

As Jyk's feel for the timing increased, his parries struck sooner and the snarl on Bylik's face grew wider. The bastard sword pulled back and feinted a hard downward swipe, then reversed direction, hilt twirling in Bylik's grip, and swept up from below. Jyk was swinging both blades up for a parry when his opponent's blade changed direction and he quickly brought his shortswords down, crossing the blades and catching the bastard sword in the crook. Leaning forward, Jyk forced his blades downward until the tip of the bastard sword dug into the dirt.

Leaving his right blade in position to keep the bastard sword pinned, Jyk raised his left shortsword in a low arc and brought the flat of the blade down upon Bylik's knuckles, knocking the hilt free from their grasp. The moment the tension went out of the blade Jyk brought his right fist up and drove the pommel of that sword squarely into the noseguard of Bylik's helm. Before his opponent could recover, Jyk twirled his left shortsword down and brought the flat of the blade up firmly between Bylik's thighs as he stepped into a hard front kick, Jyk's heel driving into Bylik's sternum and sending him flopping onto his back.

Jyk turned towards the Judging Brass as Bylik gasped for air and tried to figure out whether to clutch in pain at his ribs or testicles. The crowd roared, equal parts cheering and booing – it seemed Bylik had been a real crowd favorite. *I bet the odds against me shot sky high after word got around. I wonder when Ellis locked in my bet.* When the officiator ran over to Bylik and waved the end of the fight, the man at the center of the Brass's table – who also had the largest number of adornments on his chest to sparkle in the sunlight – raised a hand above his head and motioned for Jyk to approach them.

Jyk swallowed hard as he forced his suddenly gelatinous leg muscles to walk towards his judgment, sloppily sheathing his shortswords as he walked. He attempted to finger- comb his almost shoulder- length out of his eyes as he drew close and made sure to straighten his back until his vertebrae felt ready to separate as he bowed upon reaching them. A wave of silence slowly circled the crowd. Jyk glanced around and noticed the officiator signifying to the crowd that the Brass wished to speak. *Now that's respect* , he though admiringly.

The man at the center of the table leaned forward, his elbows down and fingers pressed together into a steeple. “Did I see you thump him in the beans at the end there?” He slowly cracked a smile, obviously suppressing some level of laughter.

Jyk bobbed his head. “Yessir,” he said with only a small quiver in his voice, “Bylik likely wouldn't yield to me and without an edge on my blade a rap to the crotch is as good as evisceration in the short term. Especially if you can follow it with a shot around the sternum, better yet the solar plexus. Sharp pain and a lack of breath will immobilize pretty much anybody for a minute or two. Sir.” A sheepish smile pricked at the corners of Jyk's mouth.

“How old are you, boy?,” asked an officer on Jyk's left.

“Sixteen and a bit, sir.” Jyk replied.

“Where are you from?,” asked an officer to the right.

“Born and raised in Tarrant Castle, sir.”

The officer in the center furrowed his brow. “In the castle, you say? I know of no Pevnals living in the castle for the past sixteen cycles.” He raised a finger to his chin, revealing the gryphon knit into the shoulder of his doublet, signifying rank as a Colonel in the Ducal Guard.

Jyk nodded. “My father was a caretaker, my mother a chambermaid, both were dead within twelve hours of my birth. I've been the servants' scullion since I was old enough to crawl with scrub brushes under my hands and knees.”

“And where did you learn to fight like that, Scullion Pevnal?,” asked the colonel.

Jyk gave a small shrug. “Fighting I mostly learned the hard way. Over the past few months, however, I have been lucky enough to be trained in the sword by Master- at- arms Varlin.”

The colonel's eyebrows raised as a murmur ran down the line of brass. “Few months?”

Jyk nodded. “Five or so, though I trained and fought in Tarranton Arena for a few months before that.”

The colonel's head tilted forward, his jaw slackening slightly. “And was there a particular reason why Master Varlin saw fit to put a blade in your hand?”

Jyk's eyes raised skyward thoughtfully for a few moments before regaining eye contact with the colonel for his answer. “Well, I think he was going to give me a shot based solely on my skills, but when he figured out that my father had served with him in the Duke's Men before becoming a caretaker at the castle it really sealed the deal.”

The colonel nodded, a small smile creeping onto his face. “Your father was a Duke's Man?”

Jyk nodded. “Master Varlin tells me he was a bit of a wildman, barely nineteen but a man people loved to have beside them when charging into battle. A veteran beyond his years, I think is how he put it.”

