

Jyk furrowed his brow up at Delk. “A landed noble? No shit?”

Delk broke into a smile as he nodded. “Yes, you nit. How do you not know this after living in the castle your whole life? Every officer's commission comes with a hefty stipend to build a manor and a decent bit of landholdings. Enough farmers and such to feed you well and provide taxes to keep you funded.”

Jyk leaned back in his seat, stunned. “So *that's* what you were alluding to whenever you mentioned my retiring after a career in the guard? Like...going to live in a manor and oversee the local community as its lord?”

“Well, yeah,” Delk answered flatly. “It might take several cycles, but with your talent the sky is the limit in the Ducal Guard. You just have to focus your energy.”

Jyk sipped from his mug with growing astonishment. “I thought you meant fighting the duke's battles for twenty years and saving enough money to open a shop or something.”

Delk rolled his eyes. “Bollocks,” he said sharply. “There's a border war with Maynon at least once a generation. The next one will likely happen during your prime. Even if you don't get a commission, combat pay for someone volunteering to go to the front lines is, well...a *lot*. Even if you only make sergeant you'll be able to save enough money to buy a decent plot of land anyway.”

Jyk furrowed his brow. “If the guard is that beneficial of a profession why haven't I heard of all this before now?”

Delk shrugged heavily. “Damned if I know, I guess you were just too busy thinking about how much your life sucked to look into how much better it can get.”

Jyk looked offended. “Well that's a bit harsh, don't you think?”

“I'm not wrong. Look at you, sitting there in brand new clothes and brand new boots, damn near brand new bloody everything and whining about what will not be. You piss and moan about everyone saying you need another two cycles before you're ready for anything, not realizing that you're proving their point all the while.”

Jyk looked down at his mug sheepishly. “You're getting pretty good at this lecture thing, you know.”

“Thank you, but I'm not finished yet. Do you remember the difference between a good fighter and a great fighter?”

Jyk frowned deeply. “The ability to focus their mind and think intelligently and objectively about the subject at hand.”

“Then think, damn your hide. Why were you so happy when you first made ten silver tala for one fight? Because it's a fantastic occasion, something that has improved your life in ways you have never experienced before. And it is just the beginning of a new path. *Look* at that path and *think* about where it can get you.”

Jyk sighed heavily and forced himself to make eye contact with the irritated barkeep. “Sell me a pint of whisky for the walk back home? I think this surprise thrashing needs some time to sink in.”

Delk nodded somberly. “Sorry. I don't mean to get so rough with you, but it's about time you wake the hell up. The only way your life is going to improve is if you work at it. You're either part of the solution, or part of the problem – get it?”

Jyk nodded glumly and slid from the barstool, recovering his duffel bag in a steady sulk. Even when Delk waved of payment for the whisky he didn't react, instead walking silently from the pub in a dim haze all to himself. He turned towards the castle despite having no intention of going directly home. A solid round of drinking on the hillside where he and Sara had spent so much time together seemed like a much more fitting setting for a round of depressing introspection.

By the time he made his way up the hill and sat, back against his bag, looking up at the stars, the bottle was a third empty and his mind had built up a load of steam. *I'm getting so tired of people ripping me a new asshole every time I have an off day. If they didn't keep making the same basic point, I'd probably be able to write it off as bullshit...but, they always seem to be getting at the same thing. Maybe they're right. Maybe I do wallow in my own misery – fueling the cycle I claim to hate so dearly.*

He drank deeply from the bottle as he spotted Sara's favorite constellation, the Fairy Goddess. *From a practical standpoint things are even better now than when dating Sara. I have a full life, full pockets, and potential fame all going for me...yet I'm as sour as rotting garbage. What was it I said to Sara? “I guess now is the time where I shut my mouth and stop questioning a good thing.” If I'm a successful Guard it should even get easier to attract women. Delk said women find professional fighting sexy, so uniformed guardsmen must be even more so, right? Money, purpose, future, romance...he's right, what in seven hells is my problem?*

