

Chapter 842

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Her grip on the spear slipped and I propelled it somewhere behind me. Constanza pulled off a reverse summersaulted while drawing her short blade. A really nice move. Unfortunately, it moved her away from the chick with the spear, who hesitated again. This time she took the thrown axe straight to the head-back end impacting. I didn't want to kill her. *www.noventa.com*

Constanza anticipated my next action. It came down to position, distance, and stride length and they all favored me. We raced to the downed companion. My left-handed axes flat side slammed into her forehead, rendering her unconscious, and I kicked her spear off the mat-out of bounds. I slowly backed away from Constanza and readied my second spare axe.

"Retire from the field," I panted. I was physically failing fast.

"Why should I?" Constanza glared. "You are about to fall over."

"Aya won't let me fall," I stared her down.

"You couldn't beat me with a companion and a spear, Constanza. Do you really think a shield and sword will work any better."

"Let's find out," she charged. I really needed the short breather to recover somewhat.

The short Amazon blade was an excellent close-in weapon. I never let her get close enough to use it. Tandem axes allowed me to shred her shield while keeping her at arm's length. My axe bit into her upper left arm right above the elbow. Constanza hissed instead of screaming. She did stagger back. I hopped back three steps, knelt and placed my axes on the mat at my side.

"No!" Constanza howled. She came at me while I remained still. Her hand drew back for a killing thrust. I waited. Sparing my life didn't stop her. The looks of her fellow Amazons held back her wrath. They wouldn't stop her from slaughtering me, but that was exactly what it was—a butchery. *www.dovell.com.co*

Two things occurred to me: Aya was showing remarkably better control today than on Saturday, and I figured out a way to sleep with Buffy tonight. Being killed? Nah, worry about the things you have control over.

"Constanza, he was instructing me," Oneida stood up.

She took up Constanza's discarded spear and stepped toward us. What disturbed the gathering was how Oneida held it—sidewise, not ready for combat.

"You do not intimidate me, Oneida," Constanza growled.

"You misunderstand," Oneida intoned. "I would do this out of shame and despair."

"I will shear my hair, burn it and take myself to the cliffs to die childless," she continued. "I leave whatever contempt you might possess for me to be conveyed to my House when they learn your actions have killed one of their last breeding females. The death of some male will not concern them. My death will. The shame I bear for killing a teacher will certainly interest many of our people."

"You wouldn't dare," Constanza scoffed. The spear dropped. Fuck that noise. I snatched the last quarter of the shaft before it hit the ground. No one seemed to understand what to do about that. Apparently my reaction was unique.

"Yay!" Aya cheered. "He's the best Daddy ever," she loudly announced to the crowd.

"Oneida, my apology, but Katrina has put her faith in me and the New Directive," I ad libbed. "I am here to aid the recovery of your people, not diminish them. For the sake of Katrina's honor, please reconsider."

"Cá el Nyilas," Oneida smiled sadly, "this is not a pledge that can be retracted."

"Ah... doesn't it only take effect when the weapon hits the ground?" I struggled. "I mean, otherwise dropping the weapon would be pointless—right?" I repeat, apparently this had never come up before. "This is kind of awkward. Can someone take this?" I meant the spear. I was worn to the bone and holding a long spear from one end, with one hand.

Quickly calls went out to Hayden as well as a few department heads.

"Constanza," one of the Amazons spoke up.

"If you attack the male, you will be actively sealing Oneida's Death Pledge. Far fewer of us will understand that."

"How is it that you are so damn lucky?" Constanza growled at me.

"You are asking this of a man, on his knees before you with your sword at his throat?" I countered. "Lucky isn't you sparing my life. Lucky is me never having heard of this place—Except for Aya. She makes the rest of this hellish experience worthwhile."

"Best Daddy ever," Aya chirped.

"Hayden is on her way," a different Amazon called out. Already a passel of newcomers were swarming the scene. Truly curious was the group looking mournfully at Oneida. One stepped forward.

