

This scene is from *Bringer of Chaos: Forged in Fire* by Kayelle Allen and is how the hero and heroine met.

Pietas didn't sleep with Joss until he was twenty, but he fell in love with her at first sight. He was sixteen. She was ageless.

The older woman had plucked him off the streets, fed and clothed him, given him a job and dignity.

That wasn't why he'd slept with her. It had taken several years to become her lover because he didn't know how to ask and he would have rather faced perma-death as a virgin than be shot down by that woman.

His father had woefully neglected his education about women. Joss told him later he'd been too young to know what he wanted and she'd promised herself she wouldn't make the first move.

This time, he knew how it was done, had no intention of waiting, and knew exactly what he wanted. *Her*.

As Pietas hiked beside Joss, he recalled their first meeting. He'd been standing in lines to join work crews. Being ignored, crowded out, shoved aside. For *days*. With no work history or experience, no identification and no sponsor, no one would hire him. That meant no money, no bed, and no meal tickets.

Worse, he had no uniform. Among the polished soldiers and officers, his thin shirt and ragged pants screamed civilian.

He'd been thrown out with nothing but the clothes he wore. The shredded and bloodstained cloth on his back announced to the world he'd been beaten. They must see him as a slacker who wouldn't work.

Weapons, though, those he had. Lucky for him, the boots he'd worn had a hidden sheath which held his best blade. Obtaining more weapons hadn't been difficult. He'd wagered his fighting skills to gain those. Nobody took a beating better. Pietas might not get in the first punch, but he *always* got back up. More times than the other guy was willing to, or could.

In his right front pocket, he had a scarred and scratched up Puma Slimline Ought Six with a full magazine of double-stings. Folded up in his left, a Primary Star flipper knife. The pearl handle had six deep notches that age had stained. Judging by the dark color, it'd been with blood. He'd wondered, but after he claimed it, he'd looked into the bleak eyes of the older Ultra who'd lost it and decided not to ask.

But a job? To quote Six, *nada*.

He refused to sell his weapons. Those would keep him alive and feed him. Criminals bought falsified documents. He'd either earn his keep or he'd starve. Once you sell your honor, nothing else has value.

The day had grown late and it had started raining. Pietas ducked into a covered alley and huddled near the wall for protection from the wind. Across the street, a food cart sold soured, day-old leavings from some posh restaurant in the nearby human district.

Ultras, the mightiest warriors the galaxy had ever seen, paid for scraps. Ate the garbage humans discarded. No way he'd do that.

Two days ago, he'd caught himself walking toward it, turned himself around and marched himself away.

A female soldier passing by slowed, looked him up and down, and then stopped. She wore an officer's uniform: simple black jacket, white blouse, black skirt, shiny shoes. One ribbon on

the left, dark blue with a single yellow stripe bordered by two red. *Gedunk*, Ultras called it. Throwaway. Given to everyone who enlisted during the last war. It meant nothing more than you were brave enough to sign your name.

"Hello, there. Are you looking for work?"

Pietas stood taller, finger-combing his hair. "Yes, ma'am."

She entered the alley, gesturing for him to accompany her.

He turned to follow, staggering with dizziness. No matter what kind of work she needed done, he would do it, hungry or not. Once they reached the alley's deepest end, she hiked up her skirt and held out paper money.

It took a moment for it to register what she expected him to do. He'd been around no women other than his mother and sister. Did people...did they *do that*...in an alley? Surely not. He must be mistaken. She needed something else and he had misunderstood.

When he hesitated, she waved the money at him. "I don't have all day, do you want this or not?"

People respect an honorable man. His mother's voice played in his memory. If they don't respect you, they have no honor in themselves.

"What's the matter?" She offered the money again. "Come on, pretty boy. This has to be more than you usually get."

Clenching his fists, he turned and strode away from her, not slowing until he reached the Ultra union hall. There, he dropped onto the ground in the drizzling rain. Arms on upraised knees, he rested his head on them, fighting to control his rising anger.

That's his offer of work?

What was wrong with people?

"Hello?" called a female voice.

"I am not for sale!" He swept back his wet hair and glared up at her.

"That's good to know." The woman who looked down at him was not the one who'd offered to buy him. This one wore a white dress uniform.

Pietas clambered to his feet. Faint with hunger, he braced himself against the wall.

Kind blue eyes seemed to look through him. Unlike his, her blond hair held tones of gold instead of white. A beam of sunshine sneaked through the clouds and wrapped her in blazing light. Seeing her, a man could believe in angels.

He stood straighter and pushed wet hair out of his face. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Are you Pietas?"

"I am." Was this someone who could hire him? Her left chest sported a brace of ribbons as wide as his hand, most related to weaponry. He must not look slipshod. He drew his sodden hair into a tail and tossed it over his shoulder. Wiping wet hands on wetter clothes, he held himself in as military-correct a posture as he could manage. "How do you know me, ma'am?"

"From your mother's description."

"My mother?" Homesickness arose in him so strong he staggered. He caught himself and straightened. He might be new to the greater Ultra world, but he hadn't been raised a fool. He kept his distance. "If you know her, what's her name? What's my father's name?"

"Helia and Mahikos. Your mother and I were created at the same time. She was scientist class and I was warrior, but we became friends. I introduced her to Mahikos. Thankfully, she doesn't hold that against me." A wry smile tilted her mouth. "She called me, said she had a son named Pietas and a daughter named Dessy. She said you and your father had a fight and she asked me to look for you. She sends her love."

Hearing her speak took him back to the warm safety of his mother's presence. "You're Joss Avaton."

"That's right."

How often had his mother spoken of this woman? And always with reverence.

"Mother talks about you all the time. She misses you. She said you were the sister she wished she had."

"Did she?" Love and amusement came through the aether, as warm and embracing as his mother's. "I'm glad to know that. I wish she'd told me about you before now."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. That isn't your fault."

"Is Mother here? Have you seen her?"

"No. But she was worried so I said I'd find you. I should have tried the work halls first."

Surely it wasn't wrong to fall in love so fast. Mother had said not to trust strange women, and from his experience with the one earlier, she'd been right. But this was Joss. Her friend and heart-sister.

Pietas took two steps toward her, checked himself.

When Joss offered her hand, he took it.

She clasped both of hers around his.

The moment she touched him he felt some inner part of him reach toward her, a sprout beneath the dark earth yearning for sun. He'd had no idea at the time she was using her gift of Clarity to help him see his path.

All he knew was he would survive. He could do anything. His life was not over. This amazing woman cared about him.

"Thank you for looking for me. Finding me."

"My pleasure." She slid her fingertips down his jaw, out to the dimple in his chin. "Let's get you off these streets, find you a meal, then bathed and into some dry clothes."

Forged in Fire – Bringer of Chaos

Marooned on an alien world. No food. No shelter. No weapons. Enemies aplenty. And the only one watching his back is his captor.

When traitors maroon the immortal king Pietas on an alien planet, there's no escape. Half a million of his followers were transported as well, asleep in their cryopods.

Pietas could create a new world, rule his people, and start completely over. Except there's no technology, no infrastructure, and every pod is set to open at the same time. Stacked atop one another in inoperable units, the pods will trap his fellow immortals in a gruesome cycle of repeated deaths, lodged within the very pods that should have offered sanctuary.

Unless Pietas can free them before that happens.

At his side is an irascible mortal who'd once been his jailer, and a fascinating woman who's the designer of their people's finest weapons—and telepathic. Just his luck, Pietas has been adopted by an entire tribe of know-it-all sentient panthers. But first, he must deal with the most dysfunctional family in the history of forever...

#SciFi #SpaceOpera

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