

Caden would never remember dropping the shield into the rust colored sands of the council arena. He had just fetched it after it flew from his father's arm. The shield had been flung by a powerful swing from the attacking knight. The clang had echoed around the circular walls, though the spectators above did not flinch. They were silently focused on this rare single combat and dreading its anticipated end. Caden stood still in frozen shock as his father was thrown to the ground and the dark knight's sword was suddenly held high above for the killing thrust. With no regretful pause, this cold attacker's sword easily shot through the chest armor with sharp crunch and drove into the man's heart. All was silent except for the victor's heavy breath and the struggling rasps of Caden's father. Caden wanted to run to him but his feet would not respond, even as his father turned to look at him with an out stretched pleading hand. That indescribable desperate desire soon left his eyes as they closed.

The final death stroke came as the sword was yanked out of the fallen knight by his fellow brother in arms. Coldly, the champion then turned from the scene as if it meant nothing. He walked away from the knight, the boy and the spectators, but he didn't reach the door.

"Satisfied with his death, Astor? Aren't you forgetting the law?" A booming voice came from the stands encircling the small arena. Burkhold stood, the bold crest of his lord emblazoned on his bulky chest plate, which encompassed his barrel gut. He was in stark contrast to the tall lean, steelly clad knight who still stood below.

"What am I forgetting, Burkhold? I'll not bury him," Astor responded in a callous tone from over his shoulder.

"The squire, Astor. He is bound to you now. William foolishly took on his own son in violation, but the law will be met by you," he demanded even as a fellow knight beside him seemed to nudge his arm as if urging him to let the matter go. Many of the knights in the stands didn't hold the same contemptible look for Astor. In fact, more were focused on the broken form of William.

Astor turned to see the bewildered youth standing still as tears poured down his pale cheeks. He seemed strong but the sight had stunned him hard. The shock had left him trembling and oblivious to the discussion. Astor then turned a sharp glare to Burkhold only to find the same look in return. The bloated excuse for a knight was trying to find him at fault.

"You would saddle me with that boy after he witnessed this?" Astor responded as he pointed his still bloody sword at the scene in disgust.

"It's the law, Astor. Regardless, you've known the boy," Burkhold responded with a slight sneer. He knew the man's past with Caden, when the boy was only five and Astor just a fresh brash knight. Whether Caden remembered that distant past or not, Astor's presence would only make the sting of this death cut deeper. A fact Burkhold knew well along with the truth behind Astor's motives. That this dark man with fearsome blade stood with a broken heart.

Burkhold thought he had Astor cornered with this; the man wouldn't dare take on Caden after this. He wouldn't hurt the child he once befriended. It will end with Astor surrounded by the brotherhood of the realm. With doubt over the reason for this Brotherly Combat, he will be prosecuted for William's death and meet the same fate himself.

"Caden," Astor suddenly turned back to the boy with a calm voice, but his emerald eyes were still fixed on the broken form of his father strung across the floor. Astor walked over to him, reached out with an armored glove and turned his head to look at him. "Caden, pick up your things. We're leaving," he said calmly. He wasn't about to try and reach out to the boy amidst the crowd and risk a backlash. Caden would put himself in violation for attacking his new mentor. Still in shock and

shaking, the redhead's mind was absent for the moment and he gathered his bag and the shield without thought. Astor looked up at the crowd again with contempt.

"As is the law, I take on Caden Striker. I will train him and prepare him for knighthood. I will abide by the laws of the realm as a rogue knight with no lord and no title," he said as he put a hand on Caden's shoulder and turned with him to head for the doorway.

The once great council of knights he had called brothers stared back with a mixture of anger and sorrow. They thought they had lost their fierce brother Jonathan Astor to the turbulent saides, but now they have lost the great William Striker. Astor may have returned, but as the rouge knight he always was. Many didn't know if he was even truly loyal after calling this Brotherly Combat against Striker. Astor claimed that Striker took the life of his wife during a campaign, but many thought it was a lie. That instead he had come as a spy or to secretly kill their ranks for the Jensari.

Astor didn't care for their rumors so long as they gave him distance. He had returned for Striker's head, but he also had no where else to turn. The home he had made in secret was destroyed. With his life altered and his eyes forced open, he had little to live for now. The vengeance had brought him back, but that was all. Even as he walked out of the arena with an urgency in his step, Caden at his side, the man had no where to go.

Outside the back entrance, his armored raider was waiting for them. Caden might have had his own ride when he arrived with his father, but Astor wasn't about to risk him running. As much as he hated the knightly order now, he would not let the boy throw it away with an impulsive move. It was once a noble goal to be a knight for the realm, whether rogue or serving a lord. Perhaps Caden would be better than his father. With Astor as his mentor, there was an even greater chance of that. He would train him to be superior knight; even if he would be arranging his own death. Willaim was known for his glory, but Astor was known for his brutal efficiency on the field of battle. Caden could have both.

It was just as Astor loaded his shield and sword onto the vehicle that Caden came around to his senses. The boy had been staring at him and realized that he would not ride behind his father's killer nor follow the man anywhere, knight or not. Silently the youth dropped his belongings and drew his sword. Astor's back was to him, but the seasoned knight knew the sound of a blade being drawn from his scabbard. Astor paused as his hand instinctively gripped the handle of his own blade.

"Attack me, and you forfeit your knighthood. Don't be foolish. Put it away and give me your bag," Astor ordered dryly. Instead Caden took up the heavy shield though he seemed a foot too small to carry it. Astor turned to see the determined hatred in the those green orbs as his gaze narrowed at the dark knight.

"Never," was said through his clenched teeth. Astor coolly reached back over his raider and drew his sword, but left the shield. Knowing the boy would stop at nothing short of a defeat, he turned as he grasped the long handle with both hands.

