

“You really are confident in me, aren't you?” asked Jyk.

Varlin nodded. “That I am, boyo, you've done a spectacular job transferring your hand- to- hand skills into using the shortswords over the past months. I expect you'll be peeing off a large number of cadets with years of training.”

“Starting with Bylik,” Jyk chuckled.

Varlin raised a finger. “Don't go taking him lightly, now. I've heard some fairly impressive things about him. He began working as a guard for one of his family's caravans soon after healing from your little encounter. It seems he has served with distinction.”

Jyk nodded dispassionately. “He always did have spunk,” he said, “but I've always had his number. He very well might prove to be a challenge, but I damn well won't let that prick get one over on me.” He reclaimed his half- eaten rib. “Especially not with a meal like this to fuel me.”

Varlin grinned. “Can't have you fighting on the slop they'd serve you in the servants' kitchen and you don't have the time to go to town for a meal. I couldn't very well let you go to the tourney ill- stomached.”

The first bout wasn't for another hour and a half when Jyk emerged from the city gates and laid eyes on the tourney pavilion, yet it already made for an awesome sight to his eyes. The stands were ten levels high, composed of metal tubing slid together to create the framing with long wooden planks to complete the seating. Just beside the looming stands stood a massive, if dingy, tent with the Ducal Guard's pennant fluttering in the wind from its peak, longsword crossed over buckler on the blue and brown.

A few hawkers were setting up their carts, unveiling souvenirs, and stoking small fireboxes for their greasy snacks as Jyk made his way to the registration desk in front of the tent. He noticed the guardsman at the desk eying him from a dozen paces away as he approached. “This where I register, sir?,” Jyk asked, trying not to show his nerves.

The Guard leaned forward in his seat, pointing at the shoulder of his doublet. “Those three bars mean I'm a sergeant, not a sir. And aren't you a bit young to be fighting for enlistment?”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “I'm over the minimum age, if that's what you're asking.”

The guardsman barked a laugh. “By what, a month?”

Jyk was forced to nod, chagrined. “Around about that, yes, but if Master- at- arms Varlin thinks I'm ready who are you to question my registering, sergeant?”

The Guard sat back in his chair, chuckling. “Trained by Master Varlin, are you? Okay then, what's your name, kid?”

“Jyk Pevnal,” he said flatly, “and I would like to challenge Bylik Olaffsen for my first match.”

The guardsman's eyebrows shot up with surprise. “You sure about that? Isn't he kind of the local favorite in this thing?”

Jyk shrugged. “Can you think of a better way to get the judges attention? I mean, if they're gonna enlist a sixteen cycle old he's gonna have to put on a hell of a show, am I right?”

The guardsman chuckled and nodded. “Olaffsen it is,” he said as he wrote it down in the ledger. “He hasn't checked in yet but you can be sure of getting a reaction when he does. Go ahead and get comfortable in the tent.” He waved to the half- open flap behind him.

Jyk's heart was racing as he ducked into the large tent, he fought to keep the shock from his face when he saw how crowded the tent was already becoming. *There's gotta be seventy guys here already* , he thought glumly, *and registration is expected to keep going long after the fighting has gotten started. A large field of cadet candidates indeed* . He found an empty stretch of bench near the back of the tent and tried his hand at one of the meditation techniques Varlin had taught him, focusing his mind on the sensation of breathing. He'd been at it for nearly half an hour when a familiar yelling broke his concentration.

“Where are you, you little shit?,” Bylik was demanding as he searched through the tent. “Pevnal, stand and face me godsdamn you.”

Jyk stood from the bench and stepped forward, trying to keep a smile off of his face. “Problem, ol' buddy?”

Bylik scoffed loudly as he cleared the distance between them in several long strides. “We ain't kids anymore and you're damn well not gonna cheap shot me again, you bastard, you just better hope you put up a good enough fight for me to impress the judges. Elsewise I'll have to keep paying you visits until I've beaten satisfaction from your scrawny body.”

Jyk tried and failed to restrain a loud snicker. “Don’t worry, Bylik, I’ll be sure to show everyone in attendance today just exactly what it is that you’re made of,” he said with a smirk. “Just relax and get ready for an experience more embarrassing than getting your jaw broken by a twelve cycle old.”

Bylik’s face slowly turned a deep shade of red. “You just stay in the back half of this tent until our fight comes around...then I’m gonna shame you as the crowd cheers me on.”

Jyk laughed loudly as he slowly backed his way into the seat he had vacated. “You just tell yourself that for the next hour or so. Maybe if you think it hard enough you might have a snowball’s chance in hell of doing it.”

