

The sun burned an unnatural red in a cloudless sky painted with dark, swirling blues and purples. Part of Jyk recognized the impossibility of this, but the pair of swordsmen spinning to face him seemed of primary importance. Jyk's twin shortswords swung about and hot blood splashed over his face. His eyes drew up and locked on the carriage ahead, but more swordsmen manifested in his path. He did not see where they came from, nor did he understand their uncanny resemblance to the two he had just slain, but flashing steel quieted any questions springing to mind.

As the raiders charged forward Jyk filled with a heavy sense of dread, though not from fear for his life. He parried their blades casually aside and followed with vicious strikes of his own, cleaving attackers apart as quickly as they moved into reach. He took his eyes off of the battle to examine himself – even as his swords continued their indiscriminate slaughter – and found his doublet and pants alike stained wholly red with raiders' blood. And still more swordsmen came.

Before long tears began to run down Jyk's cheeks, pale lines streaking down the layer of blood coating them. Corpses had fallen so thick about him that he stood as king of the hill, striking down wave after wave of mindless attackers. He tried to drop his shortswords, but his hands did not respond. He felt a ragged scream building in his chest and allowed it to burst free, hoping for something, anything to stop the killing. Jyk mustered all of his willpower and tried to divert the swing of a blade back towards himself, tried to miss a parry, tried to release his sword hilts – all to no avail. Two more bodies fell at his feet and the world went dark.

Jyk's eyes opened and he was confronted by a dim, auburn light with two brilliant points of blue hovering inches above his face. As his vision drew into focus he recognized Evelyn's face, her long tresses cascading down around his head. A small smile crept across his face. “About time I get a good dream,” he said hoarsely.

Evelyn flashed a bright smile, flipped her hair back, and reclined in her chair snuggled up beside Jyk's bed. “No sir, you get to be awake.”

Jyk smile shrank, his tongue probing at his lips and finding them uncommonly sweet. *Honey?*, he thought alarmingly. “Just how long have I been sleeping, exactly?”

Evelyn pursed her lips hesitantly. “Ah...a little over three days.”

Jyk's eyes shot wide. “Three days?” An excruciatingly potent wave of pain shot through Jyk's side as he attempted lever himself up from the lumpy mattress beneath.

Evelyn clamped a hand on each of Jyk's shoulders and pressed him back down into the bed. “You're not to get up for another three days at least. Can't have you tearing those stitches, now.”

Jyk frowned up at her. “I have to check on Kinzi and report to the Captain,” he said plaintively. He squinted his eyes as he scanned the room about him, his brow furrowing as he took in the modestly furnished castle bedchamber. “This isn't the infirmary. Why am I not in the infirmary?”

Evelyn released her grip on Jyk's shoulders and slowly edged back into her chair once again. “Sergeant Kinzington should be along for his daily visit any time now and your captain knows everything he needs to. And I wasn't about to leave you in that den of infections they call an infirmary – it'd take months for you to recover down there.”

Jyk furrowed his brow slightly. “Have you been looking after me this whole time?” A soft smile pulled across his face. “The whole three days?”

A light flush rose in Evelyn's cheeks. “W- well, it w- *was* my fault you got wounded,” she stammered.

Jyk rose his head sharply and reached a hand out to grasp one of hers. “No,” he said urgently, “if anyone is at fault it was that bloody moron Sheylds. That door wasn't supposed to open until we were inside the walls of Tarrant Castle. You...well, you just made the wound worth taking, that's all.”

Evelyn's eyes narrowed as the flush in her cheeks deepened. “Worth taking?”

A small smile crept onto Jyk's face as he nodded. “I won't claim I fully understood that fact when I leapt in front of the blade, but every one of your actions since that moment show just how worthwhile it was.”

A soft knock at the door sent Evelyn shooting from her seat, Jyk's hand falling from her's as she rose. “That will be the sergeant,” she said suddenly, briskly darting for the door.

It was indeed Kinzi on the other side. “How's our patient?,” he asked quietly as he limped across the threshold.

“Awake,” replied Evelyn, pulling herself straight and inhaling deeply. “Make sure he doesn't try to get out of bed. I'll give you two some time to talk while I see about getting him something to eat.” The words tumbled out of her mouth nearly as quickly as she wove between Kinzi and the door.

Kinzi nodded slowly and opened his mouth to speak, but Evelyn was already gone. A wide grin stretched across his face as he closed the door, followed up by a round of chuckling as he crossed the room to take the seat she had vacated. “What'd I say?,” he asked, mirth apparent in his voice as well..

Jyk sighed heavily, flinching only slightly when pain flared in his side as it flexed. “Pretty sure it was a few of my words what sent her scurrying.”

Kinzi furrowed his brow. “She did seem a bit flushed, now that you mention it. What did *you* say, then?”

Jyk shrugged. “She thought it was her fault I got stuck,” he replied. “I just told her it wasn't.”

Kinzi's eyes narrowed. “And?”

Jyk sighed. “And that she made the wound worth taking, of course.”

Kinzi whistled softly. “No wonder she was flummoxed. She already seemed to be taking a shine to you. Heroics tend to do that to a girl, you know.”

