

Chapter One—A Bloody Warm Welcome

Kassian was intimately acquainted with things that seemed too good to be true. For example, despite being born with the four elemental brands inscribed into his flesh, his magical aptitude was categorically lacklustre. So lacklustre, in fact, that he'd flunked out of the Elentarian Academy for Mages in his first week, and subsequently abandoned all notions of ever pursuing magic.

So, when his friend Borias had told him that he'd entered a raffle and won tickets to 'excellent seats' at the Zerklean Games—a quadrennial magical tourney, in which the best mages of the kingdom were pitted against each other for fame and glory—Kassian decided he wouldn't quite believe it until he saw it for himself.

It seemed too good to be true.

Presently, Kassian was making his way through Zerkleion, known as the city of magic and wine. Today, on the inaugural day of the games, it certainly appeared to have earned the latter half of its moniker; wine flowed freely from carafes in every bar and taverna, and Kassian smacked his parched lips as he passed them by.

As he strolled down the sun-kissed market street, bustling with exuberant shoppers purveying stools peddling wares—and indeed wines—from all over the kingdom, his eyes wandered along the stands. Discreetly, he was also admiring the great numbers of attractive women enjoying their day. The games had the entire city in a festival mood; people dressed nicely, and in the case of the women, many of them dressed down, showing both arms, legs and a healthy amount of cleavage.

“Get your emblems here!” a vendor called out as Kassian passed his booth. “Show your gratitude to the crystal guardians! You there, sir, excited for the games, eh? I can tell at a glance. Get an emblem to support your favourite contestant!”

Kassian put up a hand to decline. “Sorry, not quite that excited.”

“Oh, don’t be a killjoy. Three hundred years of peace this tournament marks. It’s a historic occasion. I’ll give you a discount if it please you!”

Kassian smiled apologetically. “Perhaps another time.”

The vendor harrumphed. “Suit yourself.”

As a boy, Kassian had naively harboured fantasies of competing in the games. His mother and sister had both spoiled him with praise, hoping that he would become an accomplished mage. Little had they known what a letdown he would turn out to be. Now, a man skirting the edges of his youth, he’d long ago faced the reality that he’d never be champion—let alone a contestant. Somehow, the world had gone awry with him as far as magic was concerned. So, he’d settled for a regular life, working in his village forge.

That should be enough. It *was* enough.

Still, his lack of magic notwithstanding, the city had plenty of things to offer, and it had been months since he saw Borias. He didn’t come to the capital often, and it wouldn’t kill him to enjoy himself while he was here.

Just as he finished that thought, Kassian noticed that a man appeared to be following him. He wasn’t sure at first. So, he tested it by stopping to purvey some souvenirs, including a miniature wooden replica of the Zerklean temple of the old pantheon.

When Kassian stopped, the man also stopped about thirty feet behind, noncommittally glancing at a stand selling soaps and perfumes. The man looked cut from a rough cloth, with an unkempt beard and a cloak that could easily cover up his face. Not likely the sort of bloke who’d douse himself in flowery scents before he went out to conduct whatever business the day had in store.

When Kassian resumed walking, the man waited a bit, giving space to other pedestrians, seeming greatly enthused by the perfumes. Then he started to amble down the street once again, vaguely in Kassian's direction.

Kassian swore under his breath, feeling his palms grow sweaty. This was just his luck. He hadn't spent ten minutes in the city before pickpockets were on his trail.

On second thought, this man was rather large and too conspicuous to be an effective pickpocket. So, what did he want? Could he be a criminal of a more serious variety? The sort to knife you and rob you in an alleyway? Kassian wondered if his knapsack had made him a target—perhaps the man had heard a rustle and thought it full of silver. In reality, it only contained his travel itinerary, and the only rustling came from the four blades he carried; three of them strapped to his knapsack, and one to his hip. They were engraved with elemental symbols, made specifically for the games. The forgemaster had asked Kassian to peddle them since he was going down to Zerakleion, anyway. It was an opportunity to make a bit of coin from the festive spirit. Now, Kassian wondered if he should try and make it more obvious that he was armed. Perhaps that might deter the stalker?

The next time he stopped, he adjusted his cloak, flashing the hilt of the sword on his hip. But the man didn't seem to care.

“Fuck,” Kassian hissed.

Heart pounding in his chest, he hurried his steps, hoping to disappear into the crowd. The idea immediately backfired when he bumped into the back of a stranger who halted just in front of him.

The stranger spun around and grinned, eyes glinting with malice. “Why don't you slow down a bit, mate? We can play this game all day if you like. Either way, you're not getting away.

Kassian appraised the man for exactly two seconds. He was tall with broad shoulders and a beefy chest. It looked like he might be concealing something within his cloak.

Kassian weighed his options. Then he darted to the right, away from the stools. He elbowed and fumbled his way past a few dismayed shoppers and ended up in an alley to the side of the market street, where the midday sun did not shine so brightly. He now had two men on his tail; he heard their footsteps as they followed him down the alley. Kassian didn't slow down until the silhouette of a third man appeared in front of him, entering the alley from the other side.

Kassian would have cursed aloud again, but his body was steeling itself for confrontation. He felt his muscles coil, his veins almost burning with the fight. He glanced backwards. The men behind him had slowed down but were still approaching. The man ahead walked towards Kassian at a leisurely pace.

Kassian unfastened his knapsack and threw it on the ground.

"Don't suppose you've taken a wrong turn?" he asked the men, forcing his voice steady, not betraying the pounding in his chest.

"That's right, a wrong turn," said the man in front. He wore a black leather jacket and something flashed in his hands. A knife. A despicable grin contorted his already unpleasant face. "Let's just take it easy here. We only want to talk. You wouldn't turn away strangers in need, would you?"

Kassian squared his feet, assuming a stance that would let him draw quickly. "You don't look like you're in need to me. But if you've something to say, say it."

"Well, how about this," the man replied. "We're trained in dealing with mages. If you try any magic tricks, you'll find they might backfire in unpredictable ways. It can get ugly. So, I'd suggest you make it easy for everyone and just give yourself up." This man, whatever he wanted, was definitely in charge of the group.

Kassian had been in a few scraps, but he was by no means a seasoned swordfighter. Still, he hedged his bets on that the flash of a newly sharpened weapon might at least give them reason to pause. If they were robbers, they likely wouldn't risk their lives for a bit of coin.

"Unlucky for you, then, that I'm not a mage," Kassian growled. He revealed the scabbard beneath his linen mantle and drew the blade with a cold hiss. "If it's directions you want, I'd suggest a different street. Unless you want directions to the morgue."

"Oooh, look at the brave lad. Good thing I already took a shit or I'd be in need of some new trousers," one of the thugs behind Kassian mocked him.

"Now, now," said the man in front. "Why don't we discuss this before one of us loses his head. Metaphorically or otherwise."

The man was distracting Kassian, and he knew it. There was obviously nothing to discuss, but he wanted to keep Kassian's attention on himself.

In the meantime, footsteps thumped behind him.

