

# PIT FIGHTERS

## 1. the opportunity



Rick Griffin

## **Pit Fighters**

# **1. The Opportunity**

By Rick Griffin

Amazon Kindle Edition  
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## *The Island of St. Marten-Cristo*

*“They’re spacing now—each one sizing up the other—though Sultan seems to be the only one standing straight. He’s a stone pillar, folks, can anything Farin does even bend him a little?” “Perhaps with a forklift, Colin.”*

The television was muted to preserve the gentle stillness of the island’s natural beauty, intercut with scrolling closed captions of the color commentator. Blitz tried not to gawk at the TV screen featuring the famous-and-humongous kangaroo Sultan, engaged in a brawl with Farin the boar in the Three Circle Arena.

The blue rabbit nursed his citrus smoothie with the boredom only a college student could muster, ignoring his long ears flopping along the wind line. Although the dark clouds threatened another rain, for the moment, the sun shone from the east. The billowing wind tasted warm and fresh and salty, and the outdoor cafe aside the grocer kept the awning back and left the patio uncovered.

“Ugh,” Blitz announced to his brothers, “Pit Fighters has gotten so boring with how Sultan wins every single fight. It was fun for one year, maybe two, but he’s on a five-year championship streak and nobody’s even gotten close to upsetting him. I don’t even know why he doesn’t just retire.”

Konner, the teal-furred middle child, was watching the screen with more interest and had already drained his strawberry smoothie dry. “Because he has a bunch of needy fangirls who watch every single one of his matches.”

Paris, the youngest with ears so heavy they might never stand up straight, leaned forward on his elbows until his purple cheeks melted into his propped-up wrists. He sighed, letting his eyes suck in those sculpted bodies. His mango smoothie had gone almost untouched. He tongued the end of his straw.

“Or, you know, fanboys,” Konnor said, gesturing.

“Paris,” Blitz sighed. “You are so hopelessly gay.”

“What!” Paris exclaimed, his long rabbit ears standing up at the remark before flopping back under their own weight again. “I don’t watch *all* of his matches!”

“Yeah,” Konnor said, “Sometimes you have to be at school.”

“It’s amazing how gay-pandering Pit Fighters can get,” Blitz said, eyes drawn to the TV once more. It wasn’t like *this* stuff turned him on—it was just distracting! “Can we change it over to the women’s bracket?” He asked.

“It’s not just gay pandering,” Paris said, folding his arms tight against his chest. “There’s a lot of art and skill involved. Courage. Tenacity. Willpower.”

“Low-angle shots,” Konner added, noting the zooms on the TV that swept right under Sultan’s thick tail.

“Goddamn,” Blitz said. “They just go right up into his ass now don’t they? Any closer we’d be in his rectum.”

Paris jolted, and his nose sprouted a leak. He dabbed a napkin to his face. Blitz and Konner both giggled.

Paris huffed, checking the spot of blood that stained the napkin. “Guys, it’s not that funny! My nosebleeds are unrelated. I just get them sometimes.”

“Uh-huh,” Konner said, leaning on his arm. “Paris, if you have the hots for Sultan, it’s fine, just admit it.”

“Fine, whatever! If you liked guys you’d understand.”

“Konner likes guys though,” Blitz said.

“I only had the one boyfriend!” Konner blurted. “And I don’t know if Sultan’s my type. He’s okay, but he’s so chunky.”

“No, Komana is chunky,” Paris said, referring to the top tier elephant fighter. “Sultan is... prime...” He trailed off as Sultan trapped Farin in an out-of-nowhere overhead suplex, then flipping around with grace and speed a kangaroo that size should not have possessed. He pinned the boar with his legs so his face was dead-smack in the kangaroo’s crotch.

“Holy crap that leglock,” Konner said, his jaw dropping.

“Admit it,” Blitz said, turning to his brothers, “That’s just blatant homoeroticism...” He only spotted Konner. “Paris?”

Konner turned too, and they noted Paris had fallen backwards onto the red slab deck of the cafe. His tongue lolled out like a bloated corpse, his nose ran with blood down both of his mussy violet cheeks.

“... should we get mom?” Konner asked, looking up toward the doors to the grocer.

“Eh, he’ll be okay,” Blitz said, finishing his drink. “Though get his unfinished smoothie and press it between his legs before he really embarrasses himself.”



“Mom, no, I’m fine,” Paris sputtered as she wiped his cheeks with a tongue-dabbed napkin. “I’m almost twenty, I can do it myself!”

Tyree, shorter and rounder than any of her boys, sighed and stroked her hand over Paris’s ruffled head and down his ears. Paris looked down and away, embarrassed. Behind them, Blitz and Konner both loaded the groceries into the hand cart for the trip back uptown.

“Hon, this pent-up energy is driving you nuts,” Tyree said. “As much as it’d aggravate your father, you’re in need of a husband.”

“Believe me, I know.” Paris sighed.

“Why don’t you go to the school social with Konner tonight?” She said. “I’m sure there’ll be cute guys there.”

“It’s just... so hard to talk to people. I’ll just make an idiot of myself. And nobody finds that attractive.”

“You need to work on your self-confidence.” Tyree embraced Paris.

“Yeah, maybe,” Paris groaned, eyes shifting toward the people out on the plaza, hoping it was nobody he knew.

Tyree licked her thumb and rubbed it across Paris’s cheek. Paris flailed his arms, pushing her away. “Mom, I said—”

Blitz giggled. “Momma’s boy!”

“Blitz, hon, there’s nothing wrong with being special to your mother,” Tyree scolded.

“Yes there is!” Paris exclaimed, flailing away from Tyree until he fell backwards again, right on his tail. “Ow!”

Blitz burst out laughing.

“Stoppit!” Paris shouted. “Mom, make him stop!”

