

Jyk shook his head. “Not insomuch. I thought I would avoid trouble simply because it was counter- productive – as I have managed before – but, this was different. When Disciplinarian Howle first mentioned the possibility of learning from you, he told me something that stuck in my head. I was a bit hazy through most of the lecture, having just been given six lashes, but he said that you would not train me unless I learned to control my temper. Until then I could not be trusted to wield a sword.

“Prize fighting helped to show me how to do that and once my temper was in check I saw how pointless a lot of my behavior had been. There was a fair share of justified fighting in my past, but just as many instances where I purposely aggravated a bad situation into a worse one. I never swung first, but was very skilled at goading the other guy into doing so. That also did a lot to explain why people began to assume that I picked the fight just because I won it.” *And here I thought all my over- analyzing would never be productive in any way.*

Varlin's smile grew. “Now, that's a good answer. But why do you want to join the Guard?”

Jyk raised an eyebrow. “That's not obvious? I mean, you know who I am, orphan of servants, ward of the duke and all that. I'm bound to his service until I earn the right to retire. I'm a talented fighter and I refuse to spend the rest of my life scrubbing dishes and sweeping floors. It's the Guard or the Watch and I'll take the Guard.”

Varlin heaved a shrug. “It'd be easy enough to run away and make a living as a prize fighter somewhere. Hells, they probably wouldn't even look for you. You wouldn't even have to leave Tarranton.”

Jyk shook his head slowly from side to side. “My father was murdered for defending Duke Brantley's name...even if I didn't understand my duty to the duke, I could never dishonor his memory like that.”

Varlin's eyes widened in shock. “ *That* Pevnal? He was your father? The castle caretaker?”

Jyk nodded somberly. “Apparently, he was also an aggressive drunk. Three mercenaries called the duke a cunt amongst themselves, albeit loudly, and he inadvertently picked his last fight.” His eyes dropped to his feet for a moment before rising, slightly dimmed. “Did you know him?”

Varlin nodded firmly. “A damn fine man, your father was. He was a man- at- arms under me in the Duke's Men before settling down in the castle with your mother. He fought well throughout a nasty couple of cycles for Tarrant. That's why he went right to being a caretaker.”

Jyk's eyes glittered alongside his smile. “Why didn't I know that?”

Varlin's smile shrank sadly. “No one ever told you that your father was a soldier?” He furrowed his brow deeply. “Well, I guess nobody at the castle knew him before he was a caretaker. He didn't like to talk about his fighting days around the other servants – they resented him enough already after being handed a supervisory role. Knowing it wasn't based on experience would have just made things worse.”

“Do you think you could tell me stories about him sometime?,” Jyk asked hopefully. “People have told me lots about my mother, but him they only remember as a stern caretaker. They just say that if a woman as sweet and intelligent as my mother married him, he must have been special.”

Varlin nodded deeply. “I'm sure we can work a few anecdotes into your afternoon training sessions. The Enlistment Tourney is only five months away; you'll have to put in work almost every day until then if you want to be ready.”

Jyk had practiced with the longsword and buckler for two months with moderate success, but he still did not feel comfortable. It was like a shiver in his spine that just would not go away, the sense that what he was holding was more hindrance than help. Midway into a light sparring session with Varlin it managed to break his concentration.

Jyk raised his hands and took a couple of steps backwards, using a sleeve to mop the sweat from his brow and glancing around the yard. “Something's not right. I feel off balance, like the blade and buckler are keeping me from fighting how I should be.”

Varlin shrugged. “We've been over this before, Jyk. That's because you're so used to fighting bare- handed. You'll learn to trust your skill with a weapon soon enough.”

Jyk shook his head emphatically. “No. I can't say what exactly is wrong, but it's not just using a weapon. Put a club in my hand and I'm right at home. But, it's not just the buckler either.” He spared a disparaging glance each for the wooden longsword and leather buckler.

Varlin furrowed his brow in thought for a moment. “Which foot do you usually keep forward in a fist fight?,” he asked.

“I kind of switch back and forth depending on what I'm trying to do.”

Varlin arched an eyebrow in curiosity. “How so?”

“Well I keep my right foot forward when I want to be more defensive and a little quicker with my jabs; if my left foot is forward I'm almost always on the offensive – I hit a little harder with the right than I do with the left.”

Varlin raised both eyebrows this time. “Now that's interesting. Which hand do you use more often in daily life? Working around the castle and the like.”

Jyk shrugged. “I'm more comfortable for some things with the right, some with the left. Isn't everyone?”

