

“Behind the Page”

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“And you still have no idea what she looks like.”

Kerric just shook his head. Outside the armory, the stadium crowds sent up a muffled roar - a jousting competitor must have been unhorsed. It'd be Kerric's turn on the sand soon enough. Competing in the Tourney was mandatory for every royal guard this year - with the situation in the kingdom's southern province, the crown needed all the best fighters it could get. A full arena of spectators on the edge of their seats would watch it all go down.

Luckily, Hasan's round was up first. Unluckily, it seemed Kerric wouldn't escape a round of light ribbing while he helped his friend and former lover prepare. At least it took both their minds off the Tourney.

“Aren't you even a little bit curious?” Hasan tightened the last buckle on his greaves and rose to standing.

“Not really,” said Kerric, handing off his helmet.

Hasan hooked it under his arm with a chuckle. “I don't know how you do that. If it were me trading letters with someone for months, I'd be dying to know if they were cute.”

“It's not as if she's a stranger,” Kerric shrugged. “I know her sense of humor. Her sharp wit. I don't see a need to arrange a formal face-to-face meeting if she isn't ready.”

“That, and you'd never be able to pull yourself out of your own thoughts long enough to actually inquire as to which of the infirmary's healers you've been courting all this time.”

“Exactly, yes.”

It was a peculiar dance, Kerric's correspondence. A single misplaced note had led to a series of near misses, a pile of scrawled-on paper scraps slowly growing between him and his mysterious contact. Notes turned to letters. Letters turned to conversations, strung out over weeks. He didn't even learn her name - Maeva - until almost a month in.

And now, half a year and hours of candlelight later, he'd yet to even see her face. Hasan was right - Kerric spent too much time in his head to change that arrangement.

His friend's armored gauntlet ruffled Kerric's loose, brown waves. “She gonna be in the crowd today?” he asked as they made for the doors.

“Hopefully. Southern stands, she said.”

“Don’t mess up.”

“I’m up against Caille. She’ll go easy on me.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that,” he tutted. “You know she fights dirty on the sand.”

“Are you trying to psych me out?”

Hasan laughed. “Just messing with you. I’m sure you’ll do fine,” he said, then leaned in with a knowing smirk. “Besides, if you don’t, maybe you’ll finally have an excuse to run into your girl when you wind up in the infirmary.”

Kerric snorted. “Again, not helpful.”

The roar of the stadium crowds echoed down the stone corridor. Hasan fitted his helmet over his close-shaved head. “Sounds like my cue. Wish me luck out there. I’ll give your healer lady a salute for you.”

“Get to the stables,” said Kerric, giving him a friendly shove. Hasan flipped down the visor and vanished around the corner. Kerric made for the stadium.

The Royal Guards had a whole swath of seats to themselves, but the rest of the stands were just as packed under the bright Tourney day sun. Servants, kitchen staff, healers, and housekeepers alike stole away from their duties to watch the show. Event servants swept rakes over the sand to prepare it for the next joust, readjusting the banners of pennants along the median, when Kerric snuck into an open seat beside Caille. The blonde knight spared a greeting just in time for the din to swell around them.

It wasn’t lost on anyone the real reason for the festivities. The villages of the southern province had been complaining of a white dragon for months, reports of razed woodland and charred crops trickling steadily to the castle. The kingdom needed its best knights. The Tourney would identify them.

Kerric only hoped he would be spared. Close combat wasn’t his strongest suit, and all he’d ever fought were other humans and the occasional goblin. He had enough to worry about in the castle alone without marching off to an unknown fate just to fight a whole dragon.

A roar snapped him out of it. From opposite ends of the arena, Hasan and Pryce rode out on their mounts, full plate armor donned and painted lances high. Kerric joined the clamor for his fellow knights.

Pryce took a moment to halt her horse and blow an exaggerated kiss into the crowd – most likely for her wife, Andrea. Kerric’s stomach turned over.

*I wonder if Maeva’s over there, too...*

She had to be. She was a student of medicine - a surgeon, by specialty - but also a lover of literature. From the very beginning of their correspondence, books were something that captured both of their interests. Maeva's favorite was an adventure novel called *The Esquire*, and she'd written so highly of the author's descriptions of battle that Kerric picked up a copy from the castle library himself. Maeva loved the drama of a show, surely she wouldn't miss the Tourney...

A sharp horn blast. The joust began.

Pryce and Hasan bent low over their mounts as they kicked them into a charge, colorful lances lowering smoothly through the air despite the bounding of their horses' gaits, shields up –

*Crack!*

Lances rebounded into the air as wood splinters shot away from their shields, riders pulling their mounts into slowing in preparation for the next pass. They rounded the corners in perfect mirror tandem, then charged again. Polearms no more than a shooting blur.

*Crack!*

"Sheesh," Caille commented over the cheering guards around them. "They sure aren't holding back."

