

Jyk made it a scant five days back on duty before running into Lieutenant Sheylds among the halls of Castle Tarrant. It was just after his latest shift standing quietly in the corner as little Lady Lillian went about her day, before he was so much as planned his late afternoon's itinerary. The man actually had the gall to block Jyk's path and attempt to stare him down, hands on hips.

“Problem?,” snapped Jyk, struggling to keep hands away from sword hilts.

“Yes, there's a problem,” Sheylds snapped back. “You've been spreading the lie that I almost got Evelyn killed and that I'm responsible for your getting stabbed.”

“I haven't been spreading a damn thing,” Jyk snarled, “but truth has a way of getting around. If you had stayed in the bloody carriage like you were told, neither of us would have nearly died and Evelyn wouldn't have nearly been run through herself.”

“If you don't take that back,” Sheylds said darkly, “I will have satisfaction.”

Jyk quirked an eyebrow. “Are you challenging me to a duel, you colossal twit?”

“Unless you withdraw what you have said, yes.”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “Well, I won't call truth a lie, so I suppose that means I've been challenged. I won't fight you to the death, though. Meet me at the Master- at- arms' training yard in half an hour and we'll fight with blunted steel. No need for Guards to start killing each other.”

Sheylds nodded sharply and strode past Jyk without making further eye contact. *Not exactly how I wanted to spend the afternoon*, he thought somberly. *But, I suppose if he and I were gonna tangle eventually we might as well get it over with now. Hells, maybe I'll work off some of the stress that's been itching at me*. He mulled over his newfound local fame as he made his way out of the castle. It was strange, having so many people kowtow where once they had glared down their noses. They still did not particularly like him and his distaste for them was stronger than ever, but his new reputation forced them to treat him with respect.

Even the nobility surrounding Lady Lillian lent him a certain measure of extra dignity, many of them going so far as to nod their heads in greeting to him, the faceless bodyguard. Just a cycle earlier he was not good enough to wash their dishes and now it was as if he had placed a foot onto their level of society. He had become a hero to commonfolk and nobles alike – being of the former and having saved the lives of the latter – and heroes were good for the duchy. Guardsmen heroes almost universally became commissioned officers – if they lived long enough – and since a commission also served as a title of minor nobility, by proxy he really was almost one of them.

Only, the closer he observed them, the less he desired to walk among them. Lady Lillian aside, they proved as petty and self- serving a lot as the gossip he grew up hearing had made them out to be. The young lady in his charge, however, was more akin to something out of the storybooks. Mannerly and kind, she saw no point in all the pomp and separation that went along with the castes, likely due to being raised in such close proximity to Evelyn. Low- born and high minded, Evelyn had been caring for Lady Lillian since she was old enough to babysit.

Seeing the two of them interact only served to further tug at Jyk's heartstrings, Evelyn's overwhelmingly good nature on display at every moment. They had little opportunity to talk to each other, but several long gazes from her piercing blue eyes served to reinforce his confidence on a daily basis. She was always in the back of his thoughts, her presence steadfast even as he laid eyes on Varlin's armory and his main focus turned back to the upcoming duel.

A small smile tugged across his face as a familiar sense of anticipation began to build within him – the kind of feeling that only comes with a scheduled fight. The only curiosity Jyk found in the situation was at Sheylds' boldness in making the challenge. Him, the man that got impaled before his sword was out of its scabbard, challenging the man that killed the impaler along with eight other raiders. As unfathomable as Jyk found that kind of logic, the master- at- arms seemed to bear knowledge he lacked.

“Wait,” Varlin said sharply, “you mean Lieutenant Sheylds, Baroness Donivin's personal bodyguard? Why in seven hells would you want to fight him?” His voice remained just low enough not to carry across the training yard.

Jyk arched an eyebrow sharply. “I'm sorry, have you not heard about the ambush?,” he asked, sarcasm lilting his voice up an octave. “He's pissed off that everyone knows how badly he screwed up and he blames me. Thus the challenge. I was able to convince him to go at it with tourney blades, so I at least won't have to kill him.”

“Kill *him*?,” exclaimed Varlin. “Did you ever stop to wonder how he got to be personal guard to a baron's wife? The baron holding the most contested lands in the duchy, I might add.”

Jyk shrugged. “Does it make a difference?”

Varlin rolled his eyes. “When he's killed fifteen men in proper duels, I'd say it does.”

Jyk was visibly taken aback. “So, what, he's made his career defending a prickly sense of honor with a longsword?” He scoffed sharply. “I guess that explains why he got out of the carriage before drawing his sword. He must have expected them to let him draw before attacking.” He smirked with self- satisfaction.

