

Bloodlines

Chapter 1

Crassus

The tavern was a raucous clamour of laughter, music, and clashing tankards, but it was tepid when compared to the bars Crassus was used to. He knocked back his fourth ale, blurred vision trained on a crescent-shaped spot of damp on the wall. A cloud of black curls sprung into his periphery, accompanied by Piper's chirping voice, trickling through the fog encasing his senses.

"... a card."

Crassus looked across and down at the child sitting on the other side of their table. They had picked an alcove in the furthest corner of the room, far enough away from the bar that the other patrons would pay them no mind. An older haera man travelling with a young, conspicuous eiyr would prompt no end of questions, all of which they had long grown tired of answering. Piper held out her deck of crude, handmade cards with their backs towards him. She stared, expectant, firelight dancing across her black eyes. If eiyr eyes held any hint of white, it was so consumed by their pupils as to be invisible.

"Huh?" Crassus said, before failing to stifle a yawn. What time was it?

"I said, pick a card."

"Why would I pick a card?"

"It's magic," Piper said. "I'm going to make your card disappear."

Crassus wished he had nursed his ale better, now feeling its absence. "Pip, you don't know any magic."

She pursed her lips, frowning. "Are you going to take a card or not?"

"Not."

"You're no fun, old man." She fingered the frayed edges of the cards and doubled down on her pout. Crassus sighed.

"Fine, fine," he said.

Piper's face lit up, thrusting the cards back in his direction, splaying them. He spent no time deciding, choosing the middle-most card and turning it over in his hand. The Fort of Gold gazed back at him, complete with Piper's scribbled attempts at depicting turrets. She had bought the pigments from a market stall last year, but they could only afford orange and a dark sea-blue.

"Now, place it on my palm," Piper said. Crassus did so with obedience.

Piper focused on the card, brow furrowed, then glanced back up at Crassus. Alarm and fear gripped her face as she pointed at something behind him. "Gods, what is *that*?"

Crassus twisted around, hand on the hilt of his greatsword. Nothing there but the tavern, rowdy as it had been all evening. When he turned back, his card was gone. Piper grinned.

"See? Magic!"

"Very funny," said Crassus, deadpan. Piper was unaffected by his lack of enthusiasm. Her satisfied smile still creased across her face. Crassus rose, lifting his tankard for a refill. Piper's smile faltered.

"Can we afford that?" she asked, words hesitant.

“Let me worry about what we can afford.”

Her mouth flattened into a firm line. “You don’t worry about it nearly enough.” She sat her cards on the table and wiped her hands on her breeches, scrubbing any remnants of fun and whimsy away for a moment so she could adopt sincerity, scrubbing childishness away so she could pretend to be the adult between them. “The less you spend on drink now, the less we’ll have to make up for the journey back to Jyorn. The last job didn’t pay well, and the next probably won’t either.”

Crassus ran a calloused hand through his hair, trying to push away the stress as it gnawed at him. Ale was always good for that—good for melting stress. “We’ll manage. Don’t we always?”

“That really depends on how you define ‘managing’.”

“Look, if we can’t rely solely on my swordsmanship, then you,” he chuckled, “you can perform magic, no?”

Piper almost looked like she might laugh, but it was clear she wasn’t going to let him off so easily.

“If that captain thought you were too sick to trade labour for passage, then other people are going to think the same. And, look,” she hesitated, chewed at her nail. “Maybe they’re right.”

“I’m still strong enough to fight, Pip. Roughing someone up takes less out of you than persistent hard labour, believe me.”

There was worry behind her eyes as they flicked across his face. “Fine,” was all she said, returning to her cards to play a game with herself, no doubt of her own invention.

Crassus wanted to say something, but he was out of explanations, and remained bad with kids—particularly kids with an advanced grasp of both the realities of the world and sarcasm to boot—no matter how many years he and Pip had been together. He slipped out of their alcove with tankard in hand and headed for the bar. There were few gaps, but he managed to squeeze his way between a seedy-looking haera and a pair of gleeful fályn who were standing on their bar stools, arms draped across each other’s shoulders. The extra height brought them to Crassus’s eye level, just about.

He was used to crowds; Garoan inns were always busy, boisterous affairs, but drink flowed freely, the kegs open and available to everyone in the village. The concept of a barkeep was still foreign to him. But he had to admit, the lanky eiyr man behind the counter who winked and flirted whenever Crassus returned for a fresh cup, bringing a flush to the older man’s cheeks, warmed him up to the idea. It had been a while.

After ordering his fifth ale, Crassus felt the figure beside him shift, knocking against his arm. Nothing of note in a tavern, but still, he reflexively leaned to look. A fályn woman was recoiling from—he assumed—the patron who had knocked into him. It was hard to hear anyone over the volume of chatter, but he heard the fályn telling the man, a haera, to stop, in no uncertain terms. The man reached for her hair.

Crassus caught his wrist mid-gesture, gripping tight. “I believe she said ‘stop’.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his ale being delivered to the counter.

Startled, the man blinked at Crassus in fear for a few moments, before the emotion was replaced with anger.

“Fuck off, old git,” he said, tugging his arm and trying to shake Crassus off. Crassus was stronger. It was both reassuring and exhilarating to see he could still best men some twenty years his junior. He almost laughed. The fályn woman was looking up at him in alarm, but Crassus knew himself. It wasn’t about her anymore. It never was.

“If you promise to stop badgering young women, maybe I’ll ‘fuck off’. Can you do

that for me?” Crassus taunted, not expecting, not *wanting* the other man to back down.

