

It was a full span before Jyk got back on his feet, each day spent in a constant effort to learn about Evelyn. Her parents had both served Baron Donivin, her mother running the kitchen and her father the castle steward. Her mother passed away soon after Evelyn's tenth birthday, her father following four cycles later, and the baron had welcomed her into his household with open arms. Lady Lillian, she often professed, was the sweetest young noble anyone could hope to work for. Most importantly, by the day Evelyn went back to work he had known with certainty that she was at least half as fond of him as he was of her.

On his first night out of the castle since taking the wound she continued to dominate his thoughts, much to Kinzi's vociferous chagrin. The Dog's Bollocks was packed, the minstrel was fantastic, and Jyk had been going on about the woman for over an hour. “Gods above,” Kinzi exclaimed, “get ahold of yourself.”

Jyk looked down at his mug, pouting. “Spend a span in the same room with the woman of your dreams and see if you don't talk about it too much.”

Kinzi scoffed loudly. “Woman of your dreams? Boy, that span you spent with her nursing you back to health is the entirety of the time you've known each other. I agree, she's smart, good looking, and seems interesting, but you need to take a step back. You barely know each other.”

Jyk scoffed in return. “This coming from the man that won't tell his best friend his first name.”

Kinzi frowned. “That's different.”

Jyk barked a laugh. “That's hypocrisy. I'm supposed to listen to your advice about a girl when you don't even trust me with your given name.”

Kinzi's frown deepened as he took a long drink from his mug. “It really bothers you, does it?”

“It just strikes me as odd that you trust me with your life, but not your bloody name.”

Kinzi sighed heavily. “You can't tell anyone.” His eyes narrowed sharply. “Especially Torrvold.”

Jyk furrowed his brow, but nodded. “Right, right.”

Kinzi cleared his throat softly. “Mervin.”

Jyk burst into laughter. Rude, rolling belly laughs at that. “No, really, what is it?”

Kinzi fixed his friend with a hard stare until the laughter subsided. “Mervin Bearlish Kinzington.”

Jyk managed to contain himself into a few short snickers. “Okay, okay. I get it now. Mervin.”

Kinzi raised a finger sharply. “Never say that again.”

Jyk cut a fresh bout of laughter short. “Fine, fine. But, Bearlish? What in seven hells were your parents thinking?”

Kinzi heaved a shrug. “Supposed to be a great- grandfather's name from each side of the family. One Mervin, one Bearlish. All ridiculous.” He barked a bitter laugh and quaffed the remaining beer in his mug. “Now, about the handmaiden.”

Jyk rolled his eyes, laughing and signaling for another round of drinks. “What, damn it?”

“I know you feel like the two of you grew close over the last span,” said Kinzi, “but stop to think about it for a minute. Is it really a good idea to get romantic with someone you'll be working with *every day*? I also hear- tell that Baron Donivin thinks of her like a daughter. If you two hook up and things go bad...,”

“What, she'll turn vindictive and sabotage my career?” Jyk scoffed loudly.

“I'm just saying it's a bad idea,” retorted Kinzi. “Tell him Delk.”

Delk raised his eyebrows as he slid their mugs across the bar. “Tell who what now?,” the balding tavern owner asked, smiling genially.

“That wooing the handmaiden to the girl he's gonna be guarding daily isn't smart,” Kinzi answered. “Especially when she's a favorite of the baron.”

Delk pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. “It does sound precarious,” he said slowly.

Jyk scoffed again. “Oh, come on. Kinzi, did we not talk about exactly this sort of thing? How awesome it was going to be, being surrounded by pretty handmaidens?”

Kinzi sighed heavily. “Yeah, loose, easygoing handmaidens for us to have some occasional fun with. Handmaidens that would only be in the castle for a couple span every cycle. I don't recall either of us mentioning falling in love with a long term colleague.”

“Love?,” asked Delk, somewhat incredulous. “Didn't you only wake up a span ago?”

“My point exactly,” Kinzi affirmed emphatically.

Jyk rolled his eyes. “For the record, I haven't said a godsdamn thing about 'love'.”

Delk sighed heavily. “How did it feel when you watched Sara singing, every man in the audience undressing her with his eyes?”

Jyk scowled. “I wanted to burn them out of their leering skulls, of course, but that came along with her job.”

Delk shook his head slowly from side to side. “No, that came with her being beautiful. Her job just allowed for extra opportunities. Imagine watching every lordling Lady Lillian has contact with staring your darling up and down. Blatantly, no doubt, as nobility doesn't need to disguise their lust.”

Kinzi leaned in close beside Jyk. “And what if, one day, one of those lordlings makes a pass at her? What if she accepted? How would you react then?”

Jyk growled low in his throat. “What if Tarranton breaks out into mass rioting tonight? Or hail starts falling on a hot summer's night?”

“It's always dangerous to mix romance with work,” Delk stated firmly. “That's all we are saying. The more you care for the person, the more dangerous it gets.”