Without glancing back, Kassian held his breath, preparing himself. Pretending not to notice.

The leader's grin soured. He nodded his head to the side. A gesture to his companions.

Kassian paid close attention to the footsteps behind him.

Maybe these men were lucky that Kassian wasn't a mage. But they were equally unlucky that he wasn't afraid of a fight. Never had been, never would be.

With a growl, he spun around with a twirling slash.

The approaching thug didn't have time to dodge. The man stumbled into the swing, a stupid look of surprise on his face. Then he backed away and dropped a dagger onto the

ground before he tumbled, following it. The slash had left a deep gash across his midsection. First blood was drawn.

“What are you, some kind of psycho knight?” the leader spat, eyes bulging.

With surprising speed, he approached Kassian. As Kassian swung his sword again, the man raised his arm. When the blade struck what should have been flesh and bone beneath the leather, it produced a metallic *clunk*. The man followed up with a tremendous punch to Kassian’s belly, knocking the wind out of him.

“We usually go about this quickly and efficiently,” the man continued, “but now you’ve done it.”

“Boss,” said the man still standing behind Kassian. He was peering down the market street at the end of the alley. “City guard’s coming this way. Better give up on this one.”

“But the reward,” the leader protested. “We need the money.”

“I’ll rather lose the money than meet the hangman,” the other thug interrupted. “Live to fight another day, boss. It’s what you always say.”

The man with the leather jacket spat on the ground, considering the situation. “Fuck, you’re right. Pox on this. Let’s leave this piece of crazy alone.”

“What about Nikos?”

The leader glanced at their fallen companion, “He ain’t standing up again.”

Without pause, the leader turned and darted down the alleyway. The other man followed. Kassian had half a mind to trip him up as he passed, but before he’d finished the thought, he’d already dashed past him. A few seconds later, they were both on the other side of the street, dispersing into the city.

There came a shrill scream from the market street. A woman peered down the alley, eyes fixed on the downed thug.

Despite the alarm, Kassian sighed, the relief of survival rushing through him. He looked at the man he had cut down. He was clutching his belly.

“Spare me,” he wheezed, whilst looking at Kassian with watery eyes. “It wasn’t personal. Just a job.”

The crook had gone from intimidating to helpless in the space of a minute. Kassian had no desire to kill the man; he’d never taken a life before. And now that the fight was over, thief or not, the idea that Kassian might have killed this man didn’t exactly make him brim with pride.

“Why did you do it?” Kassian asked as he crouched by his attacker’s side.

For some reason, Kassian found himself trembling as the heat of battle dissipated. He was starting to feel like he might be sick.

“Gold,” the man who had been called Nikos said. “I’d never seen so many ellerines in my life.” Tears ran liberally from his eyes now. “Times are tough for Night Brothers. I’ve saved more than one child from death in my time. But we get no thanks for it.”

“Look, murder! Murder!” suddenly came another cry from the market street.

Several spectators had gathered, eyes fixed on Kassian and the dying thug.

Kassian swore again. When Borias had invited him to join him in the capital, he hadn’t envisioned any of this. Attempted robbery, a brush with death, and Kassian killing a man. What a way to start the holiday.

Before long, a pair of armoured men pushed their way through the throng, red capes billowing in their wake. Their armour rustled as they marched down the alley.

“The Zerklean City Guard,” one of the men barked. “Toss your weapon aside and stand down.”

“Uh, stand *down*? How do I do that?” Kassian asked.

“This is no time to be funny,” the guard growled. “Weapon. On the ground. And move aside.”

Kassian left the sword on the ground, stood up and stepped back from the thug. He put his hands in the air for good measure.

The pair of knights consisted of a man of middling age, with thick eyebrows and shoulder length hair, and a younger bloke who looked like he was just barely weaned from his mother’s teat.

“You’ve killed a man,” the younger knight proclaimed gravely. “Explain yourself.”

The older of the pair examined the scene in silence, his eyes flicking from the bleeding man to the nearby dagger. He raised a hand. “Calm, Adrian, and use your eyes. No one’s dead just yet. But yes, sir”—he turned to Kassian—“I do require an explanation of what just happened here.”

Kassian lowered his hands and recounted the events as clearly as he could.

“I think they were about to rob me,” he finished. Pointing at Nikos, he added, “At least, he just said they did it for money.”

The older knight nodded. “I see.” He crouched beside the bleeding thug. “Is this true? You might as well tell me before you meet Loriath.”

“Yes,” Nikos wheezed. “Just help me and I’ll say whatever you want.”

The knight considered this while chewing his lip. “Very good, your statement is noted.” He then nodded to the younger knight. “Adrian, get more men. We’re going to try to preserve the life of this bandit and bring him in for questioning.”

“Aye, sir,” Adrian said and scurried off, his armour rustling.

“And you, are you injured?” the knight asked Kassian.

Kassian shook his head.

The knight appraised him. “Fine. And you just happened to walk by, and happened to come out of this unscathed? You’re not involved in any funny business, are you?”

“No, sir.”

The older knight looked at Kassian and grumbled. “I suppose your innocence is cleared up. Frankly, I figured you’d been attacked the moment I walked in here in this alley and saw the body.”

“You think you can keep him alive?” Kassian asked.

The knight eyed him, then tapped the robber’s face to gauge his reaction. But he was already drifting out of consciousness.

“We might, if only I had something to bind the wound with. Say, you wouldn’t have something in that pack of yours?”

Kassian opened his knapsack. He had only brought the chiton he now wore, and a finer shirt to wear at the games. It was one of the nicer shirts he owned, and he was loathed to sacrifice it for a man who would have robbed and maimed him without a second thought. Still, he took it out of the knapsack with a sigh and handed it over to the knight.

“Much obliged.” The knight ripped the shirt into strips and began dressing the wound as best he could, but it was clear he was not a physician. The blood oozed out at an alarming rate. “Damn. Perhaps he won’t make it, after all.”

“Why do you want to bring him in so badly?” Kassian asked. “It doesn’t seem complicated. They followed me here to rob me. What else is there to it?”

The knight gave him a sidelong glance and frowned. “And you fancy yourself a royal investigator, do you? Suffice to say that there have been some odd fellows about lately, and a surge in battery and murders. And we’re not just talking drunken brawls and what have you, but something different.”

Kassian nodded and swallowed. “I see. But I’m not in any trouble?”

“No. I don’t see why you would be.” The knight squinted as he examined Kassian’s sword on the ground. “That blade, it’s got a wind emblem on it, doesn’t it? You’re a merchant from out of town?”

“Yes. The idea was to watch the games and make a bit of coin. Not this.”

The knight seemed to consider his words. “I would like to ask one more thing of you before I let you go.”

“All right.”

“Are you a mage?”

“I—uh . . . I don’t think I’d . . .”

The knight raised an eyebrow, perhaps in bemusement. Possibly in suspicion. “It’s a yes or no answer, is it not?”

“I went to the magical academy for a week as a sprat, but they told me I’d never be a mage. Because I can’t do magic. So, I guess the answer is no.”