Jyk barked a laugh, then grimaced at the repeated wave of pain from his wound. “Getting stuck by a two- bit raider is hardly heroic, I would think.”

Kinzi rolled his eyes. “Yeah, felling nine men, being the last man standing, and driving us all back to safety while nearly bleeding to death isn't heroic at all.” His voice and expression were equally rich with sarcasm. “It's not like everyone in Tarranton is talking about you or anything.”

Jyk's eyes widened. “Everyone?”

A short laugh rolled up from Kinzi's belly. "Damn near. There's even some songs going around. I'm in them too, but passing out and going along for the ride lacks the ring of falling to the cobblestones the very moment your charges reach safety, exhausted and half- bled."

"Now you're just screwing with me," Jyk exclaimed accusingly.

"I almost wish I was," Kinzi retorted with a smile. "But no, you're a bonafide sensation. After giving my report to Captain Wilzan I had to retell it to several court minstrels, so don't be surprised when they come at you in droves to get your perspective."

Jyk exhaled a long breath. "You're really not messing with me, are you?"

Kinzi grunted with growing irritation. "For the gods' sake, Jyk, you killed almost half the men that attacked us. That kind of thing gets people talking, so come to terms with it. As a matter of fact, it's about the best thing that could happen for your career. The brass loves good publicity – especially right before a war breaks out."

Jyk frowned. "So that was the first strike, then."

Kinzi shrugged. "They'll play shadow games with each other for awhile longer, but yeah, that was the beginning, more or less."

"You'd better learn to fight with your off- hand in a hurry," Jyk said flatly. "I don't like the idea of marching to war without you."

Kinzi sighed. "They've transferred me back to the armory for the time being. The captain said we're both likely to get promotions out of the deal, we just have to wait a bit. We did just get promoted a few span ago, after all."

"He say anything about what I'll be doing when my stitches come out?," Jyk asked nervously.

Kinzi nodded. "You'll be running Lady Lillian's protection detail in my place. When they make you a sergeant you'll get to pick one of your men to be promoted to corporal as your second. Until hostilities become open, that is."

"Then it's off to the front lines," Jyk deadpanned.

"There's even talk of holding an emergency Enlistment Tourney to bolster numbers. Send out a wide call, take in a large number, and hand the rest off to the militias."

"So we should have six months or so before things get proper nasty, then. They need at least three for boot camp and it'll take a good couple months for the recruitment call to spread."

Kinzi nodded again, impressed. "Good point," he said, only slightly grudgingly. "I hadn't thought of it from that angle, but if they make a recruitment drive they obviously won't be intending to march until they've trained the cadets."

A soft rap at the door was followed by Evelyn's reemergence bearing a large covered tray. "I'll just set this down and leave you boys to your chatting," she said, hurrying to the bedside table and depositing her load.

Kinzi got quickly to his feet, struggling only a little with his wounded leg. "No need, Miss Evelyn," he said. "Jyk here needs his rest and I need to tell Captain Wilzan that he has woken up." He sketched a slight bow and exited the room before she could protest, the wide grin returning as he moved.

*That's Kinzi* , Jyk thought, *always looking to give me the assist. Too bad he can't help me figure out what to say next.* "So...what's on the, uh, menu?"

Evelyn flashed a small smile as she produced a pair of pillows and helped Jyk to lever himself into position to eat. "Mostly just soup, but it's good soup. Gotta take it slow." She removed the lid from the tray and swung around to lay it neatly in his lap.

Jyk looked down at two types of soup, a mug of tea, two glasses of water, a small, airy hunk of bread, and a little bundle of wildflowers bound together with dried herbs. He smelled the flowers and found their herbal counterpart oddly familiar. "This smells wonderful, what is it?"

Evelyn blushed faintly. "Some of the same herbs from my shampoo," she said softly. "I remembered you saying you liked them more than wildflowers, so...."

Jyk smiled so widely it felt as if his face would split in twain. "That has to be the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me, bar none. You really are something special, Evelyn Quintella."

Her blush deepened, but her eyes narrowed. "Don't you think it's about time to tone the charm down a bit? Wouldn't want you to run out of lines on the first day."

Jyk chuckled lightly. "I'll take that as a compliment, backhanded as it may be." He flashed a grin. "But, I will have you know that I would never insult you with something so base as a contrived 'line'." He snatched a spoon from the tray haughtily. "Besides, I hardly need such things to verbally appreciate such a singular specimen as yourself."

Evelyn sighed with a smile. "You really can't help yourself, can you?"

Jyk gave a small shrug. "Apparently not when it comes to you. Perhaps I'll become accustomed to such an inspirational presence, but that would likely require spending vast amounts of time in your sole company."

Evelyn chuckled. "Oh, so if I want you to stop trying to charm me with every sentence, all I have to do is spend lots of time with you? If only the past three days would count I might be spared for the rest of your recovery." She smirked.

Jyk put a hand to his heart. "You wound me," he declared, his voice filled with mock hurt.

Evelyn shook her head, smile widening despite her best attempts to frown at him. "Oh, just shut up and eat, will you?"