

Jyk quirked an eyebrow. "Sounds kinda morbid to me, listening in on horror stories from distant wars."

Delk barked a short laugh. "And fighting for sport sounds kind of insane to most people."

Jyk looked offended. "Be fair, I fight for sport and *money*. You mustn't forget the money." He flashed a grin.

"Eight tala, if memory serves."

Jyk nodded solemnly. "Assuming I can knock a gorilla on his ass, so to speak."

Delk shrugged. "Like you yourself said, you've been doing it since you could ball a fist. Gorillas are your bread and butter, right?"

Jyk chuckled softly. "Right you are. So why don't I feel like I'm about to get into a tough fight? Where's the energy, the anger, the anticipation?"

Delk sighed heavily. "It's the waiting. It can give a fighter too much time to think. Why don't we do some stick 'n move drills? Keep you moving, get your blood pumping and all?"

Jyk lost track of time as he ducked, dodged, threw quick combinations and darted away from Delk at an easy pace. He hardly noticed when the twenty- minute notice came, they just picked up the pace and worked on the heavy bag as well. When the call to the pit came Jyk felt better, but his normal fire still was not there. Even when the crowd roared at his introduction, something was off.

The sight of his opponent managed to perk Jyk's interest more than a little. Pyke proved to be one of the most prodigiously muscled men he had ever seen. *Now, I see why Delk told me not to fight him. I don't think body shots are going to do much good* . Pyke dropped in on the opposite side of the pit to an even louder welcome than Jyk had received. The referee waved them to the center. *I've either got to go after his jaw, or try and out- grapple him into a choke hold. Huh...*

"I want a straight up fight here boys," the referee said firmly, "No nut- shots, no eye gouging, no biting, you know the drill. Now, back to the wall and come out swinging."

Jyk put his hands out to tap fists with Pyke, but the larger man had already turned his back on him to walk to the wall. Jyk shrugged and backpedaled until the referee signaled them to fight. He figured he would meet Pyke in the middle, check out his fighting style, then try some of the stick 'n move stuff Delk was showing him. He moved his head out of the way of a couple of jabs, tried his touch on Pyke's midsection with poor results, ducked a hook, landed a couple of jabs on Pyke's chin and darted back a few steps.

Pyke waded forward fearlessly, unleashing a flurry of blows that pushed Jyk back until he ran up against the pit wall. He was blocking a lot of it, but the larger man's strength was incredible. Even when he did take a blow on the arm it tended to smack him in the head in the fist's place. Once his opponent was pinned, Pyke redoubled his efforts, striking high and low, breaking down Jyk's guard until landing a powerful right hook to the smaller man's temple, dropping him to the dirt.

Jyk's head swam as he felt his side thump to the floor of the pit. As his bearings began their return, a foot drove into his stomach. Pyke kicked Jyk about the midsection several times before the prone man rolled onto his back, pivoted on his tailbone, and swung his legs around to sweep Pyke off his feet and onto his backside. Jyk dug his feet in the dirt and tumbled away from the falling man, rolling to his feet and bring up his guard, his torso still slumped over in pain.

Jyk felt a wide grin pull across his face as his blood surged. *There's the feeling I was waiting for* . His back straightened. "Finally," he said as Pyke rose, "a challenge." Jyk showed his teeth. "But, you're gonna have to do better than that if you wanna put *me* down."

Pyke strode silently and purposefully forward. Jyk shrugged and followed his example, meeting his opponent in the middle. Pyke threw a heavy hook that Jyk caught with an upraised forearm as he fired jab in response, which was also blocked. They worked in a slow circle as they exchanged hard blows, each occasionally slipping past the other's guard – always to the head. Jyk ducked a particularly loopy hook and rose with a hard uppercut to Pyke's jaw, his torso tilting back from the impact. Just as Pyke recovered, Jyk took a half step backward and drove a powerful front kick into the larger man's diaphragm, toppling him to the pit floor.