“You’re almost twenty,” she said in a teasing echo of his words. “Can’t you do it yourself?”

Paris huffed, turning an intense glare toward Blitz. The blue rabbit noted the look in his brother’s eyes just too late, before Paris knocked him back in a flying tackle down into the pebble garden aside the deck. Paris wrapped Blitz’s arms right around his back, twisting them, and shoved the rest of his face into the rocks.

“Stop making fun of me!” Paris yelled right in Blitz’s ear.

“Paris!” Tyree exclaimed with shock. “That’s not what I meant!”

“Ow!” Blitz cried. “Ow, ow, Mom, get him off me! Mom!”

Paris was certain having to wear the puffy formal clothes for the school social was his punishment. He felt at least three decades out of place in a location where being six weeks out of fashion was reputation-destroying. There was some salvageable statement in being “retro” with the high collar and loose cuffed pants, but he didn’t even like wearing clothes at appropriate times. The weather of St. Marten-Cristo prevented the need for any clothing at any point of the year, and yet tradition and formality rules still lingered.

The venue was hardly jumping—there were perhaps four dozen students from the university, surrounded by posters in the hall with lame science puns. The school had shoved lab tables all the way to the edges of the room. This party couldn’t even get the main stage, as the school reserved it that night for an awards ceremony, which the students here actively avoided.

And Paris just hated this song.

“So,” Konner said, himself wearing a belted poncho with the *Free Friar Chanters* band logo printed on it. “You gonna talk to anyone or just stand here?” He sipped from his red plastic cup.

“I don’t see you talking to anyone,” Paris said.

“I have a girlfriend, remember?”

“Yeah, she lives in Avaria.”

Konner kicked Paris in the ankle. Paris winced and pulled his foot away.

“It’s true!” Konner insisted.

“So, what,” Paris said, gesturing to the clots of people milling about the floor, “You go up to someone and bother them? That’s how introductions work?”

“Kinda,” Konner said. “You should have learned this stuff when you’re young.”

“I’m trying to learn now!” Paris said. “But how is this not a recipe for embarrassment?”

“Watch and do like I do.”



Konner pulled away from the wall and sauntered up between a doe and a mouse who were talking with a ewe, sheared underneath her thin toga. How did that even count as clothing? Paris was certain the requirement had something to do with covering genitals and nipples, but whatever it was nobody besides old-timers and stuffy politicians took the taboo all that serious anymore. All the girls' clothing was so sheer they might as well have worn nothing.

"Hey, what's happening over here?" Konner said, poking his head into the conversation. "Where'd you get the drinks?"

"What," the ewe said. "It's just punch."

"That's not what it smells like," Konner teased in sing-song.

"Shh!" The doe said, looking around to spot the TA observer in the far corner. She pulled a flask out of the chest of her own blouse. "I brought rum. No telling!"

Konner held out his cup. "Pop a little here and my lips are zipped."

He turned and winked in Paris's direction. Paris's jaw opened; he couldn't believe Konner expected him to do *that*. It seemed more like marvelous luck that Konner found ladies with something secret going on that he could exploit.

He swallowed, and glancing among the groups of people, did his best to assess whether any grouping of guys were gay, because why bother otherwise? That amounted to him staring at a thick and fuzzy black ram who had nothing covering his tail. Paris's instinctive reaction at the sight was, *oh God, I'd love him to sit on me*, and, *I wonder how big his cock is?* He checked his nose for bleeding, but had stopped himself before he got overworked. Still, the nice, large, round ass like two neat wads of risen dough with the short and neat tail atop it was *right there*, connected to a guy Paris knew nothing of.

His thoughts got caught in a loop between *please let him be gay* and *he's not and he's gonna laugh at you anyway*.

He settled on *I could watch his butt all night and be happy*.

"Dude, just go," Konner said, swinging back around to Paris's isolated spot. He had the doe under one arm and the ewe under another.

Paris stared up and down at them. Yup, the girls might as well have worn fishing nets. "What about your girlfriend?"

"She's in Avaria," Konner shrugged.

"Fine, just—rrgh—are the guys over there gay or not?" Paris said, gesturing toward the hot ram dude. "I hate guessing."

"Trent?" the ewe said. "He's my brother."

“Is he gay.” Paris expressed the question as a frustrated statement.

“I dunno,” the ewe said. “He watches a lot of Pit Fighters, though.”

“Men’s bracket?”

“Both, I think.”

“Good enough for me!”

Before he could talk himself out of it, Paris righted himself upward and marched right into the conversation Trent was holding with a svelte mongoose. The ram was even larger than he thought.

*Don’t mention his ass.*

“Hi, Paris, I’m Trent. Did you see the Saturday match on Sultan? Amazing end to the tournament season, don’t you think?” Paris tried his best to ignore how many of those words were in the wrong order.

Trent, being two feet taller, glanced down at Paris. “I don’t watch Sultan matches. He’s monotonous.” He took a big swig of his cup.

Paris froze there for a solid five seconds, watching Trent drink. The mongoose just stared at him and blinked.

“Right,” Paris said. “Okay. I’m now going back in that corner to die.”

Paris turned his head down as the streetlights came on. The wind picked up and spattered his head with the first sign of rain, and Paris tucked his formal coat tighter under his armpit as he trudged the cobblestones back toward home.

It was, at the least, quiet. Much better to be far away from everyone. Maybe he'd turn right and walk down and go sleep under the boardwalk instead. Maybe the sea would rise and carry him away.

Before he could turn his feet off from autopilot, Paris raised his head and noted a walrus stapling up a series of bills along the white walls of the stucco buildings. He turned and found a dozen of such posters just at his left, the top corner flickering in the wind.

Paris's ears stood near straight up under their weight.

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Paris slapped the poster down on the tiled dining table. The rickety thing wobbled on its four legs like it was ready to crash, though it hadn't managed to in the last ten years. Tyree, having stopped from her housework, looked at him with increasing worry, though also like she were about to hit him with the broom.