Realization did little to raise Jyk's mood as he took another deep drink from the quickly emptying bottle. *Maybe it's like when I was fighting Pyke...I won't really feel into it until things get moving...* He took a much smaller drink. *I guess the main rub of it all is that I have no real control over the situation. All I can do is fight my hardest and hope I manage to draw the right sort of attention.* His eyes were drawn to the moon, which had begun its nightly descent some time ago. *Guess it's time to sleep it off and get ready for a load of questions tomorrow.*

As Jyk rose, a mite unsteady, he caught sight of three shadowy figures headed his way, themselves a bit unsteady. When they walked close enough to a street- torch for him to get a look at their faces, his stomach sank. As they turned off the road and headed up the hill towards him, Jyk's lip curled in irritation and he dropped his bag back to the ground. *I guess they finally decided attacking me is worth it.* He walked forward calmly to meet Pawl, Jon, and Kinnith as they ascended the hill.

“Evening boys,” said Jyk, making every effort to sound friendly. “Have a nice night out?”

The three of them fanned out and grinned at him drunkenly. “It's gotten quite a bit better now that we've found you sitting out here alone,” Jon said gruffly.

Jyk forced a smile onto his face. “Fancy a drink?” He held the half- empty bottle of whisky up for them to see. “My thirst is quite sated and you guys are welcome to the rest of it. I was just about to head up and get some sleep before work.”

Jon barked dismissive laugh. “What, already had your ass kicked once today and you think you can buy us off so we won't make it twice?”

Jyk rolled his eyes, glad the moonlight wasn't bright enough for them to notice, “What, the bruises? Oh, I didn't lose, if that's what you're thinking. As a matter of fact I won quite handily. And profitably.”

Jon laughed again. “The old 'you should see the other guy' defense, is it? And what in the hell d'you mean, profitably?”

Jyk heaved a shrug. “Do you know anyone who likes to go to the prize fights?”

Jon screwed his face up in confusion. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Jyk rolled his eyes again. “Just answer the question, will you?”

Jon nodded his head sloppily. “Yeah, a couple of the cooks went to see the matches just last night. What in the hells does that have to do with this?”

“You really are thick, y'know that?,” snapped Jyk. “How about you go ask the cooks about the new guy that fought twice last night and decide if you still want to fight me after you hear what they have to say.”

Jon shook his head from side to side. “Nope, not letting you talk your way outta this one, we're outside castle grounds and you're as drunk as we are. Get 'im, boys!”

Jyk sighed heavily as the three men advanced on him, noticing just how much whisky he had imbibed as he leveled a hard front kick into Jon's midsection, sending him sprawling. Jyk almost toppled over as he spun around to throw a sidekick into Kinnith's chest as the man came in from the left, sending him to the ground beside Jon. Jyk shook his head vigorously in an effort to clear it and looked up just in time to yelp as Pawl tackled him to the ground, sending the both of them tumbling down the steep hillside. Jyk landed on top when they slammed into the cobblestone street and was very thankful for that fact, judging by the gurgling cry of pain Pawl let out as his back slammed into the stones.

It took three attempts for Jyk to reach his feet, alcohol fading in the wake of fresh bruises. He looked down at his hand to find the bottle of whisky still held in it, popped the cork for one last slug and tossed the bottle onto a softly groaning Pawl's chest. “Share that with the others when you're up and around. It's only fair,” Jyk said, coughing as he tried to catch his breath.

The walk back up the hill was almost as difficult as standing up had been and it got harder once he slung the heavy duffel bag over his shoulder. By the time he made it back to his room there was nothing left in Jyk's mind but sleep. He tossed the bag in the middle of the floor and flopped face down on his bed without so much as retrieving his new feather pillow or removing his new boots.

*Right...focus...future...good stuff...it's all up to me...*