A ‘fuck you’ hissed between gritted teeth was all Crassus heard before a fist came flying at his face, sending a searing pain reverberating from his nose to the rest of his head. He stumbled backwards, releasing his grip on the man’s wrist and knocking into the two fállyn behind him. They cheered, drunk and excited. Crassus touched his nose experimentally, grunted, tasted the blood dripping from his nostrils. He’d broken his nose before, probably broken everything at least twice. His bloody lips curved into a grin.

The man looked like he wasn’t sure whether to run or punch him again. Crassus was more than happy to make that decision for him. Jumping forwards, Crassus grabbed his flagon from the bar and sent it careening into the man’s jaw. His head cracked backwards as ale soaked his clothes. He fell, and Crassus followed after. The two fállyn at the bar whooped and hooted.

“Fight!”

As Crassus straddled the man’s waist, landing blow after blow to his face, the rest of the tavern descended into mayhem.

The man raised his legs to try and kick his knees into Crassus from behind, but he couldn’t put enough power into it to make an impact through Crassus’s armour.

“Shit!” he screamed. “Get off me, get the fuck off me!”

Crassus was about to relent, when a heavy force thudded into his back and propelled him forwards, crashing into the man’s face with his chestplate. The man let out a weak groan. In the collision, Crassus’s only remaining pouch of beads was sent flying from his belt, skidding across the floor into the throng of bodies. He cursed, swiveling himself around to take in the chaos around him. Another drunken brawler had fallen backwards into him, and now she looked pissed. Crassus had enough time to spot Piper’s curls bobbing from up in the rafters, safely away from the fighting, before his next assailant came at him.

He rolled back to his feet, deserting the man still groaning on the ground, and attempted to get as far away from this prospective new altercation as possible. But she was faster; she stuck out her leg, kicking Crassus behind the knee and knocking him down, causing him to snarl in pain. He whirled as she came up behind him, landing an elbow to the side of her head and another to her belly. She heaved out a pained gasp, stumbling for a moment before regaining her balance and throwing herself at Crassus again, attacking his front then wrapping an arm around his neck, dragging him all the way to the floor and trying to cut off his air. He clawed at her hands, the skin from her knuckles coming away under his fingernails, but he slowed as he felt a familiar sensation creep into his chest.

Tightness.

A yawning ache that grew steadily sharper.

Crassus’s sight began to falter, his breath shallowing, quickened by the chokehold he was trapped in. His muscles went limp, his consciousness flickering as his body gave out. His attacker seemed satisfied. She slipped herself away from him and rejoined the fray, crashing into a group of wrestling fállyn. Crassus’s mind hung on just long enough for him to hear the barkeep yell, “enough! Everyone, out!”

The puddle Crassus awoke in stank of vomit and blood.

He was outside the Winking Siren, half buried in mud, Piper staring down at him in the midnight darkness. As his eyelids fluttered, readjusting, her anxious expression shifted to one of mock exasperation.

“Welcome back”, she said.

A strangled groan passed his lips, now dry and splitting, caked in blood from his broken nose. As he willed his body into an upright position, Piper leaned back to give him space, trying and failing to hide the worried knot retying itself between her caterpillar eyebrows. There were others lying nearby in the dirt, and Crassus looked at Piper for an explanation. She stood, her clothing slick with mud from the knees down.

“You weren’t the only one who required carrying out by several strong volunteers. I did ask them to put you down nicely, but I think by the time they got to you, they were already fed up.”

Crassus grimaced, hyper-aware of every ache in his body, both old and new.

He moved to stand, and Piper quickly positioned herself to support him part of the way. Putting a grateful hand on her head, Crassus stroked a few trailing ringlets behind the tall, curved shell of her ear.

“Thanks,” was all he said. Piper smiled and stood back. Crassus wobbled before managing to stand firm—maybe he was in better shape than he felt. He wiped some of the flaking blood from his face with the back of his hand, and Piper cringed.

“So ... what happened, exactly?” The question was restrained, as if it wasn’t quite what she wanted to ask.

“I got punched. A lot.”

“I’ve seen you go through worse. You didn’t pass out from being—” she dipped her voice, mimicking his gruff timbre, “—‘punched a lot’.”

Crassus avoided her gaze. Piper knew about his ‘sickness’. How could she not, when they were always together? But he would rather downplay it into oblivion than let her see how much it scared him.

“Look,” he began, wetting his lips, tasting a sour, metallic tang. “Someone took me by surprise and knocked me flat. What can I say? It happens.”

Piper looked skeptical. Sometimes he loved how perceptive she was; other times he wished she could be lied to as easily as other children her age. She’d always been sharp, but growing up with an overgrown lump for a guardian must have spurred her beyond the realms of mere mild maturity.

“Oh,” Crassus said.

“Oh?”

“Our beads. I lost them. All of them,” he said, testing out each word, unsure of his own memory. He put his hand to where his pouch should have been on his belt, and sure enough, found nothing but mud. They had no currency, nothing worth trading, and it was all his fault. Again.

Piper looked as if she was counting to ten. Her fingers rubbed at her temples, and when she brought them away, she only looked tired.

“Well, that’s that, I suppose. What now?” Her always-wide eyes were lidded and drooping. She yawned, loud and long, as if to let Crassus know exactly how exhausted she was—with him, with the day they’d had, with everything. “Where are we spending the night? I doubt they’d let us back into the tavern even if we *could* afford it.”

Crassus felt his face sag with realisation.

“Ah. Oh. Right. Somewhere to sleep. Right.”

Piper let out an exasperated, exaggerated sigh. “I thought so. Let’s go find a cosy street corner, shall we?”