"Hon..." she said, "it's a blood sport."

"Yeah and it's awesome!" Paris insisted.

Tyree folded her arms and glared.

"They have more ranks than just what gets shown on most TV," Paris said. "I'll be able to fight at my skill level."

Tyree *looked* at Paris. He twisted his foot behind him.

"So I was thinking I could take a year off school, and—"

"And what if you're sick of it in a month?" Tyree asked.

"How could I get sick of it in a month? This is something I've loved my whole life!"

"You're hoping you'll rub elbows with your kangaroo crush, huh?"

Paris glanced aside. "... not necessarily..." he muttered in a low voice.

"It's unlikely you'll ever see him in person," Tyree said. "And even if you do, you'll still be behind the line of fans; it's not like you're his co-worker."

Paris sighed, and he pulled out a chair from the table and sat. He'd been thinking over his reasons ever since he saw the poster—and yes, Sultan had something to do with it—but there was more than just that.

"Mom... I need to grow up."

Tyree perked her ears until they scraped the ceiling.

"And when I saw it, I knew it'd be hard. How could it not be hard? I weigh as much as my pillow."

"And you think getting beat up will make you a better person?" Tyree asked, though her tone was more questioning than accusatory.

"Whatever needs to happen, I can't keep being me!" Paris said. "I gotta step out of my comfort zone one of these days! I need to put up a wall of spikes at my tail so I can't retreat whenever I'm facing something uncomfortable."

"Paris..."

Tyree pulled a chair out from the table just across from him, and she pulled him into her arms and held him tight. Paris didn't resist, he flopped into his mother, like he might magically turn inanimate and never leave again.

Tyree stroked his ears. "If you want this..." she sighed. "I'll give you my blessing."

Paris, trembling, seized her tight. She squeaked in surprised.

“Thanks, mom...” he said.

“But this is at your own expense,” Tyree said. “You want a wall of spikes at your tail, you’re taking the risk.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Paris eked, unable to contain his tears.

“And if I see you on TV, I’ll cheer you on!”

Paris pulled away and met her eyes. Narrowing his gaze, he said, “Okay... but not in front of anyone I know.”

“What?” Tyree stroked her son’s long ears. “Embarrassed to have a proud mother?”

“It’s hard to be suave when you have a proud mother pinching your ears —” Paris started.

Tyree grabbed both of Paris’s ears and tugged, pinning them to his knees.

“Ow, ow!” Paris pleaded. “Fine, okay, cheer me on in front of friends and strangers!”

“That’s better,” Tyree said with a smile. “No good having a famous son if I can’t exploit it!”

It took several days to call the office and arrange the interview, with needing a new physical on such short notice. But the days were a blur, and soon Paris was there, in front of the enormous Fighters Entertainment Center, the largest single structure on St. Marten-Cristo, including all the old churches and hotels. It was not, however, the tallest or most obvious—that would have been the Queen of the Universe statue atop Varish Peak. If one didn't know the FEC was here, they might not even see it among the surrounding multi-tiered white stucco buildings.

Given the island's architecture, its most defining feature wasn't even its strange jutting steel arches, but how much glass it had for its walls. Many newer buildings on the island had glass roofs to give a lovely view of the sky, but the FEC was like a piece of a metropolis planted in the middle of a classical city.

Paris cuddled the doctor's papers into his chest as she entered the lobby, knowing he was out of place among the fighters, staff, and publicists. He kept turning around to stare at the tall open roof of the place and the multi-floor railing that emptied into various stages and stadiums. He then ran face-first into the crotch of a huge black bear.

"Oh god I'm sorry!" Paris said.

The bear, with a large belly and shoulders as wide as Paris was tall, took the papers from Paris's hands and looked them over. He smiled.

"Hello, Paris," he said in a deep rolling voice. "Name's Mack. Come with me, please."

He skimmed the doctor reports and Paris stumbled through his introduction, motioned him to a white tile room where Mack measured out Paris's proportions.

"Didn't I already do this part of the physical?" Paris asked.

"Need more exacting measures for a variety of reasons," Mack said, checking the length of each of Paris's ears with a measuring ribbon.

"Does this mean I'm in?"

"Dear," Mack said, applying a familiar tone, "That's up to you. You meet the minimum health requirements, no major health issues, no flaws or deficits."

"I figured there'd be like, a line of candidates," Paris said. "You'd have your pick."

"Oh, we do," Mack said, then patted Paris right on the rump. Paris squeaked and jumped, in part because Mack was so strong just a small swipe tossed Paris against the wall. He blushed at the treatment, but as he turned, he realized he had to avert his gaze from staring at Mack's backside—namely, that enormous rear. Paris had always been an ass man, and damn did the bear have an

ass.

Mack led him on the tour across the Center. They visited arenas with enormous seating areas—Paris had sat in the high rows more than once before—and smaller rings with private viewing booths and CCTV. Paris watched two fighters in a sparring match, a horse versus an alligator half again his size.

They traded blows, fist against fist, arm against arm, a deft dodge of a tail sweep—and spaced themselves apart. When it seemed they had paused to size each other up for the next bout, the horse sprang into a flying roundhouse kick. The alligator caught his leg mid-calf, though before he could exploit the advantage, the horse lifted himself by the snagged leg and cracked his other hoof right into the alligator's head. The alligator shoved the horse away, who rolled back onto his feet without once letting his back hit the floor.

"Go go go go!" Paris squealed, bouncing up and down as he watched the exchange, before Mack had to pull him away.

"There'll be plenty of time for that later," the bear said.

"Aw, but, but—"

Mack also showed Paris the way to the bunker and locker rooms—walls painted a bright and tasteful pale blue, created a room even more homey than the hospital had been. Dozens and dozens of lockers gave way to an open shower in the far corner, at which Paris strained to get a peek.

