

Love & Jousting – Kathryn Bard

Jasper Colmin stared at his own reflection. The mirror was cracked, which Jasper knew meant that luck was not on his side, but he stared anyways. Green eyes looked back at him, but he remained focused on the task at hand. With his skin pulled tight, Jasper delicately pushed the edge of his razor over his skin. He held his breath as the instrument curved over his jaw and hissed when he nicked himself. It wouldn't be his cleanest work, given the state of the mirror, but it would do for tonight.

Nobody important really cared about these meet-and-greet sessions anyways. This was just an excuse for the families to parade their eligible children around and make good "investments" as his parents said.

The best of the best only mingles with the best of the best.

That's what his father said at least. That's all he said recently, at least. In the months that Jasper had been preparing for his jousting tournament, he and his dad had only made talk of it. He tried not to be hurt by this disinterest in him – who he was – but he understood what this meant.

A Colmin had always competed in jousting. It wouldn't have been Jasper's first choice, but with his older brother favoring archery, the family tradition was left to him to uphold. It isn't that he didn't like it – he did, and he was good at it! But he just found it... boring, unfulfilling.

If Jasper had been born first, if he could have had his pick at any of the activities tested here, it would have been chess. The strategy and slow burn of the game gave him a rush that jousting never could. He supposed for most people that it would be the opposite, but he'd been born for jousting. He'd done it his whole life, and it was second nature by now. Boring, troublesome, painful second nature.

"Son?" His father called, pushing open the door to his room.

"Finishing up," Jasper responded, wiping his face with the damp cloth he'd collected earlier to help clean up.

His father moved behind him, his reflection serious as it appeared in the mirror, and he moved to sit on the chest at the foot of his bed. Jasper wasn't sure if he had ever seen his father fully smile; his mouth was always downturned and scrunched into a harsh line. A scar slashed from his right eye to just below the left side of his mouth – a "trophy" from his own jousting days.

"Are you prepared for tonight?"

Jasper rubbed his knuckles into his eye sockets as he thought of the headache that was sure to form later. "For the pageantry?"

"For the presentation and feast, yes."

"I don't know how much my readiness matters. The banquet will happen with or without my permission."

His father, Alric, sighed. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, bowing his head.

"I know that this is not what you envisioned when you thought of your first tournament." He finally said.

Jasper turned to face his father and found himself mirroring his position. They shared very little, not even their features seemed to indicate their relation. Jasper was all his mother, Joy, with his older brother looking more like their father. He often wondered if that was why his father could barely look at him these days. Since her passing last winter, he and his father seemed at odds even more than before. The dreariness of the season seeping into their relationship.

But looking at him like this, here, he seemed so small compared to the large room that he had been given as a competitor. His father looked tired, broken, sad – much like how Jasper felt, but he had youth to cover those things up.

"I will do what is expected of me tonight, Father." He spoke quietly, but firmly. "You will not be disappointed."

"Jasper..."

"I will even take a gander at the eligible young ladies. I know you'd like that."

His father shook his head. "I know the maidens are not who you would prefer to look at tonight,"

Jasper's cheeks heated and he found his eyes suddenly interested in looking anywhere but at his father.

"I know, I know. That was something you'd talk to... talk to mother about." He cleared his throat, covering up the breaking of his voice at the mention of his late wife. "But Jasper, I... I support you. And with the way you joust, your pairing will always be a good one."

Their eyes focused on each other, and Jasper felt his chest tighten. These moments with his dad were few and far between, but having this support settled something in him.

"As long as it isn't a Malten. That family..." his father spit on the ground to enunciate his point. "The whole lot of them are rotten cheaters. I don't think that they've played fairly a day in their lives."

"Yes, yes," Jasper started, standing and wiping his hands of sweat. "I know all about the Malten's, you made sure of that. What started this again? A poor joke played on one of us?"

"It doesn't matter what started it. It's begun; it's happening."

"Yes, yes," he said again and waved his father off. "I have a feast to prepare for. I will see you there shortly."

The two embraced awkwardly. It was stiff, but something that Jasper could get used to. And if things went well for him tomorrow, if things went well for his family, then hugging his own father might be something that could become a constant. It seemed that things were beginning to fall into place – a nice change of pace since his mother passed away seven months ago.

The banquet was as expected.

