

The sun was setting as Jyk emptied a bucket of water over his head to wash the sweat off of his bared chest. He pulled his shirt back on and was headed for the gate out of the training yard when Master Varlin came walking out of the armory.

“Where are you headed in such a hurry?,” he asked.

Jyk shrugged. “I haven’t been into town for a couple span so I figured I’d go have a pint at a friend’s pub. Why, wanna come?”

Varlin rolled his eyes. “To The Dog’s Bollocks? I’ll pass.” His eyes narrowed. “But you’re sure you’re just going to the pub and not to the arena?”

Jyk sighed heavily. “By the gods, man, how many times do I have to tell you that I haven’t fought since you started training me? Even if I wanted to, with no time to train hand- to- hand I’d get my ass kicked all around the pit.”

Varlin’s shoulders sank. “I just want to be sure you stay focused.”

“Hours of training every afternoon after a working all morning doesn’t show focus? Can’t I just go have a couple of pints without raising suspicion?” Jyk scowled at the master- at- arms.

“I guess you’re right,” Varlin relented. “I would just hate to see you waste all that potential, so I worry.”

Jyk tossed his head in irritation. “I’m sure Disciplinary Howle has been telling you some of the choicer bits of my past so you will keep vigilant, but can you please judge me based on the present?”

“Prize fighting can be hard to leave behind,” Varlin said gently.

”I’ve lost the rage that sent me looking for an ass- whipping in the pits and I’ve got plenty of coin saved up, so why the hell would I risk an injury that would ruin my training schedule?”

Varlin sighed heavily. “Alright, point taken,” he said grudgingly. “Just do your best to continue staying out of trouble. We don’t have time for me to discipline you between now and the Enlistment Tourney.”

Jyk nodded. “I know, I know, it’s only three months away and my swordplay is still sloppy. Most people train for years before they get good enough to make it into the Guard. We’ve been over all of that, but if I don’t get the chance to relax once in awhile I’ll lose my bleeding mind.”

Varlin nodded crisply. “Fine, but make it an early night because I plan to start pushing you harder as of tomorrow.”

The pub was sparsely populated when Jyk arrived, a quiet mid- span evening. Delk greeted Jyk with a warm grin and a cool mug as he got seated at the bar. “Hey there, kiddo, finally decided to visit the outside world?”

Jyk chuckled and clasped hand- to- forearm with Delk across the bar. “Varlin’s been pushing me pretty hard. On top of that the ducal court swells this time of summer, so the servants’ wing is overcrowded and basically a complete wreck.” He took a long drink from his mug and sighed contentedly.

Delk shook his head sympathetically. “Rough couple span?”

Jyk nodded emphatically. “Oh yeah. But, today Master Varlin got the idea to put a pair of shortwords in my hands and everything got a little easier.”

Delk’s grin widened. “On your way to being as stylish with blades as you are with fists, eh?”

Jyk scoffed softly. “I dunno about all that, but I don’t feel like a lame horse when I’m sparring anymore. There been any word on the underground about how tough the competition is looking?”

Delk shrugged. “There’s been some trouble brewing with maynese raiders at the southern border, so they’re probably gonna push the call pretty hard. The ones the Guard isn’t interested in will likely get pitched by every militia in the duchy. It’s been since before you were born that the full guard was sent into the field and everyone seems to think a bit of war is overdue.”

Jyk furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “I’m not sure whether or not to be encouraged by that...wartime means the opportunity for field promotions, but I’m likely to go and get myself killed in pursuit of one.”

“The way most figure it is that if war breaks out they’ll be marching off one way or another and the Guard is the best group of men to be a part of. Over two thousand trained soldiers; the perfect core for any forces the duchy may need to field. Best pay, best fighters, most glory.” Delk flashed a wink.

“I think I'd be perfectly happy keeping an eye on minor nobility my whole career,” Jyk said with a laugh.

Delk smiled softly. “War will come, boyo, that's one thing I can guarantee. Maynon settled its most recent civil war nearly a generation ago and the northern barons have always been a bunch of instigators. The best grazing valleys are in our territory and greed has been getting the best of them for centuries.”

Jyk took a deep drink of lager. “Well, that ought to serve as good motivation for my training. How long do you think before things get serious?”

Delk shrugged heavily. “I'm no expert, Jyk.”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “No, but you are one hell of a history buff, so historically how long do these things take to become serious?”

“Judging by how frequent the stories of raiding are becoming around here...a year, two on the outside.”

Jyk's jaw went slack and he stared down at his mug. “So I'll be on the front lines before I turn eighteen, then.”

Delk nodded grudgingly. “It would seem so. Even the City Watch sends off most of their lower ranking men when the Guard marches.”

