

Jyk woke to find Kayla seated in a chair beside his bed, staring at him disapprovingly. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and pulled himself up into a seated position. “Good morning to you too,” he said dully. “Before we get into how much you don't like this prize fighting thing and how bad my face looks, open that duffel bag and take out the blue thing on top.”

Kayla eyed him up and down suspiciously for several moments before bending to his request and letting out a loud gasp as she lifted the bolt of cotton in her hands. “It's so soft,” she said admiringly.

“And it's all yours,” said Jyk happily. “Whether or not you like the fighting, I only took a little more damage than I have on several recent occasions and made quite a bit of silver for my trouble. Delk already gave me a lecture about taking control of my future, in case that was on your 'to- rant' list.” He flashed a cocky grin.

“So you're already stopping fighting?,” she asked, not taking her eyes off of the cloth.

Jyk chuckled softly. “No, but I think I'm gonna give my best effort at turning a short prize fighting career into a long Guard career. It turns out that I'm a pretty good pit fighter. The next challenge is to make that into something Master Varlin will respect enough to teach me to use a sword.”

“Well,” Kayla said, finally looking up from the cloth in her hands, “I guess that having a strong sense of the direction you're headed in is something. Even if does take you into even more violent pastures.”

Jyk smiled warmly. “Well, it's what I'm good at and it seems to be the most sensible path to a half- decent future. The trick is managing to impress Varlin; I doubt he makes a habit of watching fights in Tarranton Arena.”

Kayla frowned halfheartedly. “Well, I can't say I like it, but if it makes you happy I can get myself behind it.” She looked down at the cloth and back up again with a wide smile. “This really was very thoughtful of you, Jyk, you shouldn't have.”

Jyk waved off the thanks. “It's nothing, really. If there is anything else you could use just let me know. I ran out of things to buy rather quickly.” Kayla was beaming as she gave Jyk's hair a mighty tousle before trotting out of his room.

*Wow, he thought, shocked. I'm gonna have to remember that bit for the next time I'm expecting a lecture. Be ready with words as well as gifts and save myself a tongue- lashing. Nice .* He sighed as he rose from his bed and trudged over to his bag to dig out the liniment for his face. *And now to another day of scrubbing pots and sweeping floors – be still my beating heart.*

Despite general irritation at his regularly scheduled toiling, Jyk's morning actually passed rather pleasantly. No one bothered him as he washed and everyone seemed content with a polite nod as he swept the halls. It was rather strange, taken on the whole. *Maybe Delk was right about what would happen as word got around. Those drunkards said something about cooks at the fights the other night, so people must be finding out by now. Maybe the sailing really will get smoother around here.*

As Jyk made the trek back to his room he was looking forward to perusing one of the books he had picked up, a pair on mythology and legends and one about how the dwarven code of honor rose to prominence in the Imperial Age. He rounded a corner and almost walked headlong into Jon. “Ah, hellos,” exclaimed Jyk, “not again.”

Jon raised his palms in front of him and shook his head. “No, not again. I just wanted to ask you if what the cooks said was true, if you're really gonna be fighting for a title already.”

Jyk couldn't resist smiling as he nodded. “I'm as surprised as you likely are.”

Jon forced a nervous smile. “Well, I, uh, I just wanted to say thank you for taking it easy on us so many times. I guess it wouldn't have mattered if Gaven was a tough guy or not, you're just in a higher class than most of us.”

Jyk gave a heavy shrug. “I try not to think of things from that kind of perspective, but I appreciate your meaning all the same. Feel free to tell the guys that I've got no hard feelings and honestly I'd rather save all my fighting for when it earns me coin. I think it's high time we all had a little peace around here.”

Jon nodded rapidly. “Yeah, yeah, sounds good,” he stammered before walking quickly past Jyk, obviously fighting the urge to break into a sprint through the halls.

Jyk stared at Jon's back for several long moments before heaving another shrug and continuing on the way to his room. *Well that settles it, Delk was right. If this holds up I might really be able to stay focused enough to make the Guard within the cycle. Snoogans.* (Note from author: That's right, snoogans.)

The more Jyk focused himself on his goal of gaining Varlin's respect, the easier things seemed to get for him. Castle bullies evaporated in his presence, he found more and better training partners at the arena, and his skill in the pit seemed to be rising exponentially. Ellis ended up giving him one more primer fight before he got his shot at the third division title, but both fights proved to be almost total disappointments. Even when the champion became the first opponent to push him into a second round, the challenge just didn't seem to be there.