“Why do I get the feeling you're taking this whole thing lightly?,” asked Varlin, his voice tinged with irritation.

Jyk's face turned abruptly serious. “When you spend every night dreaming about the men you killed, a fight with dulled blades is hardly something to get worked up about.”

Varlin's jaw slackened. “You're having nightmares? Why haven't you said anything?”

Jyk shrugged. “Don't really see how telling people about it is gonna help anything.”

Varlin sighed. “Talking about something almost invariably helps you to deal with it. We have ten or fifteen minutes until Sheylds shows up, tell me something I don't know.”

Jyk groaned softly. “Alright, fine. It's the first two men I took down, over and over again. They just keep coming out of nowhere and I just keep cutting them down.” He looked down at his feet, examining the hard dirt of the training yard between them. “No matter how hard I try to stop.”

Varlin nodded slowly. “Was there something different about those two? I mean, other than them being the first?”

Jyk sighed. “Yeah. When I rushed the attacking line, the first two barely had time to get their swords up. I darted between and dropped them before they could turn around.”

“So they never had a chance.”

Jyk shook his head. “Not a prayer,” he said softly. “It was as if they were moving in slow motion, then my blades struck and *everything* was slow motion. Then there was blood and more people to kill.”

Varlin laid a hand lightly upon Jyk's shoulder, squeezing gently. “The first battle is always scarring. Taking lives is an unpleasant thing, no matter how necessary it may be. The dreams and how you are feeling right now will both pass, but not if you try and keep it bottled inside of you. Don't let it rot you from the inside out.”

Jyk nodded slowly. “I'm sure you're right.” A small smile recaptured his expression. “There have been some convenient distractions cropping up.”

Varlin smiled knowingly. “Ah, you must mean the beautiful Evelyn whom Kinzi has been telling me about.”

“That fink,” said Jyk, chagrined. “How's his training going, anyways?”

“Good,” replied Varlin, “he's good; making the transition very nicely. That kid's got almost as much talent as you do.”

“Think he'll be ready by the time the wave of new recruits are done with boot camp?”

Varlin shrugged. “Seventy- thirty for, if I had to guess.” He went quiet as he spotted Sheylds steadily approaching the yard's low wall. “Our company's here,” he announced to Jyk as the Lieutenant came striding through the gate of the training yard's low walls.

“I'll get the blunts while you give him the instructions,” Jyk said flatly. “The only things I have left to say require weapons.” He headed towards the armory even as Sheylds strode up to Master Varlin. On Jyk's return trip the master- at- arms met him halfway, taking the blunted longsword, walking it back over to Sheylds, and signaling Jyk to stand at the ready. He pulled his mail coif on with an irritated grunt.

Jyk smirked across the twenty paces separating him from the lieutenant. Win or lose, he was going to enjoy inflicting a bit of pain on the man most responsible for the hole in his side. He was mildly surprised to find Sheylds staring back with a similar expression on his face. *Yeah, that's the expression of a man that's won fifteen duels all right, Jyk thought. It must be nice to just challenge and kill anyone impugning your honor, whether or not they were simply being truthful. Hells, I'm not even the one spreading the story.*

Master Varlin blocked the line of sight midway between them, turning sideways and holding an upraised palm out towards each of them. “Just try not to permanently cripple each other. This is no time for Guards to be thinning their own ranks.” He lowered his palms and quickly strode out from between Jyk and Sheylds.

Jyk drew his blades casually and began strolling towards his opponent, his smirk growing a skosh as he noticed Sheylds was moving at a brisk pace. The moment the lieutenant was within reach he lashed out, striking and pulling his blade back quickly, not allowing Jyk an opportunity to lock blades and counterattack. Despite a litany of slashes, thrusts, and bashes from a light steel round shield, Jyk held his guard without any significant retreat.

*He's very technically sound* , thought Jyk, batting a swipe away from his head. *But, he's not particularly fast* – he ducked a predictable hooking shield bash – *or instinctive for that matter. It's just a matter of creating an opening* . Jyk parried a downward slash almost before it began and leaned back to avoid another hooking shield bash. As the edge of the shield whistled past his nose, Jyk threw a hard front kick into Sheylds' midsection, sending him stumbling a few steps backward.

“Did you really manage to kill fifteen people like that?,” asked Jyk with a toothy grin. “Now, were they actual soldiers, or just a group of kids playing war? Because I can't imagine there being a whole fifteen trained soldiers worse than you in one little barony.” His smile widened as the lieutenant's face contorted with rage. “Be honest now, I won't tell.”