter how much blood is on my hands, just so long as it's in battle?” Jyk asked, clearly unconvinced by the notion.

“It's a nasty world we live in,” Varlin said gently, “and death always has been and always will be a very large part of how we experience it. The burden of men like you lies in maintaining the ability to wade through some of the darkest places the human mind has to offer and walking back out into the light of day once the time for death is over.”

Jyk took it upon himself to refill his glass, sipping at it deeply. “And if I can't?”

Varlin heaved a sigh. “Some simply seek continuous battle until they come across a situation they cannot survive.”

“Brilliant,” Jyk snarked.

“No one ever told you the life of a Guard would be an easy one,” Varlin said firmly.

“No one ever warned me about walking a razor's edge between self- loathing and manic homicidal rage, either,” Jyk retorted sharply.

Varlin grunted loudly with irritation. “Quit acting the child,” he snapped. “You're the one that chose this career, Jyk, and finding out that you have the talent to be one of the best in the business is hardly something to grouse about. It's not like you got into this expecting to never go into battle.”

Jyk scowled down at the few droplets of whisky remaining in glass. “Sorry,” he said softly. “Damn it all, fighting Sheylds was supposed to make me feel better about things, not give me new information to make me feel worse.”

“That's life, kid,” empathized the master- at- arms. “There's always something standing ready to add insult atop injury.”

Up Next (or first, if you want to be chronological about it):

Jyk grinned happily as he nodded deeply enough to border on bowing and followed Delk into the increasingly powerful light at the end of the hallway. The hall ended in an astoundingly large room sporting a circular pit framed thirty- three feet across and three feet deep, the pit floor layered alternately with dirt and straw stretching another three feet into the earth. The arena floor around the pit was tiered upwards two feet for every six feet back to create nine levels of spectator standing room. Even this early in the evening preliminary bouts were already underway and the betting stand at the far side of the space were taking wagers as quickly as the four men behind it could move.