"Pryce wasn't the Tourney Champion last year for nothing, I don't blame him for going all out." Kerric replied. *She'll be sent off to the south for sure. I wonder how Andrea feels about that...*

A few more passes, then Hasan took an awkward blow of Pryce's lance tip and toppled from his horse with a shout, echoed by a sudden "*Oh*," from the stadium stands. Kerric winced. The crowd leaned forward in their seats as the knight dragged himself up off the sand to draw his sword.

Kerric immediately spotted a problem.

"She broke his arm," he said to no one. His stare fixed squarely on his friend's stance as he watched him raise his blade to the cheers of the oblivious crowd.

Caille looked over at him, brows furrowing. "Hasan's?" she asked.

"Yeah, look at him," he said. Pryce had swung down off her mount and readied her own sword for their ground sparring. "His shoulder's pushed too far forward to keep the weight of his shield off his forearm. And he's not initiating contact like usual. Look at how he guards his left side."

Pryce struck first, which Hasan deftly dodged before lunging with an overhead swing of his own. Pryce let it glance off her own shield before striking his opening. Again and again they struck, metal clanging. Hasan, on the defensive much more than he usually was.

Until finally, in a quick stroke, Hasan's blade tangled in Pryce's and yanked the guardswoman's sword out of her hand. A kick, and she fell heavily on one knee. Hasan's blade fell beside her neck in an instant. The stadium erupted out of their seats, fists in the air for the good show.

Kerric shot to his feet, too.

"Where are you going?" called Caille.

"Hasan's gotta get that arm looked at right away," he said.

"Pryce can take him to the infirmary, you don't need to..." she trailed off as she met Kerric's eyes. Her chin tipped up. "Ah."

"I'm not going to go *looking* for her," he said, "I'm just... going to help get Hasan settled before I have to come back out."

Caille just nodded. "I see. Well, don't take too long, you have to meet me on the sand in less than an hour."

"I know, I will," he assured her before leaving the stands behind and ducking into the nearby corridor.

Except he most certainly *was* going to go looking for Maeva. Not conspicuously, of course. But that didn't mean he wouldn't be scanning every face for a whisper of recognition, a flicker of understanding.

*She doesn't know what you look like, either,* he reminded himself, shoving that fluttering hope deep down. *And she might never, if you're picked to go south.*

Kerric intercepted Pryce and Hasan walking off the sand. "Here," he said, extending his arm, "I can take him. You go get cleaned up, Pryce."

"What? Kerric, you're on within the hour," said Pryce.

"It won't take us long to get to the infirmary," he insisted somewhat hurriedly.

Hasan, though his dark eyes were laced with pain, managed to crack a smirk. "Why have I got a feeling this has something to do with your *lady*?" he drawled.

“What you’ve *got* is a fracture to the ulna, if I had to guess, but the healers in the infirmary will be able to give you a better diagnosis,” Kerric retorted. “So how about we drop the aimless chatter and get you looked at?”

“Someone’s impatient.” Hasan made a couple exaggerated kissing noises which Kerric brushed away indignantly.

“Do you want that arm fixed or not, Hasan?”

“I can wait.”

“No, you cannot. Bye, Pryce.” Kerric practically shoved Hasan down the corridor. He swore he could hear the guardswoman chuckle and heat rose in his neck.

Hasan didn’t say anything during the all-too-short walk to the infirmary, but he did stride with a decidedly satisfied air despite his injury. Kerric tactfully kept his gaze off his friend lest he invite another teasing jab. He was surprised his friend couldn’t hear the pounding of his heart the closer they got.

*If I don’t meet Maeva here, I might never get the opportunity again. I wonder if she’ll keep writing me letters if I’m sent away...*

When they ducked under the threshold, the infirmary was already swarming.

Injured knights from earlier in the day occupied several of the crowded cots. Healers rushed about, weaving to and fro. Bowls of warm water sloshed in their hands. Bandages unrolled in flashes of white. Hair whipped. Hands flickered over tool and sheet and hair-ribbon.

Moving too fast. Too loud. There was no way he’d be able to pick out Maeva in this chaos. *Again, not that you even know what she looks like in the first place.*

“Here!”

Kerric snapped back to attention. A dark-haired healer was beckoning them both to a nearby cot. “Lay him here,” he said. “What happened?”

“Fractured left ulna, by the look of it,” Kerric replied.

“Alright, I can take it from here. Thank you,” he said. He called over another healer. “Quinn, grab me an arm splint, would you please?”

“Broken arm?” replied a healer across the room. “Sure you got it? Sutures are more your thing.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m *bad* with breaks. Splint, please?”

“Hey, whoa now,” said Hasan, raising his good arm with playful smirk. “Should I even be trusting you with my arm here, handsome?”