"Now, I'm obligated to warn you," Mack said, "You have to work your way up to this. Your performance dictates your standing."

"Uh-huh," Paris said, as his eyes caught a tiger near the showers, bending over just so to loosen the wraps on his ankles, giving perfect sight under the tiger's tail and the soft yet yielding curves. He was too far away to touch it, but he could imagine, and his imagination ran away with him.

Paris's nose bled. He instantly grabbed a wet wipe from the stand near the door and stopped up the blood with it.

Mack, looking down at Paris, grinned with a large row of sharp teeth. "You interested in finding more than just violent action, huh?"



“Not necessarily,” Paris lied.

“Oh I don’t know. It would surprise you how many guys join up more interested in sex than fighting.”

Paris perked his ears, then let them fall again as he realized how that made him look. “Does... does that happen a lot?”

“What?”

“Sex.”

Mack looked Paris up and down even more than he had in the checkup room, then his grin grew broader.

Paris’s heart seized up and jumped all over the place. He couldn’t help it; he panicked, turned and ran out the door. Down the hall Mack had led him through, he was at the double doorways that led to the main lobby, when Mack overtook him and stood between Paris and escape.

“Paris, babe,” he said, holding enormous paws up, “What’s the holdup?”

“I can’t do that!” Paris confessed. “I don’t even know how to talk to guys, what am I even thinking!? I’m saving myself for marriage! Mom will think I’m a slut! Paris the Slut, they’ll call me!” Paris hyperventilated.

“Listen, if you wanna walk away, that’s your choice.” Mack wrapped an arm around Paris’s shoulders and eased him back toward the hallway. “But you came here for a reason, right? You find our fighters attractive?”

“My brother says you make it gay on purpose,” Paris said, sunken.

“Oh, definitely,” Mack said. “It’s popular with women and... our demographic.”

Paris looked up at Mack, ears up in surprise so quick they bapped Mack on the chin. “You’re gay too?”

“Hon, I’ll pay your a thousand drachs if you if you can find a fighter here who isn’t *at least* male-inclined.”

Paris blinked. He hadn’t even considered that. That’d make dating easier; as much as the island accepted it, St. Marten-Cristo wasn’t known for its broad gay scene, but apparently a large chunk of them ended up here. Who knew?

But there were always anxieties Paris had about such a situation, to the point he’d shied away from ever pursuing it. the thought of being used, abused, and suffering consequences for it filled him with nervous terror. It was why he told his mother he would find a husband rather than a series of lays like Blitz did. It seemed so much safer.

“So, if everyone’s having sex all the time,” Paris said, with teeth clenched, “What about like... disease?” He expected Mack to laugh his concern

off.

“Non-existent,” Mack said.

“You can’t guarantee—” Paris started.

“We do regular medical checkups. Fighters with debilitating disease aren’t good television, you know. Plus—” he got an interesting look across his muzzle. “Let me show you.” He gestured for Paris to follow.

Paris hesitated, looking back at the double doors leading to the lobby and back outside. He could leave right now. But his thoughts lingered on his mother’s comment about his pent-up-ness, and it was true. If there was even the possibility Mack could soothe Paris’s worries—well, he could at least look at what Mack wanted to show him, right?

The hallway led to a large medical center in the corner of the building, almost as large as the downtown hospital. Full-time doctors in scrubs walked up and down the hall, nurses read medical charts and examining equipment that went “ping”. Mack led him into a supply room near the front of the ward where he picked out a large tub from one shelf of bandages and gauze and other things.

He twisted the lid open and showed Paris a transparent goo with trapped bubbles and a green tint.

“This is the stuff,” Mack said, dipping his fingers in.

“What is it?” Paris asked. “And, isn’t that unhygienic?”

“Not with this stuff,” Mack said. “PACAD—Personal Antibiotic, Cleaning Agent and Disinfectant. Most powerful stuff on the market, also safe; you could shower in this stuff, eat it, it won’t hurt any of your cells, but it’ll kill every single other microbe.”

“Huh,” Paris said, reaching a hesitant finger to touch it.

“So the boys like to use it for lubricant. Also cleans semen off of anything. Much better than a condom, that’s for sure! Wanna try it out?”

Paris froze. He looked up at Mack warm gaze, wondering if he was really asking *that*—and for a half second considered just saying *yes, please*, but he instead just garbled something that sounded like no language.

“Babe?” Mack said, shaking Paris until a small trickle of blood ran from his nose. “You okay?”

“I uh, I—” Paris started—until he perked his ears at a sound outside. Medical crash cart. Paris turned and peeked his head out the door, pulling it back to avoiding it being shorn off by the rush of personnel in scrubs.

He stepped out in the hallway, his paw stepping in a slick puddle. Blood. Not his blood; he never bled *that* much. The trail followed the crash cart all the way down the hall.

How much blood was that?

Paris hurried after the cart. Mack was right behind him, yelling, “Paris! You’re not allowed into the surgery rooms!”

But Paris had no trouble finding said rooms. Even when orderlies noted his trespass and tried to grab him, Paris ducked under and sprinted off, avoiding a skid on the blood trail.

It was already far more blood than he’d ever seen on TV.

Paris avoided bursting right into the operating room, but there was a side door to an unoccupied observation area. He slipped in, skipped the stairs into the overhead seats, and looked down from the windows where the hypothetical medical students could get a good look at the body.

It was the horse from the training room. Something had bitten a long tear out of his midsection. The doctors had to push the damaged organs back in. They pulled loose gator teeth and discarded them into a stainless steel tray. An IV trailed up from his leg to multiple bags of blood to replace what he’d lost. Paris shivered, any thoughts he had about a gay sex paradise buried deep again as he struggled to manage his revulsion.