By the time their names were called, Jyk was certain he had gotten successfully under Bylik’s skin. The man glared at him the whole way out of the tent and until the ushers parted them to lead them around to the entrances on each side of the makeshift arena. *Hopefully I can throw him far enough off of his game that I can really do some showing off. Don’t want to leave anything to chance; I have to impress the judges as much as humanly possible .*

Jyk was overcome with a very familiar feeling as he was prodded into the gap between bleachers and walked into view of the rowdy spectators. He felt his showman’s nature stir along with his blood and a wide smile pulled onto his face as he and Bylik slowly walked towards the officiator at the center of the wide circle. Bylik was still wearing a steadfast glare when they reached the middle in order to receive instructions for the bout. Jyk was grinning toothily.

“Look here, boys,” grated the leather- faced official, “this is real simple, like sparring at full speed. The fight isn’t over until one of you yields or is rendered indefensible. Disarming your opponent is not defeating your opponent. Take ten paces backwards, draw your weapons, and get things started.”

The world seemed to slow around Jyk as he began backpedaling, the hair on his arms tried to stand on end inside the thick leather practice armor Varlin had lent him. His eyes rose and were astounded by the sheer number of faces packed into the stands around them, hardly an inch of plank to spare. People had flocked to the fights at the arena, but this was a spectacle far beyond his imaginings. To his far left, at the edge of the circle, was a long table lined by several men in full military regalia, the Judging Brass.

His eyes returned forward and cast downwards to examine the footing. What had been lush grass a span before had been trodden into packed dirt, loose dust whispering across the surface along with the light north wind. *Familiar surface, raving crowd cheering for the other guy, twelve eyes that represent all my hopes and dreams...* They must have reached ten paces because Bylik went for the sword on his hip. Jyk reacted slowly and smiled when both his blades still cleared their scabbards first. *I got this.*

Jyk strode forward to meet Bylik back in the middle, finding no surprise in the other man’s directness. *He always did like to play the bully .* Jyk hesitated long enough to allow Bylik to take the offensive, bringing his first couple of parries up at the last possible moment before accelerating his pace to meet the onslaught halfway. *He has gotten good ,* Jyk thought as the longsword’s blunt tip came close enough to his throat for him to feel the rush of air in its wake. He was forced back three steps before he managed to sweep a slash out wide and sidestep around to kick Bylik squarely in the ass, pushing him several steps forward before he could whirl around furiously.

Jyk waited until the crowd’s roar of laughter died down before shouting derision at the recovering Bylik. “I guess it’s gonna be like old times after all!,” he shouted with a laugh.

Bylik snarled and began another stalking approach; Jyk shrugged and matched his pace towards the middle. He was reminded of his fight with Pyke as he traded blocked blows with Bylik, each sword stroke landing harder than the last. The memory of how much his face had hurt the next day made him look for a different approach. *This tin can of a helm might keep my brains intact but it won’t save me the headache if his bastard sword gets past my guard like Pyke did. Wait...a bastard sword and a small shield? No wonder he seems off balance – his sword is too bloody heavy.*

Jyk feinted an aggressive parry with his left shortsword, sidestepping into it only to let the blade dip low to deflect the bastard sword softly aside. As the swords met, Jyk pitched into a spin down the outside of Bylik’s sword arm, finishing it by driving the back of his right hand into the back of Bylik’s head followed by a sidekick to the small of his back, sending him sprawling onto his face.

“What’s the matter,” Jyk asked the rising Bylik, “is that big sword too much for you? Wanna trade?” He proffered a shortsword with a wide smirk.

Bylik glared silently and proceeded to loosen the strap on his shield arm and cast the small circle of wood to the ground. He drew himself up into a two- handed stance, twisting his grip tightly on the hilt of the bastard sword. “I’m gonna cripple you, you bleeding cunt.”

Jyk screwed his face up with distaste. “Well that's about as crude a thing I've ever heard. You kiss the caravan prostitutes with that mouth? Or are you the reason they don't allow kissing?”

Jyk must have touched a nerve because Bylik let out a loud roar and charged forward, bastard sword brandished in front of him. Jyk rolled his shoulders inside the mildly uncomfortable leather armor and raised both of his blades, settling into a defensive stance. This time he would wait for the attack to come to him. *It's time to finish the fight. I've brought out his greatest threat and its time to show the Judging Brass how I can deal with it. Drag the fight out any longer and it's just arrogant showboating.*

From Bylik's first strike Jyk was pushed backward, hard blows raining down as Bylik twisted and twirled the sword in his two- handed grip. Jyk counted four of the eight traditional angles of attack thrown together randomly at his retreating guard. *He really has gotten good ,* Jyk thought as he became accustomed to his opponent's rhythm, *but you can't learn instincts, and his were always lacking. If I'm right, a frustrated mistake is coming any moment now by way of thrust or wild angle.*