

Setting: Jyk grinned happily as he nodded deeply enough to border on bowing and followed Delk into the light at the end of the hallway. The light came from astoundingly large room sporting a circular pit thirty-three feet across and nearly three feet down, the bottom layered alternately with dirt and straw stretching another three feet into the earth. The floor around the pit was tiered upwards two feet for every six feet back to create nine levels of spectator standing room.

When the evening of Jyk's first professional fight finally came, he was near to bursting with excitement. He'd managed to stay out of any significant trouble for the past two span, testing his patience to its limit. He was fine as long as he was working, training, or carving, but every moment in between activities was lost in a haze of misery and self-loathing. He'd almost cut a finger off when he had noticed that the peak of a small tower he was carving from a hunk of oak had started to morph into the head of a woman under his meditative knife.

Now, he was standing with Delk and Ellis in one of the warm-up rooms that lined the outer walls of Tarranton Arena. Clad in nothing but a loose pair of pants and strips of cloth wrapped around his knuckles, Jyk had just finished a round of shadow boxing that left him glistening with sweat. The recent lash wounds on his back were red and angry, but they had healed sufficiently closed a few days beforehand and he did not expect to have any trouble out of them.

"So, what's the story on my opponent?," Jyk asked Ellis.

Ellis shrugged slightly. "Well, we have five divisions in total. Silas was pretty high up in the rankings of the fifth before you broke his arm, so I figured we'd try you out against someone midway up the fourth division ladder. He's only a couple years older than you and pretty similar in build so it should prove an effective test for both of you."

Jyk nodded as he continued to bounce up and down, keeping his muscles warm. "So if I beat him you put me in the fourth division, if I lose I get knocked down to the fifth?"

Ellis gave a small smile. "That's the gist of it." He gave a nod to the man that peeked his head into the room. "Looks like they're ready for you," he said with a toothy grin.

Jyk began the long walk down to the pit just as the scrawny orator standing amidst the dirt began his introduction. "Coming to the pit now is Jyk Pevnal, a newcomer to

professional fighting!," he bellowed to the crowd. "But don't let yourself think that he was pushed into the fourth division by mistake, he broke fifth division's Silas Stinger's arm during what started as a friendly sparring match!" Jyk hopped down into the pit and raised his arms to a smattering of weak cheers as the orator pointed in his direction.

"For his opponent," the man continued loudly, "with a record of five wins with no losses, we have Tarranton's newest knockout artist: Mikal 'The Hammer' Mallown!"

Jyk watched nervously as a well muscled man less than a stone heavier than him strolled calmly forward and hopped into the pit amidst a raucous welcome from the spectators. Jyk had watched a few fights in the two span since meeting Ellis and this was the most cheering he had heard for a fighter introduction. *Great*, thought Jyk, *he set me up against the fan favorite.*

The orator walked to the exact center of the pit and motioned for both fighters to join him there. "Alright boys," he said once they had reached him, "simple rules. No nut-shots, no eye gouging. Rounds are ten minutes and the fight continues until someone is knocked out, submitted, or otherwise unable to continue competing. Understood?" Once they had both nodded their understanding, he bobbed his head excitedly. "Alright then, retreat to the walls and come out fighting."

Jyk bumped fists with his opponent and they slowly backpedaled until the orator-turned-referee held his palms up for them to stop. After holding them up for a few moments he dropped them quickly to signify the beginning of the bout. Jyk slowly paced forward to meet Mikal in the middle, his nerves jangling. Most of the fights he had witnessed began with the fighters pecking lightly at each other to get a feel for the opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

After their first casual exchange of blocked jabs, Jyk understood why they called him 'The Hammer'. *Either this guy doesn't know how to hold back his full strength*, he thought, parrying another couple of jabs and returning them in kind, *or he's as strong enough for a guy twice his size*. It didn't take long for Mikal to decide to ratchet up the pressure and Jyk soon found himself losing control of the fight and being pursued about the pit. *Bugger this*. He ducked a looping hook and landed a couple of hard shots to Mikal's gut before darting back a couple of steps.

The look of frustration of Mikal's face as he closed the distance between them told Jyk

something he had begun to wonder about since the orator called his opponent a 'knockout artist'. *I bet it won't be hard to lure him into a haymaker and leave himself open. I wonder how good his chin is.* In order to test his hypothesis, Jyk decided to stick with the strategy that put the irritated look on Mikal's face in the first place: ducking, sticking, and moving.

After a few more exchanges, Jyk realized that his opponent had not managed to land anything beyond a glancing blow. *He's not getting any faster,* he realized. After another exchange, he corrected himself. *Actually, he's downright slow.* Jyk added a little more sticking into his strategy, quickening his combinations and twice he even put a fist on Mikal's jaw. When the look of frustration turned into wrath, Jyk knew his opening would be coming along shortly.