Jyk frowned down at his mug of fresh lager. “And if I already like her so much that I no longer want to visit Madame Raychelle's?”

Kinzi's jaw went slack. “Have you even kissed her yet?”

Jyk shook his head sadly from side to side. “I'm bloody smitten and I can't seem to help myself.” He took a drink from his mug and sighed heavily. “I always thought the damsel was supposed to become instantly smitten with the hero, not vice versa.”

Delk fixed Kinzi with a curious look. “Is she really that good looking?,” he asked.

Kinzi thought for a moment before nodding. “She's gorgeous, there is no denying that. A bit under five and a half feet, wavy auburn hair well past her shoulders, and – not that I was looking – quite a shapely figure.”

Delk turned back to Jyk and sighed softly. “You've gone and got yourself in it all over again, haven't you?”

Jyk heaved a dull shrug. “It kind of blindsided me, what with being wounded and delirious from blood loss when we met, unconscious for the following three days, and all that. I've been in a room with the woman for a solid span and all I can do is think about what to say the next time I see her.”

“Damn,” said Kinzi, “she's really got a hold on you, doesn't she?”

Jyk groaned lightly. “Delk, I'm gonna need whisky.”

Kinzi clapped a hand on Jyk's shoulder as Delk nodded and went to retrieve a bottle. “I have to say, Jyk, I never figured you for such a sap,” he said with a smile.

Jyk barked a laugh. “With how much I've enjoyed Myla and Shyla's company, I didn't either.”

Delk waved off the pleas of his busy bartender as he returned with a bottle and three glasses. “No matter how tough we like to think we are,” he said as he filled the glasses, “there's always a woman what can bring us to our knees.” He distributed the shot glasses among them. “To women.”

“To women,” repeated Jyk and Kinzi, drinking their shots.

“Well, repressing your feelings certainly won't help things,” said Delk, refilling the glasses, “so I suppose the only thing to do is proceed. With extreme caution.”

Jyk quirked an eyebrow as he picked up his freshly filled glass. “Caution, how?”

Delk shrugged as he threw back a shot of whisky. “Move slowly, be sure not to offend her with your wooing, and if it does go badly do everything you can to keep her from hating you.”

“Hear hear,” said Kinzi, downing the second shot.

Jyk drank his and nodded slowly. “So, repressing my feelings bad, restraining them good.”

Delk nodded with a bark of laughter. “Precisely. Now, you two try not to get too hammered, I've gotta help the boy before he loses what little mind the gods gifted him with.”

“So,” chirruped Jyk, “how's the training been going?”

Kinzi scowled. “Bloody frustrating. I can't think of anything more maddening than knowing exactly what you want your arm to do – and how to do it – and having it steadfastly refuse.”

Jyk frowned. “Who have you been working with?”

Kinzi shrugged. “Mostly just whoever is around.”

“Well, that won't work,” Jyk said sharply. “You need someone that can retrain you as if you're a novice fighter all over again. We'll go talk to Master- at- arms Varlin in the morning.”

Kinzi raised an eyebrow. “Master Varlin? Really?”

“Well yeah,” Jyk said flatly. “He trained me, so why in seven hells wouldn't he want to help you get back into fighting form? He can't very well let his best pupil march to war without his most trusted comrade, now can he?”

“I think you're forgetting about Maess, aren't you?”

Jyk shrugged. “Maess is great, like family and all, but...well, where I think of you like a brother...he's more of a cousin. I mean, yeah, I trust him with my life and all, but obviously I prefer to have my brother watching my back.”

Kinzi grinned widely. “I was thinking the same thing, actually. Maybe it has something to do with his being raised as a rich kid.”

Jyk thought a moment before nodding slowly. “Y'know, you're probably right. I guess it's just harder to mesh with someone that doesn't share in having had a rough upbringing.”

“Yeah,” affirmed Kinzi, “sometimes it feels like he grew up in a different world. The man is more often surprised by daily life than any soldier I have ever known.”

“They do,” said Jyk. “Different rules, different setting, different schooling – it provides a completely different perspective on things. Although Maess doesn't seem to have the entitlement issues so many of them have, even with his father losing everything.”

Kinzi nodded. "And that's why he's a cousin. The rich cousin whose side of the family fell down to our level." He flashed a toothy grin. "Speaking of our level, when do you go back to work?"

Jyk shrugged. "Another few days or so. The captain wants me to check in each afternoon so he can look me over, make me bend and flex without pain or opening my wound. Until then Lady Lillian stays attached to her mother's side and under her detail's watch."

"Seen Sheyls around yet?"

Jyk scowled darkly. "No, thank the gods. I did hear the rat bastard recovered twice as quickly as me, though. Lucky prick."

Kinzi nodded. "A few inches in any direction and your wound would have been fatal. That son of a bitch nearly got everyone killed and will barely have a scar."

Jyk growled. "The healer said mine's gonna be prominent. Apparently I did a lot of extra damage after it was wrapped up."

"Bah, chicks dig scars," Kinzi countered brightly. "Isn't that half the reason we got into this business in the first place?"