The healer’s smile spread like a butterfly’s wings when he rolled his eyes – the way smiles always spread around Hasan, male or female. “Yes, you can trust me. I’m more than well acquainted with you knights and your injuries.”

“Yeah, would you stop heckling him so he can do his job?” Kerric said, perhaps a little too curtly.

“Just making small talk,” he said as the splint was brought over. “You don’t even have your armor on, genius. Your match’ll be on any minute.”

Kerric opened his mouth but had nothing to say to that. He cast another glance around the whirling room. Across the tied-back hair, the dark and pale arms, the voices. Far too many of them. Far too busy to distinguish.

*Just let it go. You’re out of time.*

“Right,” he said. “I’ll, uh... I’ll check up on you later.”

“Break a leg, Kerric,” waved Hasan. He hissed as the healer at his side accidentally jostled his arm. “Actually, don’t. Wouldn’t recommend that.”

Kerric huffed a partial laugh, then slipped out of the infirmary.

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Ten minutes later, Kerric’s mount stepped into the piercing sunlight of the open arena to the riotous cheers of the spectators.

Kerric winced from behind the slats of his visor. His breath condensed on the cool metal. At the other end of the ring, Caille did the same from the back of a white horse. His own horse tossed its head in anticipation, and Kerric had to steady the reins.

Now, too late to turn back, Kerric was reminded of why he avoided jousting at all costs. The lance was heavier than every other weapon he sparred with and the armor’s weight seemed to press him down into the saddle. *It’s incredible that these horses are strong enough to bear a fully-armed knight, in addition to their own trappings –*

The horn blast sounded. Kerric blinked in a cold sweat and kicked his mount forward.

*The arena really does shrink at this speed. Here comes Caille, lower the lance – lower the lance! Faster!*

Crack!

Kerric took the brunt of the blow on the outer edge of his shield, sending a shock through his entire arm. He hissed and yanked his horse around the middle partition. He gave his fingers a flex. *Maybe I think too much during jousts. Maybe that's why I can never focus. God, the sun's shining right into my eyes –*

*Sun sets in the west.*

With a jolt, Kerric realized he was poised in front of the southern stands. Caille, on the opposite side of the ring, was taking a moment to salute to the north stands.

*I wonder if Maeva came out to watch.*

Kerric hefted his lance at the crowd, scanning and scanning and scanning for a face he would not recognize. He spotted more Royal Guards almost immediately. A few of the kitchen staff he was friendly with.

*Healer garb... where is a woman in healer garb...*

Caille was lowering her lance. He didn't have time. Kerric tore his gaze away and his horse sprang into action, barreling down the line, faster and faster, *would she even have time to leave the infirmary? They were so busy –*

Crack!

*Bad.* His foot came free of the stirrup and his heart shot into his throat as he fisted the reins – but he didn't topple off. Heart pounding, ringing in his helmet, arms in shock, he fumbled with his foot for the stirrup. *Very, very bad blow, I can't feel my fingers...*

His toe caught the leather, but it slipped out of the way. His pulse hammered harder with every second his dangling foot stretched for it.

Caille was charging again. Kerric swallowed, made a last ditch effort to hook the stirrup in motion, his horse launched forward, his lance lowered, his foot was *still flying unchecked –*

Kerric tasted the crack of iron on wood. His free leg snapped up. The horse was yanked out from under him. He was untethered, midair, dropping –

Head clanged.

The next thing he knew, he was lying prone, legs splayed out on sand. His vision swam. Violently. He didn't remember the rest of his body hitting the sand. Sunlight absolutely blinded him through the slats, blurry and unstable blades of white.

Slowly, he became aware that his head was *splitting*.

Sand scuffed near his head. His name sounded as though it was being called underwater. Then the grate of metal, and his head jostled as someone eased his helmet off his head. His stomach gave a violent roil and he fought the urge to vomit at the motion.

*Where'd my helmet go?*

“Kerric.”

*Why didn't I just stay home and read like I wanted to?*

He pried one eye open. Wide, worried eyes and blonde hair cascading around his face. *Caille*. He tried to speak, but nausea rolled through him at the thought of opening his mouth and he gritted his teeth instead. A groan slipped out.

Hands held his face, and he felt his consciousness tilt dangerously. “Don't worry.” *Caille's* face hovered again. “They're bringing a stretcher. They're taking you straight to the infirmary.”

*Oh, the infirmary. Maybe I'll see Maeva...*

His consciousness tilted again, and this time it didn't right itself. It dropped over the edge into darkness.

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Kerric came to slowly.

A soft glow bathed the world beyond. One by one, the sticky hands gripping him in the dark released him, and the glow took shape. Walls. Moving figures. Torches that pierced into his eyes like arrows of light. He squinted his eyes against them with a groan.

A dark shape rose beside his cot. A head of dark hair. “Kerric?” came a voice.