Mikal strode forward quickly and started into a wild combination. Jyk managed to parry aside a flurry of hard jabs and read the telegraphed right hook that was coming at him with everything 'The Hammer' had to put behind it. Jyk bent at the knees, ducking with a neat crouch, his mouth stretching into a grin as he felt the rush of air as a powerful right hook swung harmlessly above his head. When the space above him was almost clear, Jyk threw a sharp left hook around into Mikal's kidney and sprang back to his full height, driving his leg strength behind a vicious right uppercut. Fist found purchase under The Hammer's jaw, lifting him from his feet and sending him sprawling onto his back.

Jyk kept his guard raised until the referee waved his hands wide signaling a knockout, then raised them high in the air amidst a chorus of cheers and boos. Spreading his arms wide he found Ellis in the crowd and heaved a shrug in that direction. As he climbed out of the pit, Ellis hurried forward to give him a hand up and lead him back into the room where he had warmed up.

Delk was waiting there for him, a wide smile on his face. "Did he even *hit* you?," asked a visibly excited Delk.

Jyk couldn't suppress a chuckle. "A couple shots brushed my chin, but nothing straight on. He was too slow to get anything worthwhile past my guard." He shrugged and took a slow breath. "I will say that I've never blocked a jab nearly as strong as his, though."

Ellis shook his head in wonderment. "My boy, I think you are a legitimate freak of nature. You seem to be as fast as someone two stone lighter and as strong as someone two stone heavier. The Hammer was only a couple of fights away from a title shot and you

knocked him cold in under four minutes.” He flipped a silver tala towards Jyk, who deftly snatched it out of the air and raised it in front of his eyes for inspection.

“I’ve never actually held one of these before,” he said, turning the coin in his hand repeatedly and staring at the crown on one side and tower on the other. It was several long moments before he snapped out of his reverie and pocketed the coin. “So what’s the plan for my next fight?” he asked.

Ellis laughed loudly. “Well shit, I’m kind of at a loss there. With you dispatching your two opponents so quickly it’s kind of hard to gauge who to pit you up against.” He tapped at his chin thoughtfully. “Y’know, I do have *one* idea. You feel up for a second bout in a couple of hours?” He pulled out a silver pocket watch and checked the time. “Or do you need to get back to the castle and catch some sleep before your duties?”

Jyk shrugged. “Kayla was kind enough to reschedule my day out this month for tomorrow in case I needed the time to recover. I’ve got energy enough to fight every bout on the card between now and dawn.”

Ellis grinned widely, shaking his head again. “How a born warrior like you gets stuck in the servants’ dungeon for life baffles me. It should’ve been Varlin’s knee you were bounced upon as a baby, not some servant.” He was still shaking his head as he began making his way towards the door. “Cool down, but stay loose. I’ll be back in a little bit to tell you whether or not I can get you another fight tonight.”

When Ellis left the room, Delk immediately walked over to Jyk and clapped him on the shoulder with a hearty laugh. “I knew you were talented, kid, but *damn*. I’ve seen The Hammer fight before and lemme tell you, he *ain’t* slow, you just made him look that way.”

Jyk shrugged casually. “So a fighter like him is considered fast at my size?”

Delk laughed again. “Yes,” he responded flatly. “Not lightning fast, but he’s pretty quick. And I *thought* he was too tough to get dropped by the first hard punch he took on the chin.”

Jyk shrugged again. “That uppercut had my legs behind it on top of my normal arm strength. It probably looked a lot more impressive than it was.”

Delk shook his head in a manner very similar to the wonderment Ellis had shown. “You really are something else, Jyk. Ellis is right, they should’ve had Varlin raise you, not Kayla.”

Jyk scrunched his brow. "How does he know Master-at-arms Varlin, anyways?," he asked confusedly.

"Ellis started out as a private in the Tarrant Guard. Varlin was the staff sergeant that rode his ass for the entirety of his short-lived military career. He used what he learned from being a member of a standing army and slowly built a small local fighting circuit into this underground palace for gladiatorial combat. Now fighters from all over Tathren come here to compete under Ellis's watchful eye."

The roar of the crowd suddenly grew loud in the warm-up room, then quiet again as Ellis closed the door behind himself. "Alright, Jyk, I've got a proposition for you. The top contender for the title in Division Four is in the house as a spectator tonight. I was going to throw him a couple of challenging fights before I would be comfortable giving him a title shot, but now I think that a bout between the two of you is all I need to see."

Delk's eyes widened. "Your top contender? Pyke?" When Ellis nodded silently, Delk rounded on Jyk. "Think hard about this one, Jyk. Pyke has easily three stone and four inches on you to go with his fifteen professional fights and extremely nasty temperament."

Jyk tried and failed to look concerned for Delk's sake. He mustered a halfhearted shrug. "Meh, I've been fighting guys bigger, more experienced, and nastier than me since I was old enough to throw a punch. Besides, since it looks like I'm gonna be fighting in his division I'm gonna have to fight him sometime. Why not now?"

"You just fought.,"

"I used more energy warming up than in the fight." He turned to Ellis. "I'm in."