It was amazing how fast they were for a trauma; Paris had always imagined doctors still needed time to clear and assess the wounds—which they did, pulling aside the horse’s kidneys to assess for tube damage.

Paris pulled himself away to retch into a waste barrel marked for such things, though nothing came up, and he tamped himself back down to queasy. Trembling, he turned around again, Mack was standing there, arms folded.

“I told you—” the enormous bear began with the demeanor of a schoolteacher.

“I’ve never seen anyone that injured!” Paris said.

“So you’ve only ever watched the free broadcast version?” Mack said.

“My family’s not rich, no,” Paris said. “I’ve attended a few live events and they still don’t get that bad.”

“They rarely do, but it happens,” Mack said. “You know the basic rules, right?”

“Ring out or first fighter off his feet for ten seconds,” Paris recited, eyes closed to avoid double-vision. “No strikes to eyes or genitals.”

“And that’s it,” Mack said. “That’s why the sport’s been so popular all these years. We don’t bother with the audience-unfriendly rule changes merely to make things safer, otherwise it’s little different from a kid’s martial arts tournament. It’s supposed to be dramatic! How far are they willing to go to win? Everyone knows the fighters have real relationships with each other. It’s not about the fighting, it’s about the drama!”

“So you let people get killed for drama?!” Paris exclaimed.

“Nobody’s died in years,” Mack said. “In this little community, everyone is well-aware that killing a fighter is a recipe for your matches drying up.”

“That’s not much comfort!” Paris said, gesturing at the surgery windows. “Even if he doesn’t die! I get a wound like that, I’m up for six months, and the season is half over!”

“You’re not up on your modern medicine, I take it,” Mack said.

Paris perked his ears. “What do you mean?”

Mack looked over the windows into the surgery room and gestured Paris closer. He stepped up and looked down at the surgery floor. The doctors were stitching together what they could, smearing every identified injury with a thick pink goo, similar to the green goo that Mack had shown him earlier.

“That’s not just disinfectant?” Paris said.

“Biomender Gel. Little microbes mend up wounds and broken bones in no time—even severed nerves! He’ll be up and walking this afternoon, and ready to fight again tomorrow morning.”

Paris’s jaw dropped. He watched as a trauma surgery that could have taken hours conclude within thirty minutes, light stitching patched over with that pink goo. Paris could even see it working as the muscles and skin pulled together and sealed before his eyes. The team finished up by washing off the blood with green goo and an alcohol scrub.

“That can’t be cheap,” Paris said. “Why don’t they use it in the local hospitals?”

“Babe,” Mack said, putting an arm around Paris’s shoulders. “You can’t put a price on your health.”

“I guess not,” Paris said. Strangely, he liked the touch, and leaned into the side of Mack’s belly. “But I’m assuming that comes out of your winnings...”

“We’ll never leave you on the surgery table for lack of payment,” Mack said. “I can’t say the same for the poor sods in the uptown trauma center. We take care of our fighters, Paris.”

Paris watched the final check, just before the doctors wheeled the horse out of the surgery room. He still could see the blood and organ’s in his mind’s eye—that wasn’t leaving soon. But he’d calmed down and the queasiness had vanished.

And he had to decide.

“Still squeamish?” Mack asked.

“I—” Paris sighed. “I need to get over myself. No running away from this, not this time. I knew it would be dangerous, and it’s not even all that dangerous in the long run, right? Fastest way to learn to swim is to jump in the deep end!”

“That’s the spirit.” Mack patted Paris’s shoulder. “Let’s go to my office and sign the paperwork. Unless, you wanna try out the green goo like I said—”

Paris flushed, his ears burning hot. “I’ll... work my way up to that,” he said.

“But the deep end!” Mack reminded him with a wag of the finger.

“I didn’t mean that part!” Paris said, pushing Mack away at once. Mack laughed.

Paris shouldered the duffel bag that threatened to topple him backwards as he stumbled off the streetcar, along with a half dozen other prospective-looking fighters, all of whom looked more scuffled than Paris ever did.

Paris turned his head up to the tall glass superstructure and took a deep breath.

His mother kissed him on the cheek. “Knock ‘em dead, hon.”

“We’re discouraged from killing each other, mom,” Paris said, hugging her.

“That’ll help me sleep at least.”

“I told you about the Biomender stuff they have, remember? They’ll take care of us.”

“Okay, okay!” Tyree pushed him off with another stroke to his ears. “Go make friends!” She called out. And when Paris was already a quarter of the way down the plaza, she called, “And if you meet a cute guy, don’t forget to use protection!”

Paris skidded to a halt and spun to stare dead at her. “Mom!” He yelled after her as the trolley left, and he hoped the noise of the plaza wasn’t just hiding the sound of strangers snickering at him.





The massive rotund rhino, who barely introduced himself as Cobalt, took Paris and the other recruits down a familiar spiraling ramp way, though farther than Mack had taken Paris on the tour. After a few turns, the nice mottled red carpeting transformed into gray, and then bare concrete. They must have passed sea level, given a wet salt residue coated the walls of the sub-sub-basement. The lights—no longer nice recessed or natural lighting, but incandescent lamps behind thick bars, threatened to shut off with a flicker and buzz.

“Is this the right way?” Paris asked, ahead of the others as he walked side-to-side with Cobalt—with just enough room in the hallway for the two.

Cobalt snorted.

“Where’s Mack, anyway?” Paris asked. “Can I talk to him?”

“He’s manager of Silver rank,” Cobalt muttered with a raspy voice. “Ask if you ever get that high.”

“Yeah, I was unclear on the rankings, where do I start? Bronze? Copper?”

“Green.”

“That’s not a metal.”

Cobalt laughed hoarsely. “Boy, did you even read the contract? Or should I ask, *can* you even read?”