A lot of the time Jyk wasn't even sure he was looking for that challenge anymore. It was strange, the way training began to take precedence over the fights and the techniques he used in a fight became more exciting than the contest itself. Stranger still was the sense of calm that settled more and more firmly in his chest. The more focused on getting into the Enlistment Tourney he was, the calmer his mind and emotions became. Prize fighting had seemed like such a perfect answer for all of his angry questions; now it seemed nothing more than a stepping stone.

And so Jyk found himself with a free afternoon and a mind too busy to permit the trip to the arena to train, instead wandering aimlessly about the castle's massive inner courtyard. Eventually he passed Master- at- arms Varlin's low- walled training yard, not really looking at what was going on but stopping as the delayed message reached his heavily self- entangled mind. Varlin was training around a dozen men in hand- to- hand combat. A small smile crept onto Jyk's face as he returned to the yard and leaned forward on the chest- high wall to watch.

Jyk was surprised when, on closer inspection, the youngest of the men training looked to be at least four cycles older than him. His smile grew when he noticed that two of the pupils weren't men at all and - in addition to being rather sweaty and attractive - looked to be the most technically advanced of the group. *I guess he really doesn't train people my age. He definitely teaches a different style than mine. Not nearly as direct, but effective all the same. Maybe not as used by the lot of them, but a real fighter could do quite well with it.*

He noticed a couple of the more highly skilled men glancing his way repeatedly and scowling. The next time they looked he gave a friendly nod; their scowls deepened nonetheless. Before he could make up his mind about whether he should leave to avoid trouble, Varlin dismissed the class and the two scowling men began walking his way. *Bugger*, he thought, *if I try and walk away now they'll just chase me down. Man...I really hope this doesn't end in me getting lashed. Again.*

He took a couple of steps back from the wall and tried to look relaxed while keeping his back straight to get every fraction of an inch out of his rather average height. His chest had begun to fill out rather well over the past few months, but he hadn't quite caught up with his last growth spurt. It is difficult to look intimidating when your parts do not fit together properly. He fought off a sigh as the two rather tall – and fully grown – young men reached the wall.

“You got a problem, servant?,” one of them barked.

Jyk rolled his eyes. “Just taking a look at how other people do things.”

“Other people,” the other man said with a laugh, “that's rich. You mean *better* people.”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “Noblemen?”

“Nope, but we're better than you,” spat the first.

A smirk crept onto Jyk's face. “Listen here, dickweed, if you're blood doesn't run blue then I suggest you ensure you know just what servant you're talking to before you go spouting shit.”

Both of them were visibly taken aback, but the first speaker recovered quickly. “You must be that little bastard that thinks he's tough shit because of a little coin won in the prize fights downtown.”

Jyk nodded. “That's one way of putting it, I suppose. The name is Jyk Pevnal and if your plan here is to kick my ass and teach me some moronic lesson...well, you'd better call the rest of the class back out here to help. No disrespect, but I watched you guys training and I'm just plain out of your league. Let's call it a day and go back to the better things I'm sure we all could be doing right now. Like drinking beer.”

Judging by the expression on the follower's face, he found Jyk's last point especially poignant, but the first man became even more hostile. “I was just gonna come over here and give you some shit before,” he said furiously, “but now I'm gonna give you that lesson you mentioned.” He hopped the wall and brought up his guard.

Jyk took a few hurried steps backwards, steadfastly refusing to bring his arms up from his sides. “C'mon man, just trust me when I say that us fighting won't end well for anyone. Even if I'm wrong and you are a highly skilled fighter, that just means I have to break your bones to win. Then you're in traction for several span and I get flogged again.”

“You ain't breaking shit,” the man said, spit fanning out in front of him, and advanced.

Jyk rolled his eyes and retreated slowly, managing to dodge the first succession of swings with simple head movement, growling angrily when he had to raise his hands to slap away a fist closing in on his jaw. He slapped away a few more irritating punches before sidestepping a hook, snatching the wrist with one hand as he moved, and yanking the man past him. Jyk trotted several quick steps backward.

“What's his name?,” asked Jyk, glancing at the man still on the other side of the wall.

“He's my cousin Tylik,” he said calmly, “and if you're the Jyk I think you are, you probably remember his older brother Bylik. You did break his jaw awhile back, after all.”