

Jyk woke in the back room of The Dog's Bollocks with pain both inside his head and spread over his face, but his smile remained. When they had left the arena after his fight with Pyke, a fairly large group of spectators had followed them back to the pub and proceeded to have a raucous party in his honor. It seemed that several of them had won quite a lot of money by betting on him and felt it was only right to get him good and drunk as their way of thanks.

The full light of day was streaming through the pub's windows as Jyk trudged into the main room and plopped himself down on a stool. Delk was slowly wiping down the bar in anticipation of the day's business with a hefty smile of his own. "Quite a night for you, wasn't it?," he greeted cheerily, sliding a glass of a strange greenish liquid across the bar.

Jyk looked at the glass curiously before responding. "I never knew violence could have so many benefits."

Delk chuckled softly. "For professionals, yes. Now, drink that stuff, it'll take the edge off the hangover you most certainly have."

Jyk quirked an eyebrow questioningly, but lifted the glass and downed the thick, grassy mixture it contained without voicing complaint. "Interesting....," he said with a sigh, thumping the empty glass down onto the bar.

Delk nodded. "It's full of all the stuff you're missing after a hard night's drinking. So, what's your plan for the day? Shopping spree?"

Jyk nodded. "Seems like the thing to do seeing as I have to go back to work tomorrow. Probably pick up a liniment or something for my face while I'm at it. May even be the first stop."

"Just try not to get too carried away. There's nothing to say that the coin will keep rolling in like this, y'know."

Jyk rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, but even losing fights pay well. Besides, I'm gonna run out of things to buy rather quickly, I expect; I have few needs and little space at the castle. I should probably buy Kayla something, shouldn't I?"

Delk smiled warmly. "That'd be mighty thoughtful of you."

"But...what would she want? Does she like jewelry?"

Delk shrugged. "No clue, but I do know that she sews her own clothes. Why not buy her a roll of some good cloth or something?"

Jyk grinned widely. "That sounds pretty good, actually." He stood up. "I guess I should go see...uh...what was the healer's name that you sent me to? I guess I never caught it last time around."

"Renna? Yeah, she can set you up, but expect a a lecture."

Jyk realized how right Delk had been from the moment he entered Renna's clinic. She stomped out from behind her shop- counter armed with a glower and hip- holstered fists. "And just what in seven hells happened to *you*? No pretty minstrel- girl to simper over you this time, eh?"

Jyk sighed heavily. "No, Sara left Tarranton awhile ago. I got these in a very profitable and highly organized pit fight."

Renna scoffed loudly as she got right in his face to examine the swelling. "And just how much money did you make getting your face pulverized?"

Jyk smiled widely. "Well, considering how much more pulverizing I did than the other guy, I ended up making ten tala last night."

Renna took a couple of steps back, her scowl shrinking markedly. "Oh. Well, that's a bit different, then. What d'you want, something to take the swelling down and soothe the pain a bit? I'll give you a little pot for ten bits that'll last many fights into the future. Deal?"

Jyk quirked an eyebrow. "Ten bits? You wouldn't try to take advantage of a young man just because he recently came into some money, would you?"

Renna scowled. "Fine, five bits, though it's a real hassle breaking a whole tala for that little."

Jyk's smile softened as he followed her to the counter and dug a tala from the coin pouch secured inside his waistband. She took a small pot down from one of several shelves lining the wall behind her and set to counting out forty- five bits with a scowl on her face. Jyk immediately began rubbing a thin layer of the liniment over his face, sighing softly at the sensation. It was cool, almost as if there was a winter breeze blowing in his face, and the pressure from the swelling seemed to decrease instantly. He thanked her profusely as he tied a string around the pot to hold the lid on and fastened one end of the string around his belt. A proper set of belt pouches would have to be part of his clothing purchases.

Clothes were his next stop, as a matter of fact. There was a very nice, inexpensive tailor's shop just around the corner from Renna's and it seemed the obvious place to go. He walked out with a package containing several sets of shirts and pants, some in the colors of

House Brantley, some not. The finest of the blue and browns he wore out of the shop – along with a belt lined with a wide array of pouches. It had cost an entire silver tala, but the way he saw it an entire wardrobe was easily worth ten percent of his earnings. The tailor even pointed him in the direction of a cobbler with the same sort of high quality- low price approach to business.

By the time he was finished hopping from store to store around the craftsman's district Jyk had added a pair of boots, a knife made just for woodcarving, the softest set of sheets he had ever felt, a feather pillow, and a bolt of blue rohirrish cotton for Kayla to his collection – along with a large duffel bag with which to carry everything. The sun was almost ready to set by the time Jyk made it back to The Dog's Bollocks and the pub had just begun to fill. He stowed his bag in the back room before bellying up to the bar and signaling Delk for a lager.

