

Story 5

Income

Every city must have a temple. For The City, that temple is MetroStadium. Its massive dome pulses with the rhythm of the Game and the roar of the crowd. To many, the Game is more than sport. It is life. It is identity. Hopes and dreams live and die with the team.

Throughout The City, in smaller, humbler arenas, wannabes toil, dreaming of one day being promoted to the big time. A few make it. Most do not.

“Goodbye, burned pots. So long, dried-up crud. Good riddance, coffee scum,” Rio said cheerfully through the dishwasher steam. “The only good thing about this job is that it’s gonna be over!”

Sienna, the new cook, looked up. “What’re you talking about? You quitting?”

Rio grinned. “A scout’s coming to the Game tonight, from the Pro Game League. The way I’ve been playing lately, I’ll get signed for sure. Soon I’ll be rolling in it!”

Gaia came in. “Rolling in what? I don’t see you rolling in anything but dishes to wash.”

“Two million bucks a year.”

“Right. Sure,” Gaia said. She turned to Sienna. “What’s the poor deluded boy talking about?”

Sienna filled her in, just as Luna reported for work, followed by Nikos.

“And that’s just the basic salary,” Rio told them. “Then there’s product endorsements worth millions a year. Skills clinics and appearance fees. Plus trading cards – fans’ll be paying a fortune for my rookie card.”

Gaia shook her head. “So that’s your grand financial plan for the future? Go pro and rake it in?”

Rio nodded.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Nikos told him. “Even if you do get signed, you don’t know if you’ll get that kind of money. It’s just a handful of pros who get all those deals.”

“Oh, it’s the great sports expert,” Rio said. “Like you know.”

“Listen, Rio, it would be great if it happened, but maybe you should start thinking more realistically,” Gaia said. “Like living on an ordinary income, like most people.”

Rio laughed. “I don’t want to hear about ordinary. I’m not like most people. I’m gonna be rich.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Sienna said. “Hardly anyone makes that kind of cash, even the pros. Most people live on a whole lot less. But they can still live well.”

“Live well on less,” Rio repeated. “That really gets me buzzed.”

“But it’s reality,” Sienna said. “Look, I’m not getting rich from my two cooking jobs, but I’m still managing to save for opening my own place, and I live just fine.”

“Me, too,” Nikos said. “I’ll be making 55 grand a year as a wrist-pod technician,”

Rio snorted. “You call that money? That’s squat!” He gave them all a disgusted look. “You want to live like that, go ahead. Not me. I want more.” He squirted dishwashing soap into the machine. “I can taste those millions. As soon as I sign, I’m outta here. Living big, having fun.” He turned to Luna. “How does that sound?”

She laughed. “Sounds great!” ■