"Then pray none of the council see this. You have no chance at beating me, so this will be your first lesson," Astor replied as he nodded, gesturing for the boy to attack. Caden was only more enraged and charged with a furious cry.

Astor was ready for the swing, but was surprised when the boy suddenly pulled back the sword to thrust straight for the gap between his shoulder armor and chest plate with an impaling shot. He was still able to deflect Caden's sword with a hard swing that nearly took the boy off balance. He immediately stepped in close to limit Caden's return swing; placing a foot behind the boy's leading one. A strong lock and push sent the youth tripping backwards and falling to the ground

hard. The shield fell off his arm and rolled away. Before Caden could reach for it Astor's sword was pointed at his throat.

"You're strong for a 12 year old, but you need to pay more attention to your stance. Foot work and grappling are just as important as your sword," Astor said as he walked around him. Caden wasn't about to let him win that easily. He still had his sword and swung it hard, hitting Astor's blade. Caden knocked it away with enough time to roll to his side and back onto his feet.

"Good," Astor complimented as he took the same casual stance and gestured for him to attack again. Caden charged again with no sign of despair. This time he swung low, Astor simply took a step back but then the boy drove his shoulder into him trying to knock him off balance. Caden quickly raised his sword again to cut straight down. The knight staggered, but easily grabbed the blade with his gauntlet.

"The change up was a good idea, but you cannot expect to knock over an opponent as tall and strong as I," he ripped the sword from the boy's hands. "That's enough for now... take your bag and get on the bike," he ordered. Caden was still breathing heavy and ready to explode again. Astor's patience ran out.

"LISTEN, you will NEVER receive training again if you fight me. Do you understand me, boy? The law states you will show loyalty and obey your mentor or be shunned from further training. GET ON THE BIKE," Astor then pointed to his raider with a firm glare. He watched as Caden tensed up, clenched his teeth tight. The boy shut his eyes tight before releasing his breath and reached down for his bag. When he turned back to Astor there was still hate and vengeance in his young face, but he thrust the duffle into the man's hands and climbed onto the back seat of the armored raider.

Burkhold stood in silent anger just outside the main entrance. His lip curled with disgust as he watched Astor ride off into the country side with Caden. The man's glare could have cut stone, but he managed to hold his breath as his brothers passed by him as they walked to their rides.

"That poor boy, what possessed you to enforce that law? Brotherly Combat hasn't been invoked in years. Not since the realm united against the Jensari. Astor is no mentor for that boy," Justin prodded only to be quieted by a sharp look from Burkhold.

"That man has no place among us and I will have him in violation yet," Burkhold hissed as he started for his raider. Justin Hathaway and the rest of the knights were left with only regret and sorrow. Some had known Jonathan, but all knew William. All believed they had witnessed a tragedy and whispered prayers for Caden.

Burkhold's mind was still wrapped in Lord Donovan's affairs and what Astor knew of them. His pull through the knightly ranks ran deep. He had heard the reports of Astor as he fought on the battlefield. He had once thought to groom the knight to serve Donovan, but after the incident with the caravan, both Burkhold and Astor knew that fierce knight's time in the ranks was over. Astor slipped away from the assassins Burkhold sent. Then it was as if the man simply vanished.

Now it was all too close. He couldn't kill Astor without an investigation. The rumors left room for suspicion, but too many knew how fiercely loyal Astor was before his disappearance. He needed to plant more doubt in their minds and still keep an eye on the plans. The device was still missing some vital components. More engineers were needed to help figure it out.

Burkhold was soon at Donovan's manor with helmet underarm and his head low.

"My Lord. William Striker is dead." he said without pause as he walked into Donovan's vast study. Donovan looked up from his desk and leaned back into his

leather arm chair as he brought a hand to his trim dark beard to brush against his chin in thought. The warm glow of the lamps lit his cheekbones but brought a dark shadow over his eyes.

"This is very unfortunate," his casual tone betraying his lack of humanity.

"I tried to catch Astor in violation over refusing Caden, but he actually took the boy as his squire," a scowl formed on Burkhold's face and tightened his grip on his helmet as he recalled the incident.

"Shame, William was grooming the boy nicely." Donovan got up from his chair slowly as he began to think on how he would have to alter plans. He walked up to Burkhold so to speak more privately, away from the prying ears of servants and his young daughter.

"I will deal with him. I do not want your attention wavering from the project. We need another engineer. One who can figure it out. They're so close, but so are the Jensari," he whispered with a soft yet commanding voice. His eyes piercing into the old knight; pinning him with his presence.

Burkhold could feel the pressure behind the man's words. It was as if he had his back against a cold wall. Though Donovan had promised him wealth and power as his servant, he knew the man only had so much patience. He once saw him use one of his own household servants to test out an new invention. It had made the battle-harden knight squirm in his skin. Donovan stood there engaged and observing as if it had been a show. Burkhold did not want to end up as the next subject.

"I will find one, My Lord," the knight bowed his head briefly.

"Good," Donovan headed back to his desk. The simple gesture of turning his back being the signal for Burkhold to take his leave.

The sun was getting low as Astor and Caden traveled the desolate road to Thebes. The city was still three hours away when he pulled over into a grassy clearing. He made sure to let a hill stand between them and the road. He didn't need the curious coming over to try and share a meal.

Caden was silent as the knight dismounted and started taking a sleeping bag and blanket from his raider. The boy didn't even get down or look at him. It was obvious that the shock and anger was still fresh and it could continue like that for weeks, but it didn't mean Astor would let the boy stubbornly freeze to death.

"Get down from there and go find some firewood," he ordered bluntly.