Jyk quite literally leapt upon the opportunity, managing to get past Pyke's legs and straddle his midsection. Jyk leveled a series of hard downward punches and elbows, many of pushing past Pyke's guard and smashing into his face, propelling his head back to smack against the dirt and rebound in time for the next clean blow. Jyk continued his assault until Pyke's guard went loose and the larger man was dazed to the brink of unconsciousness, at which point he abruptly stood tall and gestured for the referee to make a ruling.

Pyke rolled from side to side on his back with his arms still raised as if to fend off an attacker, groaned softly, then dropped his arms and went quiet. The referee waved hurriedly towards the nearby medic and raised Jyk's fist to a deafening roar from the spectators. The wave of adoration crashed over Jyk with such force that he was struck dizzy all over again, his senses not clearing until Delk and Ellis had

managed to lead him through the throng and back to his warmup room. It wasn't until the two older men placed him in a chair that Jyk realized how strange his face felt.

He gently put his hands to the area around his eyes and flinched in pain and shock at the extent of the swelling. "Damn....," he said, "he messed me up pretty good, didn't he?"

Delk was shaking his head with a mix of awe and irritation. "You're bloody insane, you are, going toe- to- toe with a guy that size. A swollen face is a blessing – you're lucky he didn't knock your head clean off!"

Jyk couldn't restrain a bloody grin. "Yeah, but you should see what he looked like." He snickered loudly. "The look on his face when I pounced on top of him and started going nuts." He snickered again. "He couldn't believe what was happening to him."

Ellis broke into a long bout of rolling belly laughs. "I probably had a similar expression on my face." His expression sobered abruptly. "That was an impressive display you put on out there, Jyk. Pyke's never been beaten in the first round before. The two other people he lost to had to fight for over an hour before he wore down enough to be taken out."

Jyk poured himself a tall glass of mead and took a drink from it. "If memory serves that makes three tala for winning the fight and five for the one I bet on myself. Eight tala total, yes?"

Ellis laughed again. "As a matter of fact I'm going to make it an even ten. We do a little 'fight of the night' bonus thing around here and that most certainly qualifies." He dug into the coin purse on his hip and stacked ten silver coins on the table. "Rest up and train hard, I should be able to set your title shot up in a span or two – look at your schedule, try and work out a night you can free up and let me know. For now, enjoy yourself and feel free to watch the fights – maybe place a bet or two and give me a chance to win some of that money back." He grinned widely and flashed a wink before sweeping out of the room, leaving Jyk and Delk once again to themselves.

"He's right, you know," Delk said seriously. "That was a rather impressive display out there. It looked to me like you vented a lot of rage. Feel any better?"

Jyk shrugged and took another drink of mead as he scooped up the stack of coins with his other hand and gazed at the pile in his palm. "A bit, yeah. I also find the sudden influx of a fortune in silver to be rather distracting from my personal problems. Kind of hard to sulk when I can't figure out all of the things I should buy – clothes, boots, a good carving knife, oooh a soft mattress and pillow." His face brightened further. "I can afford to pay people to do my work around the castle!," he exclaimed.

"Slow down, kid," cautioned Delk. "This circuit isn't exactly illegal, but it's certainly not smiled upon by the duke and his court. Add to that the Steward's lasting dislike of you and it doesn't make for a good situation for you to shirk your duties entirely." He sighed heavily. "It's fine to push the limits of your freedom as you've been doing recently, but don't think they'll just let you go off and do your own thing all the time."

Jyk frowned. "I didn't mean all the time, I just meant to free up more days for fights and training and stuff." He sipped at his mead. "I am very well aware of my indentured status, thank you very much."

Delk sighed guiltily. "I didn't mean..."

Jyk shrugged. "I know, but it's always there. A hard ceiling for my happiness. Even if I do one day manage to join the Ducal Guard, I'll always be doing my duke's business. Regardless of how much respect it brings me."

Delk sighed again. "Not forever. If you serve in the Ducal Guard then you will be allowed to retire after a short career like everyone else. Same goes for the City Watch."

Jyk shrugged again. "For now I think I'll concentrate on putting something cold on my face to take the swelling down. Think you could help me out with that?"