

Ellis grinned widely. “Fantastic, I'll go tell him now.”

“I have a couple of questions, first,” Jyk said.

“Shoot,” responded Ellis.

“What's my pay scale for this fight? And where are you setting the odds?”

Ellis thought for a few moments. “Three tala if you win, one if you lose. Odds...five to one against you.”

Jyk nodded with a small grin. “And a fighter can place bets, as long as they are on himself, of course?” When Ellis nodded Jyk flipped his freshly earned silver tala across the space between them. “Let it ride.” He grinned widely.

When the door shut behind the Arena Master, Delk promptly rounded on Jyk. “Are you mad?,” he demanded.

Jyk shrugged. “Worst case scenario I take a bit of a beating and gain nothing out of it. Still have the one tala. If I win I increase my gain eightfold.” He fixed Delk with a hard, measured look. “Do you understand what someone in my position can do with eight tala? I can replace all of my possessions with better quality items, buy several entirely new things, and still have enough coin to eat myself sick and drink myself into a stupor every night for ten span.”

Delk sighed heavily. “Point taken.”

They were interrupted by the head of a businesslike man coming through the slightly opened door. “Your fight won't be for about two hours, feel free to wander about. We'll find you in time to give you twenty minutes notice.” The head disappeared and the door pulled gently closed.

Delk shrugged and gestured towards the table and chairs on the far side of the room with a questioning look. Jyk nodded and took one of the seats, giving a small smile when Delk sat down across from him. There was a pitcher and a few narrow glasses on the table. Delk poured a thick brew into two glasses and proffered one to Jyk. “Mead,” he said, “but just sip at it. It's stronger than the lager you're used to.”

Jyk sipped at the mead and nodded in appreciation. “Kind of odd to find honeywine in a fighters room, isn't it?”

Delk looked at Jyk in confusion. “I'm gonna take a guess that among the lessons you eavesdrop upon, history usually isn't one of them.”

Jyk returned Delk's look of confusion and nodded. “Never found much interest in the machinations of the cunts on top of things.”

Delk's eyebrows rose sharply. “Uh...right then. Well, mead is traditionally drunk by warriors both before and after battle. The custom goes back twenty generations in Tathren, brought in from Rohirren where it has supposedly been standard since humans first set up shop there. There's actually a rather quaint myth about how a god snuck into a harvester's honey room and changed several large jars into mead and leaving clues that would push the man into discovering the process for himself.”

Jyk's expression changed from interest to boredom and abruptly ended Delk's exposition. “Maybe when I'm old enough that the duke has no more use of me I can brush up on my mythology, as it is I don't have a lot of use for it.”

Delk frowned reproachfully. “Do you want to know the difference between the good fighters and great fighters?”

Jyk leaned forward, nodding vigorously.

“Intelligent thinking.” He raised a finger. “Not just raw intelligence, which you have in spades, but the ability and desire to think things through. Everything you do, focus your intelligence on the action and consider what it means. If you read something, or hear a story or a song, think about the content. Don't just go along, examine it for yourself. Form an opinion.”

Jyk screwed his face up in confusion. “What the hell does that have to do with fighting? Or mythology?”

Delk rolled his eyes. “I think it's pretty obvious how thinking things through would help your fighting, you nit. And what do you think mythology is?”

Jyk thought for a moment. “Well, there are two ways to look at it. Nifty, erroneous stories someone made up a long time ago that just kind of stuck around, or watered down versions of the actions of true deities long, long ago.”

“Close. The point is why those stories, true or not, have persisted for time out of mind. There are lessons embedded in every myth, the framing of the reality, godly or not, that inspired their creation. If it didn't say anything important, why in seven hells would it survive for eons?”

Jyk frowned. “Well, just make me feel trivial and silly, why don't you. Maybe...maybe a couple of books could be one of the new possessions my coming fortune can gift me.” He smiled weakly.

“Distractions are good for you, especially right now.” Delk paled a bit when Jyk scowled at him. “The less blank time the better, and all that...”

Jyk shook his head slowly from side to side. “You just had to refer to Sara leaving, didn't you?” He sighed in exasperation. “I hadn't thought of her since I walked into the pub this afternoon, and now I get to spend two bloody hours sitting here wishing someone would punch me in the face in preparation for a fight.” He shook his head at Delk again and quaffed his narrow glass of mead. “Lovely.”

Delk shrank in on himself and still managed to look disapproving. “It was an asinine thing to say, but that's no reason to drink yourself out of the fight.”

Jyk rolled his eyes. “That's all I'm drinking and it'll bloody well wear off in two hours, so stick it in your gob alongside that foot.” He managed a smirk.