The knight chortled. “I see. Then you may go. Not too long until the games start, by my reckoning. Wouldn’t want to miss the first duel.”

“Thank you.”

“Just watch yourself. Best not to go wandering down alleyways alone. And if you notice anything strange, anything at all, you may report it at the captain's office. You can find us in the western district, beyond the river.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kassian said.

He flung his knapsack over his shoulder and cast a final glance at the thug. He had stopped trembling and was lying frightfully still. His eyes were going blank. The man probably did not have many more breaths left in him. His dying pallor brought back memories that tasted of ash and char. Kassian’s throat constricted as though he was choking on smoke, and he left the alley, heading towards the inn where he was to meet Borias.

He didn't look back, and he forced the image of the dying man out of his mind. He supposed these things had to happen to someone, and it was better not to dwell on it. He was here to enjoy himself, after all.

Chapter Two—Peasant Hands

The inn comprised a quaint, brick building, with the name ‘The Snug Roost’ painted in big, bright yellow letters on a signpost hanging slightly awry above the entrance. Borias stood with his arms crossed outside, wearing a green doublet with floral embroidery. His usually friendly face was drawn into a bored frown, but he was never quite able to look truly angry. Judging by the glint in his hazel eyes, he was still glad to see Kassian.

“You’re late,” Borias said.

“I was, uh, delayed,” Kassian replied.

Borias raised an eyebrow. “Bad traffic? I suppose there’s lots of people and carts out today.”

“Well, yes, but that’s not the reason.” Even though it was all very recent, what had happened to him had already begun to take on the diffuse shapes of something that didn’t feel quite real. Kassian explained it as simply as he could, without leaving out the gruesome details.

“Abominable Loriath,” Borias said with a shocked expression. “Are you all right?”

Kassian shrugged. “I’m fine.”

Borias held his gaze, appearing to search his soul. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Well, talk about a bloody warm welcome,” Borias muttered sardonically.

“Sometimes I think you attract trouble.”

“Is it perhaps something about my face?” Kassian suggested.

Now it was Borias turn to shrug. “It is a face that might make certain people want to take advantage.” Without elaborating on whether that was an insult or a compliment, or both, he patted Kassian on the back. “Now, hurry up. Leave your things and let’s go.”

Kassian went upstairs to a room on the second floor of the inn. There he threw his knapsack and his swords on one of the two beds, and then headed for the tourney arena with his friend.

“So, how do you feel having dispatched a menace to society?” Borias asked.

Kassian rolled his eyes. “I won’t dignify that with a response.”

“Well, better you than him. And you know, if you keep this up, maybe you could try your hands at being a knight, rescuing damsels. Poor, lonely damsels who haven’t known the touch of a man, but oh-so-desperately want to . . .”

“Won’t dignify that, either.”

Borias smiled sympathetically. “I’m just trying to keep your spirits up. I think what’s needed after a scuffle like that is a good meal and some belly-aching laughter. Perhaps even a nip to a gentleman’s establishment.”

“I’m not even sure if you’re joking, but you know how I feel about brothels.”

Borias waved the topic away. “Unfortunately, I do. But that’s beside the point. The point is, you don’t want to end up dwelling too much on death, or your own mortality, or other unfortunate topics. I think today should be a day to live life to the fullest, eh?”

“I suppose so,” Kassian agreed.

“But don’t misunderstand,” Borias added with a hint of earnestness, looking him in the eye as they walked. “I’m glad you’re all right, my friend. And it is *good* to see you. Especially in one piece. It’s definitely a look that suits you.”

Kassian grinned and shoved Borias in the side. “All right, no need to cry over milk that wasn’t even spilled. And speaking of looks, what did you mean about my face, anyway? I’d say your face is much more *punchable* than mine.”

“And people have tried to punch it many a time, believe me. Luckily, I’ve escaped intact thus far.” After a brief pause, he added, “Although perhaps in my case, a bit of rearrangement would be an improvement. Now, there’s the arena!”

While chit chatting, they had made their way to Queen Laodamia’s Place, the main town square in Zerakleion. The spires that could be seen from every point in town were now towering above them up close; mammoth structures that almost looked too big, and too ornate to have been built by men. The temple atop the acropolis, built in the honour of the forsaken gods of the Golden Age, and supported by columns the size of trees, in particular looked as though it might itself have been sculpted by divine hands.

The royal palace was sitting on another, lesser hill not far off from the square, overlooking the splendour. And below all of these towers and spires, close to the city wall, was the tourney arena; a tremendous amphitheatre with a dozen spectator levels.

“There’s a sight a bumpkin doesn’t see every day,” Kassian said.

“You should have come here to study medicine along with me,” Borias said. “Then you’d see this stuff every day on your way to the university.” Borias pointed to a diffuse location in the distance. “Which you can see from here, by the way.”

Kassian gave his friend a sceptical look.

“Or, well, the subject isn’t the point,” Borias said. “The point is that the city would be better for having you in it. And so would the university. And *don’t* tell me you don’t have the head for it—I won’t hear that old rant again.”

Kassian smiled. “Fine. But I don’t have the patience to bury said head in books all day.”

“So, you’re planning on being a smith until the end of your days?”

“First of all, what’s wrong with being a smith? I have to make a living just like anyone, and I’m more than happy with that it doesn’t involve poking around in people’s insides or covering them in leeches.”

“Oh, please, leeches are so last century,” Borias protested.

“Second, I guess I haven’t really thought as far ahead as ‘the end of my days.’ Right now, I’d settle for having a good day *today*,” Kassian concluded.

“I’m not sure if that’s incredibly enlightened or a touch on the defeatist side,” Borias mused wistfully. “But as far as today goes, I will guarantee you a good time, Kass.”

In truth, the life of a smith was not such a bad one—at least while you were young, strong and hadn’t yet suffered hearing loss from the constant clanging and the sound of the bellows. For the time being, the trade afforded Kassian a decent income, and it had given him the opportunity to come down here for the tourney. And as for another truth, he *had* looked forward to a good time in the company of Borias, with his penchant for revelry and general debauchery. This was the first time they had the chance to attend the quadrennial event together, upon Borias’ insistence. And when Borias insisted on something, you either said yes, or you said no, in which case he sulked until you changed your mind out of sheer pity.

Kassian grinned. “Knowing you, we’ll end up in a gutter somewhere.”

Borias regarded him with dignity. “Tell me that is not how every fine evening ends.”

As they approached the arena, Kassian noted that several red-cloaked guardsmen of the city guard were stationed outside the various entrances. Security was clearly a priority, although it seemed strange that they’d need so many guards just to deal with drunkards, squabbles or whatever else an exuberant crowd might give rise to. But then he recalled what the guard had told him that morning, about an increase of violent crimes. After the alleyway assault, the abundance of red capes was not a bad sight.

“Oh, pish,” Borias exclaimed all of a sudden.

Kassian turned to his friend. “What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you forgot the tickets?”