Paris huffed and crossed his arms. “I... skimmed it! That thing’s sixty pages!”

“It’s all in there,” Cobalt said. “You’ll have plenty of time to skim it, skinny.”

“I’m at *least* scrappy,” Paris declared.

“You’re here,” he said, stopping at an open doorway—the door was solid metal, rusted over on the hinges. It could have been years since it was last closed.

Paris stepped inside. The concrete room wasn’t horrid—the metal framed bunk beds were all rusty, as were the lockers along the far wall. The only thing modern, as opposed to dungeon-chic, was the computer console at the far right, though even that seemed to show signs of salt crusting and discoloring its monitor. At least all the salt neutralized any odor.

“Okay,” Paris said, turning to Cobalt, “when Mack said we’d work our way up, I didn’t think the bottom rung was quite so low.”

Cobalt ignored him. “Empty bunk’s yours,” he said with a firm gesture of the thumb. “Practice starts in two hours, use the console to find out where to report.” He took the rest of the group further down the hallway.

Paris blinked. He'd been aware there were many people in the Pit fighter brackets, but a number like *twenty-five hundred* hadn't meant all that much to him at the time. There were sixteen beds in this room alone. If they all lived on the premises, that'd mean at least one hundred and fifty rooms...

Paris sighed and slumped his bag off his shoulder, and sat down on the bed, only to discover it had no mattress on the plywood plank. "Dammit," He muttered, brushing splinters off his tush, "Should have brought something more than just my comforter..." he supposed he'd have to wait until his first free day to find a portable cushion somewhere in town.

As he unzipped his duffel bag, a head poked down from the upper bunk, with a broad nose and a single antler dangling from one side. The green deer blinked as though he'd just woken. "Oh hey," the deer said, a smile brightening his face, "bunkmates!"

"Uh, hi," Paris said, almost nose-to-nose with the deer. A partial tear marked one of his ears—many fighters had ear damage, even Sultan; it was just one of those things that must have been hard to repair. He resisted the urge to poke the deer's remaining antler to see if it was still attached.

"Name's Logan!" he said, reaching a large hand down which Paris shook. "You're cute, bunbun."

"My name's Paris," Paris said, unamused.

"Ah," Logan pulled himself back up and leaned over the top bunk. "Gay Paree..."

"Yeah, as if I haven't heard that one from my brothers a zillion times," Paris muttered.

"Oh, sorry. I should have guessed. Given you are here—"

"Given I am here, I must be gay, huh," Paris said, as he pulled a binder out of his bag and opened it up to his contract.

"You're gonna be disappointed if you're not," Logan said. A moment's pause, and he added, "as will I."

"I am very gay," Paris said, looking through the tiny dense text. "Gay as you please. A cock-gobbler. A ball-licker. A flaming homo."

"Oh good," Logan said. "If you wanna suck anyone off I'm basically always available."

"I'll keep it in mind," Paris muttered. He pulled his face back from the page and pinched the bridge of his muzzle. "Ugh, I can't make heads or tails of this..."

"What's the matter?" Logan asked.

"I don't know. When Mack was recruiting me, I thought the experience here would be more..."

“Sexy?” Logan suggested.

“In a broad generalized sense,” Paris said. “More like... comfortable.”

“They only show new fighters the upper floors. That’s the selling stage.”

“But he didn’t show me any of this!” Paris gestured to the room.

“Yeah, it’s kinda hard to sell people on this.”

“But how does that make sense?” Paris asked. “How’s anyone supposed to climb to Silver rank from *here* in one season?”

Logan paused for a beat. “Did he say you would?”

“No, but my contract only lasts one season, so why bother?”

“Lemme see the contract.” A large hoofy hand reached down from the upper bunk. Paris sighed, and placed the binder in that hand, which retreated to the upper bunk. After a long bout of page shuffling, there was a click, a clack, and the hand dropped with a single sheet in it. Paris took it.

“Paragraph QQ,” Logan said. “In the brackets.”

Paris read over the tiny text—and the paper crumpled in his fingers.

“*I’m gonna kill that bastard*,” Paris growled.

“Good luck!” Logan cheered.

The door slammed against its wall, startling Mack as he turned in his office chair to see the purple rabbit with the spiral mark march right into his office.

“Cobalt!” Mack called, hoping the rhino was right behind, “Can’t you keep recruits in their space?”

The large rhino stopped at the doorway, leaning against it and panting. “Sorry, sir, he’s... he’s slippery...”

Mack changed his tone and put on a friendly smile, despite the interruption. “Paris, babe, what can I do for you?”

“What the hell is this?!” Paris shouted, slapping a wrinkled sheet of paper to the desk.

Mack glanced at the page number, then folded his large hands. “Page forty-three of your contract, which bears your signature.”

“I said I was signing up for one season,” Paris said. “Then I learn from this paragraph, since I started out the season *in debt*, my contract can and will be renewed if I do not pay off, by the end of the season, *ninety thousand drachs!*”

Mack sighed. This again, He rubbed claws along his forehead. “There are a lot of expenses that go into keeping fighters,” he explained, as if to a child.

“But ninety thousand?! My mother doesn’t make that in a year!”

“It’s only fifty thousand after your advance,” Mack said.

“Which I’m not even allowed to withdraw until my contract expires!” Paris’s voice was becoming ear-shattering. “And even then—that’s still more than the advance!”

“Hon, please!” Mack snapped at the young rabbit, holding his paws out. Paris stopped, though he didn’t look the least bit intimidated by Mack’s size. The regimen would strip him of that unwarranted confidence in time.

“Listen,” Mack said. “Because you’re new, I’ll explain it one more time. Half the contract relates to operational expenses. Rent. Board. Amenities. Training fees. Publicity. Insurance. Medical buffer fund—”

“Buffer fund?” Paris said. “You didn’t say that last time.”