Dry pork, dry turkey, barely seasoned vegetables. Bad wine. The usual.

Though this was his first year competing, Jasper had grown up attending these feasts. Not only was his family famous for their jousting, but his father always insisted on attending to scout out any competition. Through the years, Jasper saw no real threats. But this year, the Malten's would unveil their challenger. The only son, only heir, to the Malten name had been kept out of the public eye, growing and honing his skills in private. No one had seen him, not even Jasper knew what he looked like.

“Competing or spectating?” asked a voice from his right.

Jasper leaned back in his chair, turning to find a handsome young man standing behind him. His hair hung in loose waves around his shoulders, its color reminding him of autumn leaves. Everything about him screamed fall, his eyes the perfect shade of golden brown. He had a lax look to him, the stubble on his face adding to his lazy gaze.

“Now? Or tomorrow?”

The mystery man laughed, sending a thrill though Jasper’s stomach. “Is there really a difference? They say the tournament begins at dawn, but anyone worthy of competing against knows that the game really starts tonight.”

“Don’t you seem astute.” Jasper commented.

“I can’t be all brawn. I’ve got to have some brains to back it up, don’t you think?”

“I do think. Quite often.”

Autumn incarnate extended his hand, loosely wrapping calloused fingers around Jasper’s. He raised their meeting to his own lips and planted a chaste kiss to the knuckles. His mouth was warm and dry but didn’t linger for long. The intention was clear though.

“What are you thinking of now?” He finally replied, dropping their hands.

That I need to calm down. Jasper found himself thinking, if his beating heart and fluttering stomach were any indication.

“I’m thinking... I’m thinking that you must be an excellent chess partner.”

Yes, that’s *definitely* what he was thinking.

“Oh!” The stranger’s eyes lit up; whatever was simmering beneath the surface had been thoroughly extinguished at the mention of chess. “I am *wonderful* at chess - I even have customized pieces for my personal board at home. Should we play a match?”

Jasper smiled and stood, sticking his arm out to this force of nature. The other man slipped his arm through, and they linked arms. “I think that a match between us sounds perfect.”

They sat across from each other with an unfamiliar and dusty chess board between them. It took longer than they thought to track one down, and even longer to find all the correct pieces. Even now, Ryder – how the handsome stranger had finally introduced himself, was forced to use one of his loose jacket buttons as his knight. The substitute had no impact on his gameplay though, every move that Jasper made was equaled by Ryder.

“It’s not often I find myself on even ground with an opponent,” Jasper sighed, leaning back to examine the board.

“No? Maybe you should play with better people,” Ryder smiled.

“Aren’t I doing that now?”

Ryder shrugged. “Are you?”

“Do you always answer a question with a question?”

“Do I?”

Jasper smiled back and examined the board more intensely. All this flirting was fun, but he would never be able to look at himself in the mirror again if he lost to a stranger. This was *his* game, his talent. If he couldn’t beat the first random opponent that he came across, he might as well chuck his own board into the ocean and commit to jousting until he was dust.

“So, I take it that you’ll be competing in the chess tournament then?” Ryder questioned as he watched Jasper think.

The question interrupted his mindless musing, and he looked up to focus on his opponent. He was breathtaking, even in this room full of art and history, Ryder was the most magnificent thing there. Auburn hair, dark eyes, gorgeous smirk – he was a stranger and yet he seemed so familiar.

“Something like that.” He finally replied, moving his chosen piece.

“Well, my friend, it appears that we have a draw.” Ryder commented.

Jasper looked at the board again and realized that Ryder was correct. Never, in 19 years of serious chess playing, had Jasper had a draw. He usually wiped the floor with his opponent’s, and he did it gladly, confidently even.

“You must be impossible to lose against.”

“I suppose we will see tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

“Care to walk me back to the competitor’s hall?” Jasper tried to ask nonchalantly. Judging by the small smirk that danced across Ryder’s features, he wasn’t as nonchalant as he thought.

“This is my first year competing. I can’t have my reputation become that I sneak off into the night with fellow challengers in the hopes that they go easy on me.”

Jasper sighed. “A gentleman through and through, I see.”

“I never said that.”

And Ryder pulled Jasper in for a quick kiss. It was clumsy and fast, but Jasper could still feel the satisfying scrape of stubble on his freshly shaved skin. It set him alight; a new want overtook him. Not just to win or bring glory to his family, but to live for himself, for... love.