“No, no, I’m not a buffoon. But I believe I had one flagon of beer too many while waiting for you at the inn. I need to find a place to relieve myself.”

Kassian groaned. “Now, of all times? All right, but hurry up. We’re already running late.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be swift as the wind . . . hopefully downwind.”

“Just, you know, stay out of alleys.”

Borias acknowledged him with a nod and sauntered off, moving out of sight of the guardsmen, who probably wouldn’t take well to a public defiling of the streets of the historic plaza, especially during such a grand event.

In the meantime, Kassian wandered about the square, taking in the sights. There were really all kinds of people attending the games, from every social class. Children played freely together, having perhaps not yet discovered that being rich or poor was considered an important modifier to the human condition, and that it dictated who you could, would, and *should* share your laughter with. The Zeraklean Games were perhaps the only occasion where a person could dramatically rise above their station, seeing as the winner was granted a title of nobility.

On top of that, the champion of the tourney allegedly got the chance to make a proposition to the crystal guardian who matched their own magical attribute. There were four greater crystals in Elentaria, each a catalyst for a magic derived from one of the four elements. The winner of the tourney had a chance of receiving a Guardian’s Kiss; a blessing which Kassian presumed was metaphorical, but in practice meant they’d receive a portion of the magical power from the crystal they protected.

Kassian’s mind once again started running away with naïve fantasies about competing. There was that sweet moment in his childhood when his mother and his sister had

truly believed he would become something great, when everything had seemed possible—before suddenly, almost overnight, the world of magic was out of reach. He could only imagine what the boons of magic would bring to his life. There was, of course, the matter of his future hearing . . .

A hooded figure moved swiftly through the throng and marched straight towards Kassian, stirring him from his thoughts. They strode quickly and brazenly, yet lithely dodged other chattering and merry-making members of the crowd.

Kassian tensed. He was still a little jittery after the prior incident, it seemed. And he didn't like the way this person was coming right at him. He steeled himself. There was a moment where they could have veered off course, but they didn't. They got closer. This time, Kassian wouldn't wait for them to draw a weapon on him. As the figure approached, Kassian reached out and grabbed their wrist. He pulled, yanking the individual forwards, and quickly stepped behind them. He twisted their arm behind their back.

“What do you want from me?” Kassian demanded.

“I do not know you, and I suggest you let me go.” The voice that responded was smooth and delicate. A woman's voice. She did not sound angry or even afraid, simply smoothly dispassionate.

Kassian let go of the woman's arm.

She turned around and adjusted her hood. The woman had soft features with a delicate chin and nose. Her eyes were unusual: grey irises adorned with streaks of amber. Even more striking was her hair, falling down in lush, silver blond waves, shimmering in the sunshine; so bright it was almost white in places. Beneath the burgundy cloak, she wore a fine chiton with a golden collar.

Kassian was astonished, not only because of the unusual qualities of her appearance, but because of her stunning beauty.

“I’m sorry, milady,” he said and bowed, for he naturally assumed this was a woman of high nobility. He chanced to glance once more at her face.

She massaged the wrist where Kassian had roughly grabbed her. Despite the pain he must have caused her, her pristine features had a stoic expression. If there was any betrayal of emotion, it was perhaps the slight flush on her cheeks. Maybe it was from her swift march. Or maybe from the strange situation they found themselves in.

“Why did you accost me?” she asked.

“A misunderstanding. I took you for someone else. Someone with ill intent.”

“A misunderstanding?” She pursed her lips. “I suppose I am partly to blame for bumping into you dressed like this.”

“The error is mine,” Kassian said. “Are you here to enjoy the games, too, milady?”

She snorted and gave him a small smile. “Well, yes, but it’s a perfunctory attendance. Mages fighting for sport doesn’t really entertain me. There’s a lot of cheering and fawning over nothing, if you ask me.”

“Perfunctory? That makes two of us,” Kassian said. “I’m here because my friend insisted. I have to indulge him sometimes.”

“So, you know something of duty, too.”

“Why the hood, milady? If I may ask?”

She held up her hands in a disarming manner, looking somewhat awkward. “You really don’t need to address me that way—I am not highborn. And, well, haven’t you wished to disappear sometimes? To melt away into a crowd?”

Kassian regarded her. “I’m not sure I take your meaning.”

She regarded him. “Oh, well, never mind. Perhaps you wouldn’t.”

“If you aren’t highborn . . . then you must be a mage?”

She smiled then. “Perhaps. As are you, judging by your signature. But I don’t think we know the same people.”

Kassian had no idea what the woman was referring to. Why would she think he was a mage? Could she somehow tell he had the magical brands? Before he had a chance to ask her, she looked over Kassian’s shoulder. “The tourney’s starting. Perhaps I’ll see you in the amphitheatre.”

“Wait, what is your name?”

The woman gave him an apologetic smile. “I’d better go.”

The clattering of armour encroached behind Kassian. A row of guardsmen appeared. One of them grabbed Kassian by the shoulders and held him in place.

Another scowled at him. “Oy, what do you think you’re doing? I saw you grab the lady with your peasant hands.”

“I’m a metalworker, not a peasant,” Kassian protested.

“It’s quite all right,” the woman with the silver hair said.

“But he laid hands on you,” one of the guards protested.

The woman frowned. “It was a mistake. Let him go. He has the right to enjoy the games, same as anyone.”

The guardsman looked surprised. “Oh, ahem, yes, of course . . . if you wish it.”

The guard that held Kassian let go of his shoulder. Kassian adjusted his tunic in an attempt to reclaim some dignity—he had been planning to wear his nicer shirt and lamented now that he’d talked to the beautiful woman wearing his regular, worn traveling chiton.

“Then, let us not delay,” said the first knight. “Let’s go, Zeph—”

“I think we’re being conspicuous enough as it is,” the woman interrupted her guard, giving him a sharp glare. “Just escort me inside, please.”

“As you wish,” the man said and lowered his head.

The woman pulled her hood further down over her head and walked towards the amphitheatre, escorted by the four knights, whose capes seemed to form a red wall between her disappearing figure and Kassian. He watched them cut through the crowds and disappear through what appeared to be a special entrance.

The woman had suggested he might see her inside, but Kassian wistfully mused on the fact that he would likely never see her again. He watched her leave with a bitter feeling. If he had truly been a mage, as she had believed, maybe things would be different. Maybe he would have the power to change things, to be who he was supposed to be. Instead, he was haunted by a gnawing feeling that he should do more. A feeling that he was living in the shadow of a great mistake, without knowing when or where he had made it.

He regarded his calloused hands. They probably did look indistinguishable from the hands of a peasant.

Chapter Three—An Age of Peace

Moments after the entrancing woman had disappeared out of Kassian's sight, but certainly not his mind, Borias reappeared and slapped Kassian on the back.

“All done, old boy. It was quite hard to find an available gutter with people swarming every street. Ah, just look at the crowds, and the amphitheatre . . . Don't you think it'll be fun seeing the action from up high? Admit it, you're a *little* bit excited.”

