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Genre: Fantasy

Judging by the way the sun had only just stopped beating down on them, Casey guessed it had to be around five in the afternoon. He and his traveling companion, giant but good-natured Bilal, had walked down seemingly every side street and back alley in this town looking for Casey's missing wife, Mackenzie. Now, they were absolutely exhausted.

Casey clapped Bilal on the back, not being able to reach his shoulder. "What do you say we have ourselves a break for the day?"

"Sounds good," Bilal said in his booming, cheerful voice. "I saw a tavern a few streets back that looks like it had seats and steins big enough to fit me. You can tell by the doorway."

Sure enough, as Casey discovered after following Bilal to a tavern called The Scorched Toad, the doorway was absolutely massive - wide enough for three or four men to walk in side by side.

A wall of noise hit the weary travelers as Bilal effortlessly pulled open the huge door and stepped aside to let Casey enter first. The place was packed, the air thick with smoke from lumpy tableside candles and carved wooden pipes dangling from the mouths of patrons.

Casey stuck close to Bilal, whose bulk was enough to carve a pathway through the raucous tavern. By the time they made it to the bar, Casey had already seen a crew of dwarves toasting what appeared to be a successful mission, given the pile of gems on their table, a handful of elves in glimmering silks with elaborate braids in their hair, and a good number of individuals whose race he had no hope of discerning.

After all, he'd only been in this world a few days now. It had been less than a week since he'd stumbled through a strange portal in an attempt to find his wife, who had apparently disappeared through the same portal. He'd learned plenty since his arrival here, most of it from Bilal, but he

still knew very little about this world and the beings who inhabited it. It was probably obvious that he wasn't exactly a local, since Casey could feel a number of eyes on him, and at least one person - a figure whose hood obscured their face in shadow - was watching him intently.

Casey did his best to keep his head down and not attract any more attention. All he wanted was a solid chair to sit down in after being on his feet all day, and a hearty mug of ale to quench his thirst. Bilal was about to order them some drinks when a commotion erupted near the center of the tavern, grabbing everyone's attention and making it impossible to communicate any kind of desire for a cool beverage. All heads, including the barkeep's, were turned toward the spot where a clump of revelers had gathered to cheer on some kind of competition.

Casey stood on his tiptoes and craned his neck, trying to get a glimpse of what was going on. All he could see was a mass of hoods, hats, horns, and heads. Fortunately, Bilal noticed his struggle and hoisted him up, letting Casey sit on his shoulder so he could see over the crowd.

The scene that met his eyes would have knocked Casey flat on his back had he not been held up by Bilal's strength. There was his wife, Mackenzie, at the center of the crowd, doing a shot of flaming liquor that appeared to be inside an odd looking toad. She tossed her head back and downed the fiery liquid, eliciting a roar of approval from the onlookers. Beside her, a large man, swaying like a drunk and wearing heavy leather armor, held a nearly identical toad in his hand. His toad was no longer on fire, but looked soot-streaked and bedraggled. The man's beard had scorch marks that were still letting off little wisps of smoke.

Mackenzie opened her mouth and blew out a small column of flame, then threw her head back and hollered in victory. The man at the table beside her pounded his fist on the table and shouted that his toad had been defective, blaming "last night's witch" for putting a curse on him. This had the crowd laughing and jeering while Mackenzie jumped on a table and spread her arms out in victory. A blonde dwarf with a thick, braided beard tossed her a golden coin, and she caught it in one smooth motion before leaping down to dip him low with a dramatic kiss.

Casey blinked, squinting his eyes as he tried to make sense of the scene. He could have sworn that was Mackenzie. He'd know her face anywhere: eyes the color of redwood bark in the rain, the bright flash of her wide smile, the way she tilted her chin when she laughed. And she was laughing now, looking much happier than Casey had seen her in a long while, ever since their daughter's sickness became terminal.

But how could it be Mackenzie? She wasn't acting like herself, for one - kissing other men, even as part of a show, was never something she'd do. Her hair was oddly longer than he'd last seen it, even though it had only been a few days since she disappeared. Her clothes looked well worn, and the sun-baked creases of her face were deeper. The biggest difference, though, was that the hollowness under her eyes was long gone.

It only took a split second for Casey's doubts to fade away as he realized that the woman carousing in a tavern from another world was, in fact, his wife. He clambered down from Bilial's shoulder and shoved his way through the crowd, desperate to get close to the woman he loved, the one he'd been searching for since the awful moment he'd discovered she was gone.

She was facing away from him now, but he could see her hands moving through the air as she playfully flipped the gold coin between her fingers. He noticed she still wore her wedding ring.

"Mackenzie!" Casey could hardly contain his joy, crying out her name as he reached out to take her by the shoulder and pull her into an embrace.

He did not, however, wind up with her in his arms. Instead, he found himself on the floor, his arm throbbing where he'd been grabbed and thrown down. Pointed at him were two arrows, one aimed directly at each of his eyes, as his wife glared down at him from behind her bow.