Varlin shook his head. “Most people are strongly dominant to one hand. Your kind of neutrality is called ambidexterity, or being ambidextrous.”

Jyk furrowed his brow. “And that explains why I can't get comfortable with the blade and buckler?”

“It might,” Varlin said before directing his attention to the small armory at the back of the training yard. “Kal!,” he yelled, “Bring me two wooden shortswords and two padded helmets.” He was grinning when he turned back to Jyk. “We'll find out if it means anything rather shortly, I think.”

Jyk was still fixing Varlin with a slightly suspicious look after he had donned his helmet and traded equipment with Kal. “So we just jump right into sparring with completely different weapons, then?”

Varlin barked a laugh. “You already know how to parry and attack with a sword so just transfer those same skills to your left hand. Your reach is shorter but your weapon is faster. And you are balanced, able to attack and defend with both hands. What more do you bloody well need to know?”

Jyk cast his eyes downward, chagrined. “Well, you could've given me some warning, especially since I've never sparred against Kal before. New weapons *and* a new opponent?”

Varlin snickered loudly. “Where's the fiery kid that came here wanting to fight in the next Enlistment Tourney? Because the one in front of me sounds an awful lot like a pussy.” He flashed a toothy grin.

Jyk clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Right then. Sparring now.” He raised his guard experimentally and shrugged at Kal as a signal for him to take the initiative. *The shortswords do feel better*, he thought nervously, *more balanced...but...* His hesitant thoughts were interrupted by Kal's advance, the wooden longsword arcing slowly down at him.

Jyk smiled as he brought his left blade up to parry and took a short step back, staying on the defensive as Kal continued to attack at half- speed. He retreated in a wide circle before finding the rhythm for the 1-2 parry- strike approach, taking it slow and matching strike count with Kal as their pace increased. *I like this*, Jyk thought, a grin pulling across his face. His attack timing was getting better and even at the sparring pace he could tell Kal was having a hard time getting his buckler on some of the sword strokes. When it seemed like Kal had stopped pushing the pace, he figured it must be his turn to go on the offensive.

Jyk timed a thrust just right, sidestepping and sweeping it outside with his right blade and commencing his attack, raining vaguely sloppy blows at Kal from every angle. He pushed Kal several steps backward before a snarl appeared on the man's face and his blocks pushed harder and suddenly became attacks again. Jyk swatted hard at Kal's buckler with his right blade, pushing it out wide, and rose his left blade up swiftly to meet a downward stroke, rebounding the offending blade violently.

The moment the wooden longsword sprang away, Jyk dug his back foot into the dirt and spun down the length of Kal's sword arm. As his left shoulder thudded into Kal's chest, Jyk slipped his right blade between Kal's legs and behind his left knee, yanking up as his torso knocked his opponent firmly onto his backside. Jyk followed Kal to the ground, straddling his midsection and crossing the wooden shortswords over his neck.

Master Varlin applauded loudly and approached them, smiling widely as Jyk helped Kal up off the ground. “Beautiful work, the both of you.” He focused his attention on Kal. “I really like the way you let him work his way into things like that. I might have use of you for a lot more tutoring. For now, please go about your previous business.”

Kal sketched a deep bow towards Master Varlin and clapped Jyk on the shoulder, smiling, before heading back towards the armory building.

Varlin smiled widely at Jyk for a few moments before speaking. “I take it I was right, then?”

Jyk snickered as he nodded. “I feel like my old self fighting with them, full of feints and manipulation.”

“And sloppiness,” Varlin deadpanned.

Jyk's smile evaporated into a stunned stare. “Well...it was my first time using them...nerves...uh...,”

Varlin shook his head slowly. "I've been teaching you how to swing a sword for two bloody months and there's still no discipline in your strikes. You don't punch with a blade, you swing it. Think of your wrist as a second elbow, the tip of the blade is your extended hand, and your fingertips can cut through leather like butter if the stroke is steady as well as strong. Understand?"

Jyk frowned and nodded slowly, then shook his head from side to side. He sighed heavily. "More drilling?" His frown grew as Varlin pointed him towards the hated training dummy.

"How many different strikes are there?," barked Varlin.

"Nine," answered Jyk as he squared off with the wooden dummy. "Eight basic angles of attack and the thrust."

"How many ways can they be used?"

"How many stars are there in the sky?," Jyk retorted, turning away from the dummy to face the master- at- arms. "Can I at least use tourney blades if you're gonna make me drill all afternoon? Wood is fine for sparring, but I feel like an ass standing here hitting a dummy with sticks."