Kassian's excitement was roused all right, but for an entirely different reason than watching the games.

“Let me remind you,” he said, “that our seats are probably so high up we might barely see anything at all.”

The sober reminder that they were both lacked the privileges of the upper class seemed to get even Borias down for a second. Kassian felt bad for unintentionally dragging down his friend's mood, which he generally considered indefatigable. But then, Borias spotted a stand near the entrance with little brass binoculars on display.

“Aha! That's why they sell these, Kass.” He rushed up to the stall, staffed by a grouchy-looking woman. “Two of these fine binoculars please, my dear madam.”

The store woman received the coin and handed him two of the objects, glaring as they caught the sun. “There. Now you better get in or they won't let you. And these are for the games only. Don't use them to ogle at strangers.”

“Of course not,” Borias replied, looking genuinely wounded. “Why would you say such a thing?”

The woman shrugged. “Well, your friend just accosted an innocent woman, and I overheard you talking about taking a piss down the street. Forgive me for saying it, but you don't seem . . . respectable.”

“Pah, my friend would never behave improperly towards a woman. And as for the pissing: seeing as there are very few public lavatories in this city, even the king himself might on occasion need to seek out a gutter,” Borias retorted.

The woman at the stall rolled her eyes. “Be on your way, please, sir.”

When Borias returned to Kassian, he looked vexed. “Tarnation! Did you hear that? On what grounds would she make such an accusation?”

Kassian ushered his friend towards the entrance to the stadium. “I guess she doesn’t know you’re an upstanding gentleman deep down,” he said with a smile. “Very deep down.”

“Indeed,” Borias replied as they began the climb up the narrow staircase to the different spectator tiers. “It hadn’t even *occurred* to me to ogle at folk. Although now that she put the idea in my head, a man can hardly be blamed for it. I wonder if you could see down a fine lady’s bosom from up high . . .”

“I’ll be very impressed if the scope of these binoculars extends to the fine ladies across the class divide.” Although it was only meant as a wry remark, the reality of the gulf between ordinary people and those with exalted positions smarted a little more than usual after having seen the stunning woman with the silver blonde hair. Nobility or not, she was clearly from an entirely different world than Kassian.

“You might have a point,” said Borias. “Anyway, I don’t need more reminders that I’m not a third cousin twice removed of some count, thank you. I’m here to enjoy the games, and perhaps to get a peek at the crystal guardian.”

Kassian was amazed. “The crystal guardians appear at the actual tourney?”

Borias scrutinized him. “I didn’t take you to be historically illiterate.”

Kassian pouted. “You know I’ve never attended the games. I don’t really care much for them.”

“Because you can’t participate, yes, yes. You, me and most other poor sods in Elentaria, I dare say. It’ll still be good fun, you’ll see.” He gave Kassian a questioning look. “Now, what was that about you accosting a woman?”

Kassian shook his head. “Tell you about it later.”

They emerged on the second-highest level of the amphitheatre. The view of the arena grounds wasn’t actually as bad as all that from up there—so the raffle apparently hadn’t been a complete scam. Figure that. Still, Kassian was still glad for the binoculars. Being somewhat tardy, he and Borias had to shuffle and rub themselves somewhat unfortunately against a dozen seated spectators on the way over to their seats, receiving annoyed grunts as they went and offering regular apologies in return.

Not a moment after their buttocks finally touched down on their seats, a score of knights in ceremonial garb emerged onto the arena, blaring a victorious fanfare on silver trumpets. They wore white and blue, the colours of the Elentarian heraldic banners, with red dolphins embroidered onto their capes.

Following the knights, a woman with blonde, flowing hair trotted out onto the arena atop a white stallion. She came to a stop in front of the knights.

“Welcome to the quadrennial Zerakleans Games,” she announced, her voice effortlessly booming across the stadium.

“She must be using wind magic to carry her voice,” Borias whispered.

Kassian crossed his arms. “Well, yes, I figured that much.” He adjusted his binoculars to zoomed in on the woman. Instead of the red dolphins of Zerakleion, she bore the crest of the Royal Collegium of Wondrous Arts on her mantle; a golden drakaina with a sword clenched in its jaws. The same emblem was emblazoned on a white shield that hung by the side of her stallion. Kassian knew mages of the Royal Collegium had to perform certain

duties for the court at important events, like royal weddings, births, and whatnot. Apparently that included hosting the Zeraklean Games.

“This occasion marks the 64th tourney since the tradition began,” the mage resumed. “It is a celebration of our kingdom; of our wise and magnanimous King Yannis III; and not in the least, of the revered crystal guardians, who have taken it upon themselves to safekeep the most treasured artefacts of Elentaria.” The mage paused for effect between each line. “This year, however, marks a special occasion.”

Already, the crowd grew excited.

“This being the year 1349 since the twilight of the Golden Age, marks the 300th anniversary of the Great Hunt. An unprecedented time when all the greater kingdoms came together to once and for all eliminate the monstrous creatures that plagued our ancestors. The campaign was the largest coordinated effort ever undertaken, and it was a resounding success.”

The crowd roared in approval.

“Since that day, all Elentarians have enjoyed the fruits of that joint effort. That is what we celebrate this year: our long and lasting peace.” The woman paused again, and the knights played another short, victorious fanfare.

“Over the next three days,” the royal mage continued, “brave and learned contestants will fight sportingly in single combat to determine who is the most skilful among them. The winner shall not only receive an award of 3,000 ellerines, but shall also receive a title, and the chance to serve our kingdom as a royal mage.” Through his binoculars, Kassian saw the woman finish with a smile. “And finally, the winner shall also be permitted to kiss the hand of one of our crystal guardians in attendance. This year, the games are overseen by Zephyra, the warden of the westerly wind.”

The mage produced a silver wand and from it shone an enchanted, blue beam of light, which she pointed towards an ornate booth in the amphitheatre. Kassian, like thousands of spectators around him, followed the light with their binoculars. Excited murmurs and applause ran through the crowd.

Kassian couldn't blame them. Zephyra was none other than the silver-haired woman he'd encountered outside the amphitheatre. She waved at the spectators from her booth.

"I spoke to her while you were off taking a piss," Kassian said to Borias.

"Sure. And I'm the king's uncle."

Kassian didn't bother with a rebuttal. He kept his gaze fixed on Zephyra. She looked dignified, but her expression did not project the excitement and revelry of the general crowd. She had said her attendance was perfunctory. Kassian believed it.

Shortly after the introduction, there was an extended dance routine performed by very acrobatic and rather lightly dressed men and women, which had Borias use his binoculars on full magnification.

Then it was finally time for the games to begin. The first two contestants consisted of a male wind mage and a female fire mage. The wind mage performed an overly deep bow in Zephyra's direction, no doubt hoping to impress her with his magic. Unfortunately, as the battle began, his tactics were revealed to be anything *but* impressive.

The fire mage conjured bursts of flame with her wand which she sent flying at her opponent. The wind mage attempted to blow the fireballs out of the way with magically summoned gusts. However, as the bursts of fire grew more aggressive, the wind mage countered with stronger gales. In doing so, he accidentally created a mini typhoon, which sucked in the flames and formed a tremendous fire devil.