They shared a small smile and wished each other luck in their respective challenges tomorrow.

“Perhaps I’ll come see you perform tomorrow? After I win *my* tournament.” Ryder called over his shoulder.

“You don’t even know my activity!”

“I’ll find you, don’t worry.”

Usually, before training or a challenge, Jasper found sleep elusive. It seemed out of reach even when his body was bogged down with drowsiness. But tonight, settling into his sheets and thinking of his day, he found himself drifting effortlessly into a blissful, dreamless sleep.

A naturally early riser, Jasper found himself up and out of his room before anyone else. It was no problem for him though, he could move through the halls and grounds unnoticed, could get one final training session in before the tournament, and then it would be time to begin. Or end?

Secretly he hoped that if he did well and won his first competition, that he could retire from the sport. His father would be happy and proud of his win, especially with it happening during his debut year, and then he could fade into obscurity. Or maybe settle into a nice domestic life with someone. Maybe Ryder.

He stepped into the area designated for jousting challengers and opened his bag. He’d stuffed weights and a change of clothes into his satchel for training, but his jousting armor he’d dropped off the day that he and his family had arrived. He had no interest in polishing it or even looking at it in the days leading up to the event. After today, Jasper never wanted to wear it again.

A quick spar with the training dummy had him feeling sweaty, but focused. In a few hours this would be over, and he could really begin his own life.

Jasper found himself showering quickly as more competitors began to file into the section. He dried off and began hooking into his armor when he heard a familiar laugh coming from the front.

I guess he did find me. He thought to himself, feeling quite proud that their impromptu date last night had such a strong impression on Ryder. He was even coming to wish Jasper luck – how sweet.

But when the auburn-colored hair came into view, Jasper slowed his steps.

Why is he in jousting armor?

“Ryder?” He called quietly when the group of men he’d been laughing with cleared away, most likely prepping their own armor.

Ryder flicked his head to the other man. When he recognized him, his eyes lit up. “Come to wish me luck, I see?” His tone was light, clearly not quite understanding the implication of them both being there.

But then his eyes drifted to the silver tomb Jasper had hooked himself into. He saw the fine make of the metal, the firmness of the leather straps, but his eyes seemed to latch on to the Colmin family crest engraved over the left breastplate of the chest piece.

“Colmin,” he said it slowly, like he’d never said the name out loud before.

Jasper never thought his last name sounded so elegant as it did when coming from the lips he’d grazed last night. But now of course, he couldn’t ignore the family crest engraved on Ryder’s chest piece: Malten.

“The Malten heir isn’t named Ryder,” he spat quickly.

“Well, his *first name* isn’t Ryder. But that’s what he goes by.”

“Private talk. Now,” Jasper gripped the other man’s hand and spun on his heels. He was yanking a full-grown man in metal armor behind him like a ragdoll, it surely made for an interesting scene. Lucky for them, everyone else seemed too focused on themselves to notice.

When they were out of earshot and had some trees for cover, they stopped their parade.

“What do you *mean* that the Malten heir goes by ‘Ryder’?”

“Okay well, first of all, he doesn’t like being called the heir because he wants *nothing* to do with all this,” he gestured vaguely to the tents and spectacle of the tournament. “And second of all, his *first name* *Remington* but that is a stupid name, and he rides horses. So, his... his family and friends call him – call *me* Ryder.”

“Did you know it was me?”

“What?”

“I am Jasper Colmin. The Colmin’s and Malten’s feud is notorious and long living. My father tells me that your lot are notorious cheats, and I can think of no better way to cheat out a victory than to... emotionally compromise me. So, tell me, honestly, did you know it was me?”

Ryder softly placed his hands on Jasper’s cheeks, their roughness that he noticed last night finally making sense. He felt tears well in his eyes and blinked furiously to keep them at bay. One slid down his cheek and Ryder thumbed it away.

“I have lived far away my entire life to train. The first time I saw you was last night, and I had never seen someone so beautiful before. I swear, I did not know.”

Something about his eyes told Jasper that he was telling the truth.

“Tell me one more thing.”

“Anything.”

“Did you cheat at chess, then?”