Delk smiled sheepishly. “I think I'll give you some time to yourself, yeah?”

Jyk nodded, lost in thought before his companion even left the room. *It's no big deal, I can work with this. Sara just up and left on a day's notice, that makes me mad. Right? Well, I did skulk out of the room without waking her because I'm too much a coward to say goodbye. That probably hurt her, waking up and finding herself alone like that. It was a childish thing to do. I wonder if I'll ever see her again so I can apologize? I wonder if I'll ever see her again period? Yeah, she said she'll come back to Tarranton as soon as her contract runs out, but she will catch another lord's ear and get another job now that she's singing exclusively to nobility .*

Jyk sighed heavily and poured a half- glass of mead, looking around guiltily. He sipped at it, then drained it and immediately wondered if that had been a good decision. He stood up and began pacing in a circle around the room, wanting to clear his head but not having the will to steer away from his current train of thought. *Where is the resulting anger from these feelings that sent me into prize fighting in the first place? It's the money. Kind of hard to rail against my station when I just earned a bleeding silver tala and might turn it into eight .*

He stopped pacing long enough to kick a chair across the room and mutter a string of random curses. *Yeah, this is a productive way to spend time before a big fight .* He directed his pacing over to the heavy bag in one corner of the room and threw a short combination of punches into it before walking away again. *It's gonna be a long two hours .*

Jyk had been circling the room and circling in thought ad- nauseum for a good while when he was saved by Delk's re- entry. “You just been walking in circles this whole time?,” asked Delk, amused.

Jyk stopped his pacing and faced Delk with a shrug. “Don't feel like watching other people fight and my mind seems to have gotten stuck on a particular subject. It's a very irritating sensation.”

Delk chuckled heartily. “Ah, adolescence, everything is a crisis because everything is new. Don't worry boy, it'll pass. For now, we make a subject change because you've got more than an hour left till the fight. What's got you curious, eh?”

Jyk furrowed his brow. “Well, I do find Oggrik a bit...confounding. What the hell is he, anyways? He's not a normal human, that's for damn sure.”

Delk led Jyk to the table and chairs at the back of the room. “Oggrik is...complicated,” he said as he sat down. “And he is human. Well, mostly human at least. Do you know anything about the Giantkin?”

Jyk furrowed his brow again. “Descendants of real giants, bloodline watered down with humans or something. It was a particularly thick door to eavesdrop through.”

Delk smiled. “Pretty close, all things considered. The important thing is that the watering down of their blood was intentional. Giants were never a widespread race, and after generations of constant warring with their dwarven neighbors to the east they had become few and mostly females. So they began capturing the largest human men they could find and forcing them to mate with their women. Thus, the giantkin.”

Jyk quirked an eyebrow. “So that's what a giantkin looks like?”

Delk shook his head. “I'm not finished, and no, a giantkin looks basically like you or me just ten or eleven feet tall. Oggrik is a sixth generation result of an ogre breeding project. While their numbers are not suffering as in the case of the giants, they still wish to understand more about the metropolitan society we humans have. Same concept, using a human parent for a few consecutive generations and then mating them with other mixes like themselves.”

Jyk's jaw went slack. “So...he's an ogre...,”

Delk shook his head again. “No, as I said before he is mostly human. When his tribe sent him to attempt infiltrating a town across the southern border of their hill country...he simply never went back. Defected, as it were.”

“So...does he fight on the circuit?”

“Oh no, no no no. There was one top tier champion that challenged him – ended up saying some pretty nasty things to get Oggrik to accept. The fight lasted twelve seconds. Oggrik just grabbed the guy and squeezed until he heard half a dozen or so bones snap and dropped him. Fight over.”

“Definitely not a guy you want to fight bare- handed,” said Jyk, awed. “But seriously, an ogre breeding experiment? That sounds like something a senile old man would tell his grandchildren to scare them. ‘They can walk among us and strike at will, capturing small children to take home for dinner.’ And yes, I know that ogres don’t really eat children.”

Delk pursed his lips momentarily. “Actually...they do. Sometimes, at least. It’s a fear- tactic used in territorial war against the smaller races. They capture children, kill them, roast them, *eat* them, then discard the leftovers near where they originally snatched them.”

Jyk’s face paled significantly. “W...Well damn...,” he stammered. “That’s possibly the most horrifying thing I’ve ever heard. Why do you know that?”

Delk chuckled lightly. “I’ve owned a pub for twenty- some cycles that is frequented by mercenaries and well- traveled men- at- arms. You learn to sift through the bullshit and pick up a lot of interesting, if often disturbing, information.”