Jyk heaved a sigh. “Now I see why Varlin has been acting so urgent lately. Even if I don't make it into the Guard this year I'll likely join the Duke's Men and go to war anyway.” He sipped from his mug. “It feels like my life is becoming very real very fast...it's unnerving.”

Delk chuckled lightly. “That's normal for someone approaching a turning point like you are. Everything you've done so far has all led up to a particular moment and now you know when that moment will be.”

Jyk gulped at his lager. “Yeah, a month and a half after my sixteenth birthday. Is it normal for something so big to happen to a sixteen cycle old?”

Delk shrugged. “Most kids start their apprenticeships at thirteen or younger. By your age the most talented of them would be testing for journeyman. Besides, aren't you the one that decided he can't take another year in the servants' wing? The timing is purely of your own choosing.”

Jyk nodded dully. “I guess I'm just feeling the pressure. I mean, whose to say that winning a fight or two in the Enlistment Tourney will net me a spot in the Guard? I mean, it's not just a normal tournament, right?”

Delk shook his head. “It's more audition than it is tournament. You just need a skilled opponent to impress the judges by defeating.”

Jyk's expression perked up. “Can I challenge a particular applicant? To make sure I beat an impressive fighter?”

“Yes, but how will you know who to challenge?”

Jyk smiled. “The serving girls always chatter about the most popular and most reputed caravan guards fighting for enlistment. I'm sure somebody will stand out.”

Delk's eyebrows raised. “A caravan guard? Pretty lofty, especially with how bad the roads have been lately.”

“If I don't take out one of the best there's no way they're gonna pick a kid of sixteen cycles for enlistment. If I leave it up to them they'll pair me with opponents they think will fit a kid of sixteen cycles. They'll call me impressive and tell me to come back when I'm a little older.”

Delk nodded grudgingly. “You have a point there, but do you really think three months training with shortswords will be enough?”

Jyk shrugged as he took another drink from his mug. “It'll have to be.”

The next three months passed in a flash of dishes and blunted steel for Jyk, even his birthday celebration was only a short night of drinking in The Dog's Bollocks after his normal training regimen. All the work seemed to be paying off – he had run out of challenging sparring partners two span before the tourney came around. Jyk had scheduled his regular day out appropriately and spent the morning doing light drills with Master Varlin. With three hours left before the tourney – a makeshift arena of temporary bleachers had been built just outside the city walls – Varlin laid out an excellent lunch spread for the pair of them.

Jyk was halfway through a large beef rib when Varlin's steady stare made him put the meat down on his plate. “What?”

“I'm simply wondering about your choice of opponent. Are you sure you aren't letting your personal history run away with your judgment?” Master Varlin steepled his fingers, elbows propped on the table.

Jyk sighed heavily before picking up a napkin and wiping his mouth. “You figure I picked Bylik just because I broke his jaw when we were kids? Okay yeah, that does have a little to do with it, but he's the most vaunted caravan guard entering in the tourney. If I beat him they *have* to enlist me.”

Varlin nodded. “Yes, but he’s the most vaunted candidate for a reason. His great- uncle is a Royal Shieldsman and he has a cousin that’s a captain in the Ducal Guard already. Not to mention he’s supposed to be a pretty damn good – and experienced – swordsman. And if you didn’t pick him because you whipped him as a kid, what’s the personal reason?”

Jyk sipped from a narrow glass of mead and cast his glance around the spartan dining hall inside Varlin’s armory. “Don’t get me wrong, breaking his jaw when we were kids will be helpful, but not because I think I’ll always be tougher than him. He’s always been easy to taunt into losing his temper and I have a good way to do that.”

Varlin nodded, mildly impressed. “And his experience will matter a little bit less because of that. You’re about as ready as you’re gonna get, I suppose.”

Jyk smirked. “If you get any more enthusiastic I may bloody well overflow with confidence,” he japed.

Varlin gave a small smile. “I’m just a little sad to see you move on so soon...you’ve really livened the place up these few months.”

Jyk smirk turned into a wide, warm smile. “And had a wonderful time doing so,” he said sincerely. “I can’t tell you how lucky I feel to have trained at the feet of one of this duchy’s storied warriors.”

Varlin’s smile grew. “Well there’s only a *couple* stories about me,” he said, preening. “But on a more relevant note, the pair of blunted shortswords you’ve been training with are yours to keep through boot camp. After that we’ll see to outfitting you with a proper set.”

Jyk shifted happily in his seat. “Thank you, Master Varlin, I’ll admit I was wondering if they would have anything other than the standard longswords and bucklers.”

“They won’t,” Varlin replied, “and you will likely take some crap from your drill instructor about bringing your own. Hopefully your performance in the tourney will be enough to keep him open- minded.”