“It was under the *et cetera*.”

Paris put on a nasty look. “Let me see if I understand... if I’m injured in a fight, and you wheel me to that expensive-looking surgery room...”

“I said we will not leave you on the table,” Mack said. “Anything past the initial five thousand drachs paid into the fund will be added to the debt.”

“And I can’t say no to that.”

“If it’s critical, no, you can’t refuse. We’re required by law to do everything we can to preserve your life.”

“But even if I became crippled,” Paris said, “Then I’m too injured to earn any drachs back, so I’d have no choice *but* to use your medical facility.”

“That is the unfortunate truth of a world where you must work for a living, yes,” Mack said.

“I’d have to have a flawless tournament run as-is just to pay off what you saddled me with from the outset!”

“Paris, please don’t shout.” Mack sighed. “I don’t write the contracts, I’m just a manager. I have my own contracts too.”

“Then who writes the contracts?”

“Our parent company.”

“And where are they located?”

“Neverwark, Avaria.”

Paris slapped himself in the face. He sank, hitting his head on the desk.

“Babe, listen—”

“Stop calling me babe!” Paris yelled. He sprang across the desk and seized Mack by his forearm, twisting and turning himself all over the desk as if in a frenzy to throw Mack onto his back. Mack let him play around a moment, before tugging his arm back behind the desk, and Paris with it.

“I did the part I’m required,” he said, looking Paris in the eye. “Which is to sell you on the contract. I followed all the legal procedures required, and you had the opportunity to ask all questions you needed to make an informed choice.”

“But I wasn’t informed!” Paris said, clinging to Mack’s arm.

“That’s not our duty,” Mack said. He curled his free hand into a squeegee and shoved Paris off his arm, who crumpled to the floor.

Paris whimpered.

“I will point out you are within your rights to address your grievances to the board. You’ll find the mailing address on the last page of the contract. Now, to show you I mean you no ill will, you can stand up and we can engage in any sex you like. Ride my cock, or I’ll ride yours. I’ll even suck you off while you sit in my chair if that’s what you like.”

“You think that’s gonna make it okay?” Paris said, pushing himself up on his palms.

Mack was silent for a moment and reflected on the time he’d signed his own contract with Pit Fighters twenty-five years ago. He’d been a lot like Paris, then—though never quite so small.

“No,” Mack said. “But I’m a manager to lots of fighters just like you. I’d much rather be friends than enemies.”

Paris considered Mack’s substantial genitals, not all that far from his

face, for a moment. He sighed. “I’m not in the mood,” he said, standing. “Not for you.”

Mack sighed, shrugged, and turned his chair around to his computer again. “Suit yourself. Cobalt, escort him back to his room—don’t want him to miss training on his first day.”

Paris marched into the room, flomped onto his bed again, which rattled the bunk. Logan listed as the rabbit flipped to the back of the contract.

“... it’s a mailing address,” Paris realized. “Not even email. Why am I not surprised?”

“Wait till you get to the part where you settle disputes through arbitration,” Logan said. “Pit Fighters’ parent company is Amalgamated Entertainment Services Inc. And the arbitration service they use is—”

“Amalgamated Arbiters LLC?” Paris hazarded.

“You’re catching on!”

Paris was quiet for a long moment.

“Logan...” he said, “How long have you been here?”

“Seven years,” Logan said.

“Seven?!”

“Oh yeah, but I’m more of a lover than a fighter. I joined in the first place to look for some hot guys, and that’s paid off! I spend multiple months per year beating them up, and getting beaten up, but it’s super good exercise and everyone’s always pent-up to the point of exploding so you got your pick. Speaking of, we still got an hour before training, so did you wanna bang?”

Logan waited for a response, but when he perked his ears, he only heard a quiet sniffing sound. “Bun?” He asked, concerned.

He lifted himself off the railing and hopped down the side of the bed. Turning, he found the purple bunny curled up with his knees to his chest, his face buried in those knees, and his ears lopped down to cover his face.



"Hey, Paris, what's the matter?" Logan asked, leaning against the frame of the bunk.

"Mom's gonna kill me..." Paris whimpered. "Dad's gonna *actually* kill me..."

"It's not that bad! I'm not joking—"

"It's slavery, Logan!" Paris turned his face up, showing off his tear-stained cheeks. "I signed away my body and all my finances forever!"

"It's not forever!" Logan said. "Fifteen years minimum."

"Fifteen!?"

"That's how long the renewal period lasts," Logan explained. "Course, then you're out of here with all that debt on your shoulders, but you know—"

Paris broke into open sobs, burying his head into his knees again. Logan's ears sank, and he sat down on the creaky bed next to the rabbit and put an arm around him. Paris pulled away.

Logan wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't good at this kind of comfort—he preferred to just work through emotions with a lot of sex. But it was hard to tickle someone's buttons when they were despairing.

"Bun, it's okay," Logan said. "Crying's not good for television—"

"I don't care about television," Paris sniffled. "I don't... I don't know what I'm gonna do..."

"Why'd you wanna join in the first place?" Logan asked. "Most people join cause they don't have any prospects. The recruiter doesn't sell you on *everything*, you wanted something out of this."

Paris looked up, wiping an eye. He thought. "... this is gonna sound stupid, but..."

"Yes?" Logan perked his ears.

"I've... always had a massive crush on Sultan..."

"Oh, me too!" Logan said.

"Really?!" Paris perked up brighter than Logan had seen him yet.

"I crush on lots of fighters," Logan admitted, hand-to-chest. "Why not? There's so many heavenly sculpted bodies around here. But yes, Sultan's a particular fave of mine."

"I mean, damn, his legs are as thick as I am," Paris said.

"Thicker," Logan said, cupping his hands around Paris's shoulders to check.

"You met him?!" Paris asked.

