

The soot-stained inn looked as miserable as the rest of this mudhole village. Casey felt the last of his hope seep away as the drizzle turned to icy rain. Every day since he'd stepped through the portal had been worse than the one before, and he still had no clue where he was, how to find Mackenzie, or how to get home. Not that there was any reason to go back there.

Bilal seemed to agree. "I don't think you will find your mate here, my friend—only mercenaries and criminals." He grinned, incisors gleaming against his forest-green beard. "But the innkeeper brews a tolerable ale, and we need a dry place to sleep."

Casey gave a tired thumbs-up. "All right. Let's do it, Hulk."

Bilal's grin vanished. "I've heard every runt joke you can imagine, Casey. They still hurt."

"Aw, my bad. I'm sorry, man." Casey reached up and punched Bilal's arm just above the elbow. It felt like punching a tree trunk. "Where I come from, Hulk is the name of a hero."

Bilal grunted and opened the door.

The odor hit Casey like a shock wave. Hops, yeast, sizzling pork fat, wet wool and leather steaming in front of a smoky fire. A roar of voices and laughter followed. Instinctively he scanned the room. Staircase to the left, wooden barrels stacked three high against the wall below. A massive stone hearth hung with blackened kettles. Dozens of patrons, not all of them human, seated at long plank tables. Despite the cartoonish sign above the door forbidding weapons, he spotted glints of steel, bone-handled hilts, and the fletched ends of arrows. A hooded figure near the fire was the only one who glanced up as they entered.

As he searched for a space along the benches, he observed that the patrons and servers—human and otherwise—were all male. Except one.

The woman was standing on a bench with her back to him, one hand hooked around a pewter mug she was rapidly emptying, to the chanting and table-pounding of her companions. Well-worn leather pants showed off every muscle in her legs, and her padded leather jacket was reinforced with strips of bronze. It too had seen a lot of action. Dark blond hair, a few leaves in the tangles, just brushed her shoulders.

She finished her drink and hopped down to raucous applause from the entire tavern. As she wiped her mouth on her sleeve, Casey caught a glimpse of her face and felt his bones turn to water.

Mackenzie.

In less than a heartbeat, he was next to her, one hand reaching for her armored shoulder. “Baby—”

Two silver-tipped arrowheads were so close to his eyeballs they blurred out of focus. The tavern clattered to silence.

On the far side of the arrows, her face was as familiar as his own and as alien as the rest of this world. The stress crease between Mackenzie’s eyebrows was replaced by a smudge of dirt. The dark semicircles that had appeared below her eyes around the time of Thea’s diagnosis were gone, and the ivory skin his wife had anointed religiously with sunscreen and expensive serums was tanned and dusted with freckles. A narrow scar crossed her left cheekbone.

The woman held her weapon sideways like a crossbow, confidently, almost negligently. Her voice was playful, but there was no humor in her expression. “You want to keep those pretty brown eyes?”

Casey felt his arms rise, palms front. *First rule of combat? Stay alive.*

“If I could say a word?” Bilal’s deep, rumbling voice broke the tension. “My companion mistook your captain for his mate, who is missing. He meant no disrespect.”

“Not their captain,” the woman replied, never taking her eyes off her prey. “We share everything. Equals.”

“All the same, perhaps we could offer you a pitcher of ale, by way of apology? He truly meant no harm.”

“Leave him be, Silver—the man’s about to piss himself.” Casey didn’t dare move his eyes, but he thought it was the fat man next to her who’d spoken. “Let the half-pint Kurzite stand us a round or seven. I feel a powerful thirst coming on.”

“Shut it, Garrett.” She drew her bow arm back an inch. “That true, what your little friend says, Brown Eyes?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Casey whispered.

“How do I know your woman didn’t have a reason to run off? Might be doing her a favor by putting you down.”

He didn’t realize she was smiling until he heard Garrett let out a guffaw. Faster than he could track, she gathered the arrows and the bow in one hand and grabbed the back of his collar with the other. He felt her gaze travel from his Vibram soles to the top of his buzz cut. Then her

mouth was on his, her tongue between his lips. She tasted of sour mash whiskey and honey, spiked with something green. Shouts and whistles erupted from all directions.

Abruptly she released him, and if not for Bilal catching him under the armpits, he would have been on the straw-covered floor. “That what you wanted?” she asked. “A taste? You’re not my type.”

Garrett thumped the table with a meaty fist. “Drinks!”

Casey nursed his last pint, the ale and stew Bilal had ordered turning sour in his stomach as he watched the woman toss dice and trade dirty jokes with her companions. Her thick-lashed gray eyes crinkled at the corners, and a wicked grin exposed the tiny gap between her front teeth. A man she’d just met gently caressed her ass. She wasn’t giving him any encouragement, but she wasn’t threatening to shoot his eyes out, either.

“That woman,” he muttered, “is not my wife.”

“No, my friend.” Bilal shook his head, his shaggy hair brushing Casey’s shoulder. “As handsome and muscular as you are, you could never hope to attract such a mate.”

“Thanks, brother. Appreciate it. Cheers.” He clinked his mug against Bilal’s and drained it. When he looked up, Bilal’s deep-set eyes had gone all misty.

“I would be honored to consider you my brother.”

Casey choked and Bilal slapped him on the back, slamming his body into the table edge. “Well, *brother*, I say we pay your tab and see if there’s a room upstairs.” Rubbing the new bruise

on his ribs, he was about to swing his legs over the bench when the woman who was absolutely not Mackenzie slid closer, pressing her thigh against his.

“Stick around.”

“Why? You need some target practice?”

A frown line appeared on her forehead. “I get more than enough of that. But maybe I think your puny friend would be useful in a fight.”

“Oh, I’m not.” Bilal shrugged apologetically.

“He’s really not,” said Casey.

“Or maybe we have a mutually beneficial proposition.” Garrett was suddenly behind them, his arm slung around the shoulders of a slender creature too eerily gorgeous to be human.

*Damn, he moves fast for a big man.*

“We’ll talk in the morning. Inn’s full, but you can bed down in the stable.” He winked.

“Unless you’d prefer to bunk with us. Plenty of Garrett to go around.”