The colonel cast a long, pointed look down the table to each side, his smile growing as many of the officers seated there gave small nods to him as his eyes passed over them. His face was serious when he turned his gaze back upon Jyk. “Why do you want to be a Guard?”

Jyk took a deep breath. “I have been a ward of the duke since the day I was born and am thereby honor bound to serve him until my debt is deemed fulfilled. What better way to serve my duke than in his own Guard? What better way for me to show everyone that taking mercy upon a parentless infant is worth the expenditure?”

The colonel nodded sharply. “You will report to Training Camp one span from today; the sergeant outside the entrance you came through will have the details.” He reached under the table and came out with a sleeveless vest of light cotton, dyed Brantley blue and trimmed in brown.

Jyk bowed deeply as he took the vest in his hands, waiting until the colonel motioned towards the exit before spinning on his heel, pulling the vest on as he walked and raising his fists in the air to the cheers of the crowd. Even as he made his way down the path between the stands there were men and women hanging over the railing, cheering and waving their hands down at him. Jyk continued waving until he got to the end of the tunnel and was faced with a very stunned looking sergeant standing a few yards outside of the arena, hands on his hips.

Jyk broke into a wide, toothy grin as he recognized the sergeant he had registered his challenge with. “Hello again, sergeant,” he chirruped, “weren't expecting to see me in this vest, were you?”

The sergeant cleared his throat and tossed his hands up in front of him. “As a matter of fact I didn't expect to see anyone given their vest after a single fight, even if they did beat Bylik. How badly did you hurt him?”

Jyk shrugged. “It was more embarrassing than painful, I think, although he's definitely gonna be sore in two or three places. So what's the skinny, Sergeant...uh, I feel kind of strange with you knowing my name and me not knowing yours.”

The sergeant smiled widely. “Maess Torrvold, Sergeant Torrvold to cadets like yourself.”

Jyk felt himself stand taller and his chest swell. “Cadet Pevnal,” he said softly. “I like how that sounds.”

Maess snickered as he motioned for Jyk to follow him. “Where you headed to celebrate? I'll fill you in along the way, maybe stay for a pint myself.”

“It's practically on the opposite side of Tarranton,” replied Jyk, “a little place called The Dog's Bollocks. Great little pub owned by a very good man.”

Maess frowned. “Well, maybe I won't make it all the way to the pint after all. That's a bit high on the hiking seeing as I've gotta come back here. A few of us run a rotation waiting for enlistees like yourself and giving the rookie speech.”

Jyk shrugged. “Walk as far as your speech requires, or suggest a closer bar where you can impart the bulk of it. To be honest I need to pop by the arena on my way across town anyway.”

Maess raised an eyebrow. “Why the arena?”

Jyk smiled. “A friend of mine held a bit of coin to lay on me when the odds peaked out.”

Maess raised his other eyebrow. “Don't booking houses usually frown upon that kind of thing?” He raised a hand in greeting to the guards at the gate as they entered Tarranton proper.

Jyk's grin widened. “Not when they run the place, they don't. He made a ton of money regardless considering almost everyone was going to bet on Bylik no matter the odds. And after they found out how young I am?” He looked up and whistled softly. “That just made it even more of a sure thing, so they would feel more comfortable betting more money to make up for the high odds.”

Maess barked a laugh. “You're a wily bastard, aren't you?” He motioned for Jyk to walk with him as he started towards the city gates. “There's a bar pretty close by, run by a retired guardsman. I think you bear introducing. And I think I want to have a beer with you.”

Jyk laughed softly in return. “I fought my way within a couple bouts of the second division title. I learned a lot about how people bet. The few that knew about my real talent got the chance to make a lot of money and everyone else figured me for an idiot kid about to get mowed down by the favorite.”

Maess shook his head in wonderment. “How much did you bet?”

“I had about fifteen tala saved up. I'm hoping to have enough to buy a good pair of shortswords and maybe a start towards some mail.”

Maess choked on his own spit. “Fifteen tala?,” he exclaimed. “How in the bloody hell did you save up fifteen tala working as a servant?”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “I didn't. I made it beating people senseless in the pit at the Underground Arena.”

Maess thumped the palm of a hand softly to his own forehead. “Right, you mentioned that before. But, wait on buying the steel, you aren't allowed to carry anything with an edge until you graduate from Boot Camp. The Blade and Buckler is only a couple blocks from here, I'll fill you in on the rest of the boring stuff once there are mugs in our hands.”