"A few times!" Logan said. "You wouldn't believe it from how cold he is

in the ring, but he's a real sweetheart. Nice kisser, too."

"You've kissed him?!" Paris asked, then got an incredulous look on his face. "You're lying."

"You can ask a dozen guys around here," Logan said with a hand up. "Cross my heart."

Paris considered this, though his expression read as dumbfounded.

"Bun?" Logan asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

"I didn't think..." Paris rubbed a paw over his head. "Oh, what would I even do if I met him?! What would I say?"

"Something like this," Logan said, as he got on his knees in front of Paris, and smoothed over his head fur with a lick of a hand. Logan was just tall enough that put him eye-to-eye with the flustered rabbit.

"Hey there, sir," Logan said, putting on a fake exotic accent, "love your matches. I joined up cause of you, you know. Always wanted to know what it'd be like for those legs to crush me like a watermelon, but if you had any other ideas, I'd be open to suggestions..."

As he stared deep into Logan's eyes, Paris's nose sprung a leak.

"Oh hey, you do that too!" Logan said. "Much less blood, but then again, you nose is smaller than mine—"

"Okay, okay," Paris stuttered. "M-maybe it's not all bad, I might have something to... look forward to..."

"You see?" Logan said. "The stuff you were looking for, that's still here, and you can go take it. We can work on the crippling debt and entrapment on its own time."

Paris tilted his head. "We?"

"I'm not gonna let my bunkmate cry himself to sleep every night, that'd get depressing." Logan pulled Paris close and squeezed him tight. "I'll watch over you, Bun."

Paris, hesitated, then wrapped his arms around Logan and held him tight. "Please don't disappoint me..."

Logan pet Paris down his ears. Paris leaned into it and sighed.

"Sooo..." Logan started, "Wanna..."

"As much as I'd like to," Paris said, "I think I need time..."

"Only thirty minutes until training!" Logan said. "Could be a quickie."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like enough time, given I haven't—!" Paris started, before cutting himself off and turning his eyes away.

Logan's ears perked. "You're a virgin?"

Paris became silent. A grin spread over Logan's lips.

"Not—not technically!" Paris exclaimed.

“Ah, so you’ve never been on the receiving end,” Logan said with a thoughtful nod. “Just sucked off a couple guys in the school restroom, huh?”

“One guy,” Paris muttered. “Public restroom. And there’s nothing wrong with being a virgin, anyway!”

“Of course not,” Logan said. “It’s just kinda funny...”

Paris crossed his arms.

“If you’re not in the mood, we should hit the shower first before everyone else gets there,” Logan said, taking Paris by the wrist and pulling him up. He grabbed a small black bag from the foot of his bunk before they sped out the door. Paris followed haltingly, staring at Logan’s behind. Logan swished his tail, and Paris averted his gaze.

“I don’t... I’ve never been in a place like this before,” Paris said. “Is it like prison? Am I gonna have to worry about guarding my butt every time I bend over?”

“Oh, definitely not,” Logan said. “We have rules down here, we’re not barbarians.”

“Rules like the contract?”

“Rules like a decent society of horny dudes should have!” Logan said. “You’re gonna get a lot of advances, touching included—that’s expected, so get used to it. But if that’s all you care for, that’s as far as it should ever go. If anyone directly or indirectly threatens or blackmails you, kick their ass, or let someone else know so they can kick their ass. The vast majority of guys here like the good thing they have going and don’t want anything to ruin it, especially not abuse.” Logan snorted. “Way too many willing partners as is. They can learn the rules or be ostracized.”

“How’d *that* come to be the way of things here?” Paris asked as the hallway opened toward the central shower room, a handful of fighters taking up the open stalls.

“Sultan wanted it,” Logan said. “And he beats up anyone who tries otherwise. Kinda how I met him.”

Paris’s ears perked. “It goes all the way to him?”

“He’s got pull around here!” Logan stepped under a free showerhead and pulled the handle to start the water running. He gestured Paris forward.

Paris stared at the deer with water cascading down over him.

“It’s three minutes and they charge you for more,” Logan said, pulling a bar of soft soap and a rough-looking loofah out of his black bag. “Though if we go together, that’s six minutes.”

“Um,” Paris started.

“It’s okay if you don’t wanna,” Logan said. “I know, you’re—”

Paris bolted right under the showerhead along with Logan. The water was freezing cold—which he should have expected, but it was likely necessary to keep calm. Logan made pointing gestures with the bar of soap, which Paris considered, and nodded.

“Just uh,” Paris said.

“I’ll be careful!” Logan insisted.

He lathered Paris up, starting at his head and ears, and slid his hands all up and down the rabbit’s slim body. He knew it could be too far, but he briskly soaped up the rabbit’s genitals too, and under his tail, in as chaste a gesture as he could manage. Paris’s ears were burning hot, but he didn’t look away or freeze up, at least not any more than the water already made him freeze.

Paris returned the favor by soaping up and down Logan’s back, which he had trouble reaching. Though, even though he wiggled his tail a lot, Paris recoiled and blushed, too squeamish to touch his rear end, which Logan just giggled at.

When the three minutes were up, Logan, kneeling down, kissed Paris on the lips. Paris’s ears burned, taking the rest of his body heat with them.

“It’s just for the efficiency,” Paris insisted, shivering.

“Sure!” Logan said. “And we’ll have lots and lots of opportunities to be efficient, bunkmate!”

Paris just nodded until he was certain his head would fall off. “This doesn’t mean I want sex!”

“I know,” Logan said, as he gathered his things, turned and headed for the hallway to the training arena. “I’m not banking on it, there’re always others!”

Paris wrung the water off his ears before stopping as he made a sudden realization. “... I’m gonna have trouble sleeping in that bed with all the squeaking, aren’t I?”

Logan just whistled as he rounded the corner out of sight.

TO BE CONTINUED

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