Ryder threw his head back and cackled into the sky. When he finally leveled his face to Jasper’s again, he leaned forward to brush their lips together.

With their foreheads resting against each other’s, Ryder said, “I have to admit that I am a terrible cheat.”

“What a relief.” Jasper exhaled with relief, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

A trumpet played in the distance, alerting competitors and spectators alike that the jousts would begin shortly. The noise rattled around in Jasper’s head, each note reminding him of this impossible to win scenario that he was faced with.

“What do we do about this, then?” He finally questioned.

Ryder thought for a moment. “How much do you care about winning?”

“I want to win so that I never have to do this again.”

“I will not cheat for me. But if you want to win, I can make that happen. We both know that the finals will be us.”

“You think that I cannot best you on my own? I’m offended.”

“I think that we could have a lifetime to best each other. We just need to get away from this,” Ryder’s voice was strong, but his eyes seemed to well with uncertainty and desperation.

“Tell me your plan.”

It was basic, but to the untrained eyes of the audience, no one would know. Only those with jousting experience would be able to recognize the maneuver, and that was if they were looking for it. With the feuding families truly only searching for victory, the chances of them spotting this little trick were unlikely.

“Now remember,” Ryder started. “Just place your lance six inches to my left. I will fall back dramatically and put on a good show of acting hurt and distraught at my loss. Then we meet in the woods and set off.”

“And what will happen if I place my lance *five* inches to your left?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Do you always answer a question with a question?” Jasper echoed his sentiment from last night and Ryder smirked.

“As long as your lance is nowhere near Emerald, I’ll be happy.”

“Emerald?”

Ryder pulled a carrot from his pocket and gently fed it to the majestic horse that had eavesdropped on their plan. “This one here is Emerald.” He patted her fondly and even placed a small kiss on her muzzle. “She’s been through it all with me. Every joust, every victory, every...”

“You seriously haven’t lost yet, have you?”

The other man stifled a laugh. “Good luck, Jasper.” Ryder said as he slid his helmet on and set off to mount his horse. He smoothed a hand down the creature’s mane. “Do go easy on Emerald though. She’s a sweet girl.”

Jasper covered his heart with his hand and said, “You have my word.”

When Ryder began wailing about his honor, Jasper did his best to slip through the cheering crowd. Despite being the honored champion, no one seemed to notice who he was as he pushed through the bodies to where he left his belongings. His anonymity might have something to do with the helmet still covering his face and his hand over his family crest as he waded through the pool of people, just in case anyone recognized it.

It was going too well, in reality. It went off without a hitch, so when Jasper’s father was standing by the tree line, he wasn’t completely surprised.

“A feast will be held in the Colmin name tonight to honor your... victory.” His father mumbled, almost inaudible.

“Surely!” Jasper exclaimed. He peered off into the foliage and saw a familiar figure hiding in the woods. He tried not to let his relief show. “A young man just wants to be with nature a moment – to celebrate his win.”

“Do you know what that maneuver is called?”

Unlike Ryder, Jasper was a bit better at lying – cheating as his father may call it. Especially when it came to said father. So, he mustered up as much confusion as he could when he said, “What maneuver?”

A sad smile washed over Alric’s face. It was the most smiling his father had done in a long while.

“It is called ‘folie à deux’ – the madness of two. Have you gone mad, son?”

“I’ve never been saner.”

“When you return home – together – we will have mended the rift.”

“Father – “

His father raised his hand, cutting him off before he could speak further. “Go be young and in love. Your mother would have wanted that.” He tossed him a pouch full of coins with his other hand and walked off without another word.

When the two lovers reconvened, they joined hands. They walked in the opposite direction of the tournament with no real destination in mind. Most of this land was new to Ryder anyways, so it would be interesting to wander.

When they found a place to stop for the night, they enjoyed the company of one another. They traded tales of childhood and the different perspectives of their families’ long-standing feud. It seemed that no one had real answers regarding it, but just simply *was*. As natural as a tradition passed from parent to child.

“My father seems to think that when, and if, we decided to go back, that he will have mended this great divide.” Jasper commented as he stuffed an olive into his mouth that he had plucked from the tree outside the inn they had retired to.

“Do you think he will?” Ryder sounded hopeful.

“Do you?”

They smiled widely at each other, Ryder eating an olive before he asked, “Do you always answer a question with a question?”