“You look good,” Delk said, sliding a full mug across the bar.

“Thank you. I bought pretty much everything I could think of and only spent three and a half tala.” He sipped from his mug with a smile.

“Not bad, but I'm guessing you didn't stuff a mattress into that bag.”

Jyk chuckled. “I'm gonna have to look into that one some other time. Not really an item I can carry across town, no matter how awesome the boots I bought are. And they are awesome.”

Delk grinned happily. “That's great, kiddo. When d'you plan on heading back to the castle?,” he asked.

Jyk shrugged. “I dunno, I figure I'll make the walk pretty late – it's not like I have anything to do up there other than sleep. Besides, the longer I'm around the more questions I'll get about the bruises on my face.”

Delk barked a laugh. “One night's not gonna change the bruises much, Jyk, nor is it gonna stop the questions about why you're wearing new clothes. Hells, there might've been a couple castle folk at the fights last night.”

Jyk's eyes widened. “I...I don't know what I think about that...,”

Delk furrowed his brow. “What, you mean to tell me you didn't think anyone would find out about your prize fighting? It's some of the cheapest entertainment in Tarranton. There's fights every night of the span.”

Jyk heaved a sigh. “I guess I never really thought about it. Will it be a good thing or a bad thing, do you think?”

Delk quirked an eyebrow curiously. “I would think becoming known as a skilled professional fighter could be nothing *but* good. Girls think it's sexy and guys think it's cool. And who wants to start shit with a pro?”

Jyk nodded, convinced. “Well, I guess that makes sense.” He flashed a smile which quickly morphed into a small frown. “Money and success make people jealous, though. Where you see admiration I see envy and resentment. And being attacked in numbers.”

Delk rolled his eyes. “Ever the bloody pessimist. Not all swords are double- edged, Jyk. Sometimes a good thing is just that: a good thing.”

Jyk scoffed. “I'll believe that only once I experience it. As far as I can tell everything good comes with a healthy dose of the bad.”

“Bah, you've just taken more than your fair share of shit so far in life. It's gotta balance out sometime.”

Jyk fixed Delk with a doubtful expression. “I thought that once before, remember? I'm not going to make the mistake of thinking one piece of life can make everything better – not again. No matter how successful I am as a fighter I'll always be a speck of dirt inside the castle and that's just how it is.”

Delk grumbled loudly. “Not if you push the advantage. Didn't Howle tell you that Varlin might overlook your age if you show enough talent? I'd say becoming a prize fighting champion before your sixteenth birthday takes a lot of bloody talent, wouldn't you?”

Jyk arched an eyebrow. “So I earn Varlin's favor by beating people senseless in exchange for money?”

“In a way,” Delk said with a chuckle. “As Master- at- arms it's part of his job to be on the lookout for talent and you've managed to keep out of major trouble before – why not now?”

Jyk relented with a nod. “I guess you have a point, I'm just finding it hard to be motivated into good behavior. I mean, before I was being good to earn time spent with Sara. Now it's just to go get into a fight with an audience and a profit. And I'm already pretty much out of stuff to buy.”

Delk quirked an eyebrow. “Not exactly the perfect outlet for your frustrations you thought it would be?”

Jyk shrugged discontentedly. “Well, I managed to vent most of my misgivings about Sara leaving, but now I'm kind of stuck with the same anger I had before. I mean, what's the point really? Either way I fight for money and remain the duke's bitch- boy.”

Delk raised his other eyebrow to join the first. “The glory of the day's shopping spree wearing off, I take it?”

Jyk sighed and took a long drink of lager. “When I first won the ten tala it seemed like it would make such a difference, but...well, nice clothes and comfortable boots may make a guy feel pretty good but it doesn't actually change a damn thing.”

Delk frowned sympathetically. “Being cheered on in the pit and celebrated after the fight not fulfilling for you?”

Jyk shrugged again. “Don't get me wrong, it feels great to have so many people behind me. But if I lose a fight, will they care? They don't have any real interest in me, I just put on an exciting show.”

“Wow,” Delk said incredulously, “most guys your age would kill for that sort of popularity. I figured after spending so much of your life at the bottom of the barrel you'd appreciate it doubly so.”

“Sure, having people like and admire me is nice, but in all honesty I find it rather pointless. Great fighter or not, well- known or not, I'm still the servants' scullion.”

Delk growled with irritation. “Then put your mind to joining the bloody Guard and quit grouching about the 'point' of it all. Yeah, as a member of the Ducal Guard you take orders from the duke, but that life is a damn sight better than scrubbing pots. Want to feel more like your own man? Work your ass off and climb the rankings of the guard – anyone can rise to become a commissioned officer and *that* makes you a landed noble.”