

The Drinking Hole stunk of piss and shit and all things unsavoury. True wove her way through the crush of bodies, trying her best to breathe through her mouth to avoid gagging and giving herself away. Her cloak, worn hood-up, rendered her almost invisible in a sea of similar attire, but it was only a matter of time until someone noticed the delicate figure underneath. She swore softly under her breath and cursed her brother for his poor choice in underground taverns.

Unlike proper taverns this was a den for sleazy business deals. The place was poorly lit by oil lamps, possibly to hide all the questionable activities taking place in all its nooks and crannies. Sure enough, as her eyes scanned the smoky interior she caught sight of a good few things that she would later need to scrub from her memory.

She was by no means the only woman here but the other women were all whores working the crowd – claimed women accompanied by their pimps. She craned her neck to look around the mountain of a man before her. He stood at least six-and-a-half feet tall, his hair shaggy and unkempt, his clothes reeking of stale sweat and reefer smoke. He was standing before a table where a game of pebbles was in progress, accompanied by much cheering and jibes. These places were always frequented by the dregs of society – fighters, thieves and murderers – men looking to make a deal, barter away a treasure, or in the case of her brother, collect information. Now because of events outside her control, she was forced to enter as well. Then she saw him, Oz, surrounded by four lethal-looking men, his face open and smiling as he nodded in agreement with something someone had said. She suppressed a pang of irritation. He may have looked like he was enjoying himself, but she knew her brother well enough to know the joviality was an act. She moved toward him and lost her footing, bumping a stool and face planting the mountain man's back.

“Watchit!” The man turned, glaring down at her. She could feel his eyes boring into the top of her head. Her heartbeat accelerated but she kept her own gaze fixed to the floor. She nodded in what she hoped was a placatory manner and moved to escape, but a meaty hand grabbed hold of her slender upper arm hauling back. “Whadya say, squirt? I can't hear ya.” His breath reeked of rotting dead things.

She gagged.

“What? Whadya say?”

“He’s choking on ya death breath, Muller,” one of the other men at the table provided, slapping his thigh and chuckling. “Toldya you shoulda taken Brun up on his offer of mouth paste.”

“Good barter,” another voice added. She assumed it was Brun himself.

Shit! True racked her brains, this was bad. Real bad. If she spoke they would know that she was a woman, if she didn’t speak they would make her. The plan had been to get in, find Oz and get the hell out and now...shit! She felt the big man’s grip tighten on her arm.

“That right, squirt? My breath offend ya, huh?”

She shook her head.

“What? Ya mute or summit?”

She hesitated before nodding.

“Aw, come on, Muller, let the guy go, we’s got a game to finish, and I’m winning. You can kiss ya cows and that shiny bag of coppers goodbye.”

His grip loosened and for a moment she thought she’d gotten away with it, but in the next second he had ripped the hood off her head.

“Dintya mama teach ya it’s rude not to look someone in the eyes when they’re takin to ya?”

She looked up startled and saw his eyes – all three of them - widen in shock and then narrow in calculation. She had pulled her sunny hair back into a tight knot at the base of her head, but there was no disguising her feminine features. His brutal face, broad meaty and broken, split in a wide smile showcasing yellow teeth painted in a thick coat of plaque. True’s veins filled with ice. *Keep it together, don’t lose it.* Her reflex had been to fight, fight the way Oz had taught her but common sense prevailed. Her hand slipped to the dagger hidden beneath her cloak just in case. Hopefully she wouldn’t have to use it. Oz was just a few feet away, all she needed to do was blag, to reach the bar and she was home free.

She stood tall, staring up at the behemoth haughtily before jerking her arm from his grasp. He was so surprised by the action that he let her go. “I apologise for bumping into you, but I’m here to see someone and I’m late. So if you’ll excuse me.” She inclined her head and began to walk away. No one made a move.

“Ya not going anywhere, whore. Consider yaself claimed!”

She felt fingers digging into her hair and squealed as she was dragged back and up close and personal to Muller’s surprisingly firm body.

“Get your filthy hands off me!” She kicked and squirmed, but the men just laughed.

“Ya lucky bastard! This one looks fresh. She’ll fetch a good price once you’ve had ya fun.”

“I’ll play ya for her!” Her eyes found the speaker - a short man whose voice she recognised as belonging to the man called Brun. He leered at her, his teeth surprisingly white in his weathered face. She’d have to get some of that mouth paste. A wild giggle climb up her throat. She swallowed it quickly. Claimed, she was being claimed!

She’d heard about this system, Oz had warned her of it. It was why he didn’t allow her anywhere near these places because despite the disgusting nature of most of the occupants, while in the Hole they were bound by a very strict set of rules. As far as these men were concerned she was just a lone female and Muller had claimed her.

One of Muller’s hands fumbled with her cloak, trying to reach for her breasts.

True lost it.

Bringing her heel down on his foot she pushed back, spun and brought the dagger up, pressing it to his thick throat hard enough to draw blood. “One more move and I’ll gut you like a pig.” Her voice was soft and lethal just the way Oz had taught her.

*“Don’t ever give in to emotion,” he had said. “If you’re calm they know you mean business.”*

Her legs were trembling, but she managed to keep her hands steady.

Muller had gone very still as had the men at the table.

“Oz!” she shouted.

The room went silent and then the crowd parted and her brother stepped through.

Tall and lithe, his hair cropped short, a scar running from his brow to the corner of his mouth, Oz was dangerous to look at on the best of days, but now as his eyes fell on the scene before him, the menace in them was a hot blade cutting through the crowd.

Oz's jaw tightened in suppressed fury. "I'd do as she says, Muller. She's known to get a little testy if she doesn't get her own way."

Muller gulped, his Adam's apple catching on the tip of the blade, yet he held his ground. "She came in alone. Rules are rules, Oz." He no longer sounded so certain.

Oz pursed his lips as if considering the statement and then shrugged. "Doesn't look like you have the upper hand anymore. If you want to claim rules then fine, take her if you can. I'm just gonna have to wait for you to leave here and kill you outside." There was no threat in the words, he uttered them as if he was commenting on the weather.

Muller's eyes narrowed to slits. True could almost hear the brute thinking as the rusty cogs in his fat head turned.

"Come on, Oz, rules is rules. Ya not gonna let a slice of cunt come between friends, are ya?" Brun smiled up at Oz in what True expected he believed to be a winning manner when, in reality, the action only served to make him look seriously unhinged.

Oz's gaze remained fixed on Muller. "This 'slice of cunt' is my sister."

The tension in the room suddenly racked up a notch. True could feel it thrumming against her temples and bouncing between her teeth.

"Shit, man! Why dintya say afore. Shit on a stick, Muller, his sister! Whatdya know." Brun looked seriously uncomfortable now and was shooting Muller danger eyes.

"So, Muller. *Do* you want to live?" Oz asked.

True held her breath, afraid that any sudden action would result in Muller making a stupid decision. Although she *could* gut a pig, she had never gutted a man. She knew that Oz could and would kill the man if *she* couldn't, yet she didn't want to be the cause of unnecessary bloodshed, not to mention that Oz needed his strength for the fights that paid. There was a long beat then Muller held up his hands in defeat and took a step back. True sagged and stumbled toward Oz who slung an arm around her shoulder.

"I'll see you around," he said to no one in particular before propelling her from the den.