

Chapter 641

Settling Differences With a Nice Chat

The brick locker room under the fighting cages was small, which made sense as there were two for each of the four cages. They weren't much different from domestic bathrooms in size and layout. Jason emerged from the shower having washed off the blood, of both himself and his opponent. His regenerative abilities had already healed his injuries, the biggest factor being Colin.

Jason's clingy cyclist-style outfit was surprisingly resilient and hadn't ripped, so after washing it off in the shower as well he yanked it back on, ignoring the wetness of it. He didn't bother with crystal wash for himself or his clothes as they would soon be bloodied again. Just as he was awkwardly yanking the wet top into place with sharp tugs, the door opened to admit the chihuahua-headed outworlder Zolit.

"Not bad, Cook," Zolit told him as he strode inside. "The bookmakers let people keep betting into the start of the fight because there are always those chumps who think they can read how it goes from the opening moves.

"Does that mean I get a bigger slice?" Jason asked not bothering to look at the skinny man in the white suit.

"Sure does. Of course, being your first fight, there's only so much going around."

Jason turned to stare at the little man.

"Hey, I'm not responsible for the betting, and the later rounds are where the real money is. Everyone is paying attention to this Nightingale girl, and that's where all the money is going. Even putting aside what she looks like, which is just... wow, she's really good. I mean, no offence to your respectable skills, but she is just plain better than you. You get a lot of travelling adventurers trying their hand in the cages, and most don't do that great. In a box, with no powers, it's a different fight. But this girl knows her way around a cage."

"I'm well aware of her competencies."

"You know her?"

"I'm a cook for an adventuring team. She's on that team."

"No kidding. Think she'll go easy on you if you get matched up?"

"I do not."

"Good thing you weren't matched up until the final round, then. You're up against some adventurer next, but people saw you both fight and the odds are pretty even. Maybe take a few hits early so the bookies can roll up some chumps? Keep up the turnaround

fights if you want to fatten up your piece of the pudding. I know that means taking an extra beating and I was even bringing you a potion to kick that healing into action. You don't appear to be having any problems in that regard, though."

"Isn't it about time you left so I can get in the right headspace?"

"Okay, I'll go. I think you've got this next fight but try and make it look like a struggle. It'll help shift the betting odds for the fight after, and that's where you'll make your money."

Jason didn't respond and Zolit left. The small man was concerning to Jason in that his aura showed nothing but what Jason would expect from a mid-tier underworld fight promoter. Since he was an outworlder like Jason, it was more strange for him to be ordinary than not, especially given his unusual appearance. Jason's Eurasian features didn't match any of the human ethnic groups he'd encountered on Pallimustus, but there were enough variations that he didn't especially stand out. The little chihuahua-faced man would have had much more trouble blending in.

The upcoming fight was not playing on Jason's mind. Win or lose, it was just an experience for him. More pressing was the question of what to do about Zolit. While it wasn't a rule that outworlders had to get involved in exceptional events, it was his understanding that it was almost always the case.

There had been another outworlder in Rimaros when Jason arrived, but they had never gotten to meet. From what he discovered, she had become embroiled in a conflict between some lesser elemental gods and had left the city early in the monster surge in an attempt to broker peace. The monster surge was bad enough without a holy war involving powerful elemental forces.

She had apparently achieved results, as some of the priests in question had been on hand to help shield coastal communities from the backlash of the Builder's flying city crashing into the sea and causing a tsunami. The outworlder herself had not returned and Jason hoped to meet her in the future.

Compared to that, Zolit was a more curious proposition. On one hand, Jason wanted to reveal his full identity and learn all about the man's experiences. On the other, he seemed a relatively ordinary and not wildly trustworthy person. His instincts told him not to break cover, as flimsy as his false identity was. There was a big difference between a mysterious stranger who quickly moved on and hanging out his secrets for the world to see.

Jason pushed the small man out of his mind, shifting his concentration to the fight ahead. Zolit could wait, although Jason wondered if he was letting the other man make the

choice for him. The emotions he read in the man's aura held disproportionately more curiosity than caution.

Zolit returned to his reserved seating, mildly annoyed at its location. The four cages were placed in a square, with seating around and in between them. He was on the opposite side from the fight everyone wanted to watch, anticipating the Nightingale again making absolute brutality seem graceful. Instead, he was stuck watching the cook with his strange scars and air of mystery.

Plonking down next to Benella, Zolit sat with a sullen expression as the panels in the cage floor opened to admit the fighters. It went about as Zolit had predicted, with the adventurer's inexperience operating without his powers showing in his messed-up rhythm.

The cook fought a little differently, to Zolit's mild surprise, although the start was quite similar. The opponent was aggressive but lacked the same mastery of the cage that the cook's previous opponent had. This new one had more skill, but failed to make use of the confined space and sharp boundaries of the cage.