He squeezed shut his eyes and tried to get a sense of his bearings. His palms slid over linen. More linen brushed across his knuckles – he was under a sheet? Yes. He could feel it pull and drape as he moved his leg. His throbbing head rested on a pillow – he didn't move that. His stomach still rolled at the mere thought.

“How are you feeling?”

*Is that Pryce? Pryce has dark hair.* “Pryce?” he mumbled.

“No, sorry.”

*Not Pryce?* He squinted up at the person beside him.



A man. He was seated on a stool beside his bed. Sleeves rolled up to his slender elbows. Long, dark hair hanging in waves and framing his olive face.

A smile that spread like a butterfly's wings.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"It's me. My, uh... name's Ravi."

"Ravi," said Kerric. "How's Hasan? How's his arm?"

"Stable. He'll be fine."

"Didn't get too fresh with you, did he? He's prone to that."

He tipped his head to the side, that smile crinkling his eyes. "No, he was quite the gentleman," he assured him.

Kerric released a slow breath. "That's good."

"The Tourney's over," Ravi said after a nod. "It's about eight, now."

"Eight?" He blinked at the clock-shaped blur on the far wall. Panic rose in his throat. "Then the Tourney - the results - who's going? Who's-"

Gentle hands on his shoulders. "Relax. They released the list of chosen victors a couple hours ago. You're not on it."

*I'm not on it. I'm not leaving after all. I have time to work things out with Maeva.* He swallowed. "Hasan?"

"Not on it either. He's down a functioning arm and you're concussed. Pryce and Caille, though, they're going."

*Pryce. If anyone can handle a dragon, it's her. Poor Andrea, though...*

"I'm concussed?" Kerric finally asked after a moment to digest that information. "I didn't even realize I was out for that long."

"That's to be expected. But you're awake and talking and you aren't bleeding, so that's a good sign. You're going to be okay, just stuck in bed for the next month or so."

*Bedridden in the infirmary. There are worse places to be stuck.* "I guess that's not so bad. Maybe I'll actually get the chance to talk to one of your healers," he murmured, mostly to himself.

Ravi, on the other hand, stiffened as he reached for a hand towel. Without looking up, he said, “You mean Maeva?”

Kerric blinked. “I... yeah, that’s her,” he said. “How’d you know that? Do you know her? Has she talked about me?”

The healer didn’t respond. Didn’t meet his eyes, just wrung the towel tighter and tighter between his fingers. Worked his jaw as if searching for words and coming up empty.

Realization settled on his muddled brain slowly.

“I should have just started with this,” Ravi finally said. “I should have said something earlier, I shouldn’t have led you on this long...”

“It’s you,” Kerric whispered.

He finally met his gaze - deep brown and terrified. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I should have told the truth from the start. I know I’m not what you were expecting. But I came to like our correspondence and getting to know you and sharing parts of myself without the pressure of meeting face to face -”

“Is *The Esquire* really your favorite book?”

Ravi blinked. “Yes. Everything... everything I told you about me was true, I swear it. Just... you know, not the name. Or the gender. And I’m really sorry about that, Kerric, I just... couldn’t stop thinking about what might change if you found out the truth this late.”

*Him, overthinking about meeting me?*

Kerric couldn’t tear his eyes from his face. Memorizing his every feature, even as he blushed and fretted. The hair. The cheekbones. The eyes. The smile, the beautiful butterfly smile...

“I never meant for you to have to find out like this. I understand if you wouldn’t want to talk anymore-”

“Why wouldn’t I want to talk to you?”

Ravi froze. Kerric cracked the barest smile the longer they stared at one another. “Didn’t I mention my thing with Hasan in one of my letters?”

“You... yes, I suppose you did, but-”

“I mean, you’re right, I... wasn’t expecting my correspondent to be a man, but that isn’t what kept me picking up my quill, you know. I liked your cleverness. Your humor. Our discussions about literature.”

“Stop,” Ravi almost laughed. He hid his flushed face behind his hand.

“I’m serious,” Kerric grinned. “I’m okay with keeping in touch. I’d... actually really like that.”

He slipped his hand out from under the cool sheet, stretching his fingers toward the healer. He slipped his own hand into Kerric’s, giving it the barest of squeezes.

First touch. Holding the hand of the person he’d been writing to for so long, perhaps even falling in love with. The dance was over. Here they stood, face to face, palm to palm. Not a Tourney, or a dragon, or even his bedridden state could stand as a barrier between them now.

If anything, they had all the time in the world.

“You should rest,” Ravi said at length. “You need to heal.”

“Will you come back to visit me?”

The butterfly-smile returned, shy but certain. Kerric could definitely get used to that smile. Ravi lifted Kerric’s hand to his lips and brushed a gentle kiss over his fingers.

“As often as you wish, my knight.”