Worse, it moved in the direction of the stands, so that a mage overseeing safety protocols had to douse a portion of the audience in water to put out the whirling flames. By the sounds of the jives and boos, the wet spectators were not happy.

The wind mage forfeited the duel out of sheer embarrassment and scurried out of the arena, desperate to escape the scorn and laughter his fumble had provoked.

“If these are the kinds of contestants on display, you might actually stand a chance,” Borias remarked.

Kassian snorted. “Your backside has greater control of the wind than I do.”

“Touché.”

The next few duels were more interesting. Fire mages created dancing flames—more controlled, going forwards—and all kinds of impressive pyrotechnics. Earth mages cast spells that made vines and shrubs sprout out of the ground to form temporary gardens with intricate floral elements. Water mages summoned clouds in the shapes of temples and castles and incorporated delicately chiselled ice sculptures into their performances. It seemed that half of the contestants were at least as interested in showing off their technical prowess by creating works of art as they were in actually defeating their opponents. A particularly vainglorious fire mage scorched the name ‘Zephyra’ into the ground, as he twirled and dodged a barrage of snowballs launched by his opponent.

“Look at that bugger,” Borias said, referring to the fire mage. “I bet he’s hoping to get into the wind guardian’s knickers. He doesn’t stand a chance, the poor fool.”

Kassian turned his binoculars to Zephyra’s booth. She looked as impassive as ever. It occurred to him that a woman as lovely as her might be so used to vain feats and grandiose gestures that it all became blasé. Even if it involved magic.

“You know, I think she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve seen,” Kassian mumbled absentmindedly.

Borias turned his head and eyed him briefly. “You’ve said that about half a dozen girls, Kass.”

#

After the first day of the games was over, Kassian and Borias had partaken in a light dinner. Afterwards, they had both been supremely thirsty. So, Borias had led Kassian through Zerakleion’s sprawling drinking streets, past numerous buskers providing cheerful ambience, in search of a bar that tickled their fancy. It hadn’t taken Borias long to make his decision, and Kassian had not objected.

It was now close to midnight, and they found themselves in an establishment with cheap drink, tawdry décor and happy patrons. Two women had joined their table, and Kassian surmised this was for two reasons. First: Borias’ looks weren’t actually as bad as he made out; in fact, he didn’t look bad at all, and Kassian could see how women might be charmed by his easy confidence. Second: with the infectious revelry sweeping across town during the games, people were looking for a good time. Most everyone seemed happy to strike up a conversation. The fact that most everyone were at least somewhat inebriated was likely not an insignificant factor, either.

After some chatter and a few shared drinks, Borias seemed to think it was a good time to suddenly decided to embarrass Kassian.

“So, let me tell you something about my friend here,” he said effervescently to the ladies. “Listen, this is an exceptionally important fact about him: Kass here has all four brands of elementary magic. I mean, uh, *elemental* magic.”

“There’s no need to go there,” Kassian muttered and rolled his eyes, although he smiled all the while.

Discussing his magical brands and his extraordinary lack of aptitude was not exactly his favourite pastime. But his head was light and seemed to gently sway this way and that as

he looked between the people at the table. He felt good—in no small part thanks to enjoying the ‘wine’ part of Zerakleion’s moniker—and was happy enough to let Borias lead the conversation, wherever it may go.

One of the women, with dark hair and freckles—Kassian had already lost both of their names to the drunken fog—examined Kassian with a curious, if not outright sceptical, look. “Is that so?”

“I’m not lying,” Borias said. “He’s the real deal.”

The other woman, with strawberry blonde hair and wine on her breath, leaned in. “If that’s really true, that’s quite interesting. It’s pretty rare to have even two or three brands, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” Kassian said.

He prayed the women wouldn’t ask for a magical demonstration, lest he’d be forced to thoroughly embarrass himself. It would be like trying to ignite a crateful of wet fireworks.

“So, where are they, then? The marks, I mean.” The blonde woman smirked. “Clearly not on your face, nor your wrists.” She turned his wrist around and rubbed his skin rather intimately. “What about on your bottom? Or maybe on your . . .”

There was a fire in the woman’s eyes as she teasingly considered where his brands might be concealed. Her cheeks were flushed from drink—and per Kassian’s best guess, perhaps from wanting a lay. Kassian didn’t mind that prospect at all, and all things considered, having to explain *where* his brands were located was still a better outcome than trying to do magic for the ladies.

“Perhaps—” Kassian began but was interrupted by his friend.

“You could find out if you play your cards right,” Borias said with a wink. “I dare say you wouldn’t be disappointed.”

The blonde woman blushed. “Well, then. How am I playing my cards so far, Kassian? Kassian and Cassandra, that has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

Cassandra—ah, right. That was her name.

“Uh, yes,” Kassian said. “I mean, yes. Yes, it does.”

She was definitely showing interest, and Kassian was almost fumbling this. But she didn’t seem to mind; or perhaps she didn’t notice.

Cassandra eyed him. “You’ve got a lovely voice. Why don’t you try saying my name?”

“Cassandra,” Kassian enunciated, quite sure he’d never been complimented on his voice before.

Fundamentally, Cassandra was quite a pretty name. It had a nice ring to it. Certainly, there was nothing wrong with it. Except that it was the name of Kassian’s mother. But he tried to suppress that fact.

Cassandra smirked. “Now I can imagine how that might sound later.”

The other woman, whose name was to Kassian also lost in the abyss, chimed in. “What I want to know is how *you* know where his marks are.” She attempted a thoughtful expression, as if she’d caught Borias in a trap.

“Ah, my dear Filomenia,” said Borias, “that is, err, you see, you know . . .”

Filomenia—ah, that was it. *Filomenia*. Fil-oh-men-ia—waited expectantly for the answer.

“He’s a doctor,” Kassian stated suddenly, having a strong feeling that would help explain things.

“So that’s why he’s seen your cock?” Filomenia mused with a teasing grin, and Cassandra laughed. “What, do you get regular cock-related checkups? You sure it’s not for some other reason?”

“I didn’t say it *was* on my cock, did I?” Kassian replied with a smile.

Borias snorted. “You see, ladies, perhaps you don’t know what it is to be a man.”

“No? Then do enlighten us,” Filomenia implored.

Borias leaned in closer. Both women did, too, as though he was about to reveal some great secret long kept from the fairer sex. “To be a man is to be bold, to live freely without shame, as nature made him. I tell you, every man has seen his good friend as naked as the day he was born. If he hasn’t, then truly, they cannot call themselves brothers.”

This caused Filomenia to erupt in a fit of weeping laughter. “Truly, that is the most profound thing I’ve heard in a while,” she said. “Thank you for elucidating us about the poignant nature of male friendship.”

“So would that be when you’re just visiting each other?” Cassandra asked, clearly not satisfied with the answer. “You regularly walk around naked, freely swinging your little acorns?”