Rather than unveil a countering strategy that slowly increased the wariness of his opponent, the turn in the fight came suddenly. After feeling out his opponent for a while, the cook started aggressively leaping on every mistake his opponent made. Those pacing issues became glaring weaknesses as the cook used each one to launch not just attacks but entire attack sequences. Caught on the back foot, the opponent was pounded repeatedly, which was the kind of hammering it took to deal with a silver-ranker.

Zolit observed as the cook's style went through subtle changes throughout the fight, shifting his approach to keep his opponent off-balance, every time the adventurer started adapting to the cook. He started to wonder if the cook had started playing possum long before Zolit suggested it.

As the fight continued, Zolit was joined by an unexpected guest. Claiming the seat next to his was a prestigious figure of the underground fight scene, a priest of the Warrior called Kraysch. The priest was an elf, who were naturally slender as a people, but like Neil and Lucian Lamprey, Kraysch was unusually bulky for his kind. He was tall but not towering, broad-shouldered but not hulking. His loose clothes, the standard informal outfit of his church, looked similar to martial arts training gear.

"What brings you by, honoured priest?" Zolit asked, straightening his posture.

"My god is very happy with this place, Mr Kreen. Battle is rarely fair, so places like this, which are as close to fair as you are likely to find, fall under his favour."

"We are blessed," Zolit said, his tone almost a question as he tried to figure out what the priest wanted.

"Being under my god's favour means that he doesn't like things disrupting it."

"Apologies, honoured priest, but I am not a man of political mindset. I'm not sure what you're getting at."

Kraysch sighed.

"There is a certain kind of story," he said. "I'm sure you've heard some variation. It's about a man whose true skill in life is killing, so he kills and he kills and he kills until all that he is, is a killer. Until all that he has is killing. So he gives it up, in search of something else. Anything else. He becomes an unremarkable man doing an unremarkable job."

The priest gave Zolit a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Of course," Kraysch, "he's not really an unremarkable man, and he gets remarked upon. Someone notices something and starts digging deeper. And stories being stories, the man gets dragged into something he shouldn't, and is forced to resume all the killing he tried to leave behind. Are you familiar with this kind of story?"

"I am, Priest Kraysch."

"And are you a smart man or a wise man, Mr Kreen?"

"I aspire to each of them, honoured priest, but fear I fall short of both."

"Then perhaps you would be open to some spiritual guidance."

"Of course."

"When an ostensibly unremarkable man, with an unremarkable job – say, a cook for instance – tells you that he doesn't like questions, you have a smart path and a wise path. The smart path is to ignore him and learn all you can, as there are dangerous secrets lurking about. The wise path is to let go of your curiosity and leave it be."

"The Church of the Warrior is interested in the cook?"

Kraysch bowed his head, saddened.

"Curiosity it is, then."

Kraysch stood up just as the cook's opponent fell down, too beaten and exhausted to continue. Zolit stood as well.

"Priest Kraysch, I wouldn't want to do anything that would frustrate your deity."

"I have already told you of my god's feelings. But since you have already asked the question, then no. The only interest the Church of the Warrior has in your fighter is not getting involved with him. Faith does not always need to be smart, Mr Kreen, but it should be wise whenever possible."

The priest walked away leaving a confused Zolit behind. The hitherto silent Benella, Zolit's aide, only spoke once he was gone.

"Do you believe him? That the church isn't involved with your cage-fighting cook?"

"I think it's likely he's telling the truth, if only because I'm not important enough to lie to. But it's not just that. I think he came to me like this because the church isn't involved and doesn't want to be."

"You think the cook is some secret super-warrior? That he's hiding his real skills?"

"No. I think the danger is if he starts using his powers."

"You think he would start using his powers and go on a rampage here?"

"How would I know? I met the guy, what? An hour ago? And I'm already starting to hate this guy. If you want people to think you're a cook, maybe don't join a fighting tournament and flash your scars you stupid..."

Zorit let out a little growl, and Benella successfully hid her reaction to the tiny-dog adorableness of it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "This fighter is starting to sound like trouble."

"Starting? A church full of combat fanatics doesn't want him making a mess at an underground fighting area. Something like that isn't the way trouble starts, Bennie. That's how trouble ends."

"Then I'll ask again: what will you do?"

"Did you notice what Kraysch said about the cook not liking questions? That was something he said in the prep room, which has a privacy screen. A good one."

"Meaning?"

"His god has blessed this whole place. Warrior probably directed his priest to come over here and talk to me. I do not want gods paying attention to me, for a variety of reasons. I've already got a bad feeling that the cook is better at reading me than he should be. And if this guy is a big enough deal that gods are moving, I'm moving out of the way. I'm going to take the advice of my fine local clergyman and not ask any questions. I'm going to pay the cook what he earns and send him on his way, in the hope that he takes the money and leaves. If someone else wants to make trouble that's their problem; I just want to avoid anyone blaming me for it, be it the top fight organisers or Warrior, the god of not settling differences with a nice chat."