Borias’ eyes twinkled. “No. But for example, good friends might sometimes opt to go skinny-dipping in the company of fair women, when the opportunity presents itself. Such as on a summer’s eve, when there is a river nearby, with piers and little beaches. Such as our very own river Thalasseus, where Zerkleas swam with the river nymphs. Say, do you like skinny dipping?”

“Yes, but it seems like a lot of effort to jump in the river in order to get naked,” Filomenia said. “I’m sure you can find some other excuse, Mr Doctor. Maybe . . .” She bit her lip for effect, barely able to suppress a giggle. “Maybe you could give me a full physical? And *show* me what it means to be a man instead of just telling me?”

Borias swallowed. “Why, I believe that is open for discussion. In fact, as a doctor, how could I refuse? You might even say it’s my duty.”

Filomenia smirked. “I agree.”

“Although . . .”

“Although?”

“Kassian and I share a room.”

“What a coincidence. So do Cassandra and I,” said Filomenia. “It sounds to me like maybe some kind of *arrangement* could be made.”

She exchanged a look with Cassandra that seemed to contain more than Kassian could probably have expressed in a few sentences. Cassandra smiled and nodded.

Borias gave Kassian a look of his own. A simple look which he could read easily enough. It meant, ‘Please don’t fuck this up.’

Cassandra inched closer to Kassian, rubbing his wrist again, her fingers crawling further up the length of his arm. “Maybe you could show me where those brands of yours are?”

Borias stood up and took Filomenia’s hand. “Well, then. If these kids are going looking for magical tattoos, we should leave them to it. Why don’t you invite me over, and I’ll see what I can do about that physical?”

“Yes, doctor. I do believe I need your help. Why don’t you *please* come over?”

“And you two,” Borias said. He shrugged with a glint in his eyes. “Well met, Cassandra. I shall trust that my friend is safe in your hands.”

“Oh, he will be much more than safe,” she said deviously.

Filomenia rose and leaned into Borias, giving him a smooch right then and there.

“It seems I shall see you in the morning, Kass,” Borias said. He smiled and pretended to tip a hat he wasn’t wearing, and then sauntered off. Filomenia followed him, giggling.

Things had escalated rather quickly.

Must be the festival mood, Kassian thought.

“Sooo,” Cassandra said, fluttering her eye lashes. “It seems I’ll need a place to sleep tonight. Will you be a gentleman and offer me a bed?”

Kassian gently grabbed the woman’s chin and pulled her in for a kiss. She responded eagerly. It was instantly a sultry, sloppy kiss, tasting of both wine and honeyed mead.

After breaking free, he said, “I believe there’s a bed on offer, madam.”

Cassandra’s eyes were glazed over. “Then lead the way. I’m very interested in what you have to show me. I’ve never seen a magical brand up close before.”

Kassian rose and walked Cassandra out of the bar. Seeing as their inn was a few blocks away, they ended up strolling for a quarter of an hour, the moon bright above them in the inky sky. Cassandra kept fondling his butt as they walked and tried to get him to stop and kiss her every other alleyway they passed.

Whilst he appreciated the enthusiasm, Kassian would rather not step into dark alley and insisted on steering her away from them.

“Are you afraid of the dark?” she teased.

“No, I, uh, just can’t wait to have you,” he replied.

“Sir, who said you can have me?” Cassandra said, feigning shock. “I’m just in need of a bed.” Yet, as she teased him, her hands found new places to touch. What she found there made her grin. “Although I can see that you’re rather keen.”

That was true enough. Kassian had a healthy libido—sometimes he wondered if it was a little *too* healthy—and he often found himself admiring women in one way or another. He liked when they were clever and good-humoured and Cassandra certainly seemed to fit the bill. Still, there was a bit of reticence tonight. But maybe Borias was right. After his brush with death, perhaps he needed to get his mind off things. And maybe a tumble in the haystack was just what the doctor ordered.

By the time he'd walked Cassandra back to The Snug Roost and past the dozing portier, the excitement in the moments before the act grew palpable. He entered his room and turned on the lamp. Cassandra closed the door, locked it and leaned against it.

Kassian turned to appraise her. She was certainly pretty enough, and the dim lighting made it easier to focus on the overall experience rather than details, such as whether he liked her smile or her teeth.

"Well, am I going to have to undress myself?" Cassandra posited with a flirtatious expression.

"I would never ask such a thing of a lady," Kassian said and closed the distance between them.

He pulled down the straps of her dress and then her bodice, revealing her under garments. Her dress had clearly wrapped her bosom rather snugly, seeing as she was more well-endowed than Kassian expected. He yanked down the gown underneath and after another kiss, he worked himself down and buried his face in her cleavage. The combination of perfume and a day of revelry under a blazing sun combined into a distinct musk. It made him have to suppress a small cough.

"You've got an active contraceptive spell, right?" Kassian whispered as sensually as such a question could be posited.

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously. Do I look like I live under a rock? I get it renewed every month."

Kassian smiled disarmingly. "A man's got to ask."

"I do like a man who asks," Cassandra said. "Myself, I prefer taking."

She pushed him towards the bed in a manner halfway between gentle and aggressive. Mostly a little drunkenly. Kassian stumbled backwards and let himself fall.

Cassandra's lips curved in a devious grin. "All right, love, let's find out where those brands of yours are . . ."

And so the tumbling begins.

Cassandra indeed found out where all of his brands were, and she was a very vigorous lover to boot. Despite that, Kassian couldn't find quite the right rhythm with her. It all felt a little awry, just like the signpost of the inn. He then started thinking about why no one had bothered to fix the it, since it would be such an easy job; and that made him wonder how long it had been neglected, and whether that was perhaps emblematic of the slow disrepair of the universe?

The hot, sticky air made pressing skin to skin a bit unbearable, but Kassian soldiered on. He made an effort to focus on the woman he was with. Cassandra. The fact that she shared a name with his mother was somewhat unfortunate. He was sure Borias had told him of a philosopher of mind who'd have a field day with this. Polyeuctus, maybe?

After going at it for what seemed like the indiscernible, timeless age of the early cosmos, from the dark mists of which the first god Zefailon had been sired—and then created the Earth by slicing off the cock of Father Heaven (ouch)—Kassian still wasn't able to finish.

Once his thoughts finally moved on from signposts and heavenly dismemberments, Cassandra shuddered and gave a sudden yowl which—although in this context a cry of pleasure—could have been mistaken for the cry of an upset mountain lion.

It seemed like the fates were determined to prevent Kassian from enjoying his night.

"Are you done yet?" Cassandra asked. "It's been ages."

"Not yet."

With a haughty frown, she rolled away from him and started to put her dress back on.

"What's wrong?" Kassian asked half-heartedly.

"This obviously isn't working."

“What do you mean?”

It was all too apparent what she meant.

“You’re not into this. Or maybe you just can’t handle me. I’m sure there are dozens—no, hundreds—of men here tonight who would be glad to have me in their bed.”

Kassian sighed. “You’re right. It’s nothing to do with you, I swear it.”

But Cassandra wouldn’t hear him out. She was dressed and already leaving. Perhaps she truly had plenty of other options.

Kassian leaned back onto the bed. Truthfully, he was relieved to be alone.

#

At some ungodly hour, long past when witches, lycanthropes and all manner of daemons would be asleep, the door opened with a whiny creak.

Kassian jolted upright. “Why did you do this!” he yelled, barely half conscious. His mind was somewhere else entirely before he caught up with reality.

“Sorry, it’s me,” Borias said. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Kassian stared blankly into the darkness until his eyes adjusted enough that he could discern his friend. “Oh. Hello.”

“I was hoping to sneak into bed without disturbing you and your guest. But . . . it looks like the coast is clear?” he finished when he saw that Kassian was alone.

“It’s very clear,” Kassian replied drily.

“Didn’t you bring that other girl back with you?” Borias slurred. “Cassidy . . . Casserole . . . Cassiopeia?” He stumbled into the room, his motor control seemingly still not what it should be.

“Cassandra, yes,” Kassian said.

“So where is she?”

“She left.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Kassian shrugged pointlessly in the dark. “You know, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Fair enough.”

Realising he’d forgotten to close the door, Borias stumbled back and rectified his mistake. Next, he sat down on his own bed, parallel to Kassian’s on the other side of the room, and began to concentrate inordinately on neatly folding the green doublet that had been casually flung over his shoulder. Then he started unbuttoning his shirt.

“What about you? Why are you back?” Kassian asked.

“Well, once I’d given Filomenia her ‘physical,’ that is, once she was satisfied—and I do believe I satisfied her well, and many times—she threw me out. Not in a meanspirited sort of way, really. But she said she can’t fall asleep with a man in her bed.”

Kassian reclined again. Borias crawled underneath his bed covers.

“Heartless,” Kassian said. “Although you have been known to snore like a bastard at times, so it might have been a good call on her part.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“Was it still worth it?”

“Yup. Still worth it.”

The silence of the night filled the room. Kassian glanced at the stars through the little window between their two beds.

“Borias?”

“Yes,” he responded sleepily.

“Have you ever been in love? I mean, proper in love?”

Borias snorted. “What brought this on? Oh, let me guess, that wind girl’s got you creaming your knickers.”

Kassian frowned, as pointlessly as his shrug. “No, it’s not that. It’s just, I don’t think I ever have.”

“Have what?”

“Been in love.”

“Oh.” Borias was silent for a little while. “Well, sure I have. You remember Maya, don’t you?”

“You left her high and dry.”

“Not because I didn’t love her.”

A number of years ago, Borias had been betrothed to Maya, a fellow medical student at the time. Kassian didn’t know the details, he just knew it hadn’t ended amicably. He didn’t usually enquire about it, but the alcohol emboldened him; it was easier to have delicate conversations when you might forget they’d ever occurred by morning.

“Then why did you leave?” he asked.

Borias sighed deeply. “Probably because I *did* love her.”

“You’re going to have to explain how the hell that makes any sense.”

“I think things got serious very quickly. I loved her very quickly. That scared me. So I took that fear and misconstrued it for a sign that something was wrong. Maybe.”

“That’s a bit confusing.”

Borias laughed. “You’re telling me.”

“So what were you afraid of?” Kassian asked. “Specifically.”

“I don’t know. Getting settled down so young, maybe. I probably wasn’t ready for that kind of commitment, or I told myself I wasn’t. I suppose I believed there were more things I wanted to do, more places to see, and—”

“More ladies whose bed chambers to visit.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that *that* is my *raison d’être*, but it is nice to have the freedom to take the opportunities as they come. But if I did come to love someone again, I’d be sure to not make the same mistake I did before.”

“And sleeping around doesn’t ever leave you feeling . . . I don’t know, a bit empty?” he asked Borias.

“No. I’m not that much of a sap,” Borias replied with a snort. “We live in progressive times. Sometimes, a bit of fun is just that, a bit of fun. ‘Upon the eve you do the deed, on the morrow you spur your steed,’ as my late uncle used to say.”

This was the first Kassian ever heard about Borias having a late uncle; or any uncles at all, for that matter.

“Charming,” he said.

“But the question is,” Borias continued, “if you don’t like sleeping around, why aren’t you settling down with someone?”

Kassian sighed. Although he had never fallen in love with someone—not as an adult, anyway—and despite the fact that he sometimes felt like a beast in human skin when it came to his sexual appetite, he was still often left feeling disappointed after more casual encounters. He was like a dog chasing his own tail, never quite reaching fulfilment, but rushing off in the same direction again and again. That was to say, he kept ending up with women he found attractive but couldn’t love; or, as on this occasion, jumping into bed with people he barely knew. He didn’t know exactly why he did it, but he suspected he was his father’s son, in some ways.

“I think maybe I’m cursed,” he responded at length.

“How so?”

“Sometimes I wonder if I could ever settle down with any single person. It seems . . . limiting, as you say. And yet I keep feeling like I’m looking for something, but I don’t know what.”

“If you want my opinion—”

“Normally people phrase that as a question,” Kassian interjected drily.

“—then I don’t think that’s your problem. I love women. And I don’t mind the idea of falling in love. I really don’t. But I wonder if deep down maybe you do.”

Kassian frowned. “Why would you say that?”

“I think that when women start liking you, you start liking them less. You don’t let them in. I think you *believe* you do, but I think there’s a wall which no one can breach. And so, when they get there, you defend the castle, so to speak. Am I wrong?”

“Well, those *might* be wise words, if it weren’t for the fact that you’re reaching so far you’re tugging on Zefailon’s beard.”

He couldn’t see Borias’ face, but Kassian felt his friend regard him sceptically in the darkness. He probably came across as though he was protesting a little too much. But the reason for his jive was simply that Kassian felt uncomfortable being dissected with a verbal scalpel, as though his heart was a topic to freely have opinions about. And that people may have spent considerable time thinking about it, even if it was a good friend, unnerved him. Maybe because he didn’t like being seen? Damn, if Borias was right about him, that would somehow be annoying. But Kassian had tried courting girls more seriously on a few occasions. Could it really be his own fault that he never seemed to feel a genuine connection?

“Anyway,” Kassian broke the silence. “It *would* be nice to fall in love. Truly. It seems to come easy for some.”

“I won’t say envy is an ugly emotion, because we all bloody feel it. But it is a wasted emotion, my friend. You can go your whole life envying others for what they’ve got that you don’t, not realising they’ll be envying you for what you’ve got that they haven’t got.”

“I’m sure that’s right. Easier said than done, though.”

Kassian was silent for nearly a minute, feeling himself drift off to sleep. Then, stricken with concern for his friend’s happiness, thinking that maybe Borias had made a mistake himself that he would come to regret, he suddenly had a very important question to ask. “Hey, Borias? Have you considered finding Maya again? I think you should think about it . . . Borias?”

Borias concluded the late-night talk by snoring.