"Male, do you need something? Water?" she asked. I gave it some thought.

"Could you sing?" I requested. "A nice soothing song of hope would be nice." Blink. Like all panicked moments, nothing came to mind for several seconds. Oneida's people rapidly bantered about some names. *www.noventa.com*

then the questioner began singing. By the third song I was crying and shaking like a leaf. Constanza had fallen back enough to get her arm tended to.

Twice Aya had tried to get me, lending me the tiniest bit more strength. Wisely, her minder kept her away from the possible conflict. There was a whole different level of commotion when Hayden arrived this time.

"To bear a weapon in my presence is Death, Cáel," Hayden stated.

"I apologize for being a disappointing Male," I grunted. "Pass on my regrets to Katrina."

"Drop the weapon and you will be spared. You will only be beaten," Hayden gave a hint of a smile.

"If I drop it, she dies," I hissed. The ache in my right arm was exceeding that in my left leg.

"I'm afraid I will have to decline," I concluded.

"If I kill you, the spear will drop and she'll die anyway," Hayden pointed out.

"Sucks to be both of us, I guess," I gasped.

"Oneida, step on the spear. Push it down," Hayden ordered. Hush. Oneida raised her foot.

"You are stepping in the wrong place," I huffed. She looked at me. My eyes flashed to the short side between my grip and my side.

"Do you really think you can hold it up?" she questioned.

"I know I'll fail if you step anywhere else," I tried to grin.

"No matter what happens, you will die," she murmured.

"Not my chief concern right now," I grunted. "Hurry." Oneida put her foot on the short end.

"It will help your balance if you place a hand on his shoulder," Hayden noted. We both flashed Hayden a shocked look.

Oneida stepped on the spear. It trembled and sunk down, barely millimeters off the

mat. Her hand came to rest on the crux of my neck and shoulder. I felt my body about to tip over. I was at my limit. I almost missed the gasps whispering around the assembly. Oneida had her body off the ground. Hayden lowered herself so that she could witness there was a distance between the spear and the earth.

"The spirits have not heard your pledge, Oneida," Hayden declared as she regained her regal posture. "I suggest you weigh your words with greater care in the future. Retrieve your spear." She turned and started to leave the gym. Oneida dismounted and snatched up her spear.

"What of the male?" one of the spectators inquired. I didn't care. I had fallen on my back.

"At a moment of such great spiritual significance—the ancestral rejection of a Death Pledge, the action of any one male does not concern me," Hayden remarked coldly. It wasn't praise. It was a "don't fuck with him". Around me a cultural conundrum was taking place. Not only could Oneida's house not thank me because I was a male, they couldn't thank me because, by

Hayden's decree, there was no life to be saved.

Oneida bent over me on one knee.

"You really shouldn't be so eager to toss your life away, Cáel," she smiled warmly. I was essentially immobile. *www.noventa.com.co*

"You have the most gorgeous blue-grey eyes," I moaned.

"You are thinking about that at a time like this?" she snorted. Her relatives were shockingly amused as well.

"No time like the present. Besides, in 75 days you can all go out to some nature preserve and hunt me down with non-lethal weapons. Great way to spend a weekend."

I heard an authoritative cough. I looked up from my still prone position to see Katrina.

"Cancel that Oneida. I'm about to get relocated to Antarctica where I'll be tasked with teaching penguins how to arm wrestle," I sighed.

"Cáel, why do you think I'd be so nice to you

after all the hell you cause me on a daily basis?" Katrina looked all menacing.

"You recall how much I like winter sports?" I pleaded. "Hey—wait. I was good on Friday. Wasn't I good on Friday?"

"I don't recall you having a good day yet, but I may double check. Can you stand?" Katrina asked.

"Is that a question, or veiled order?" I muttered. "If the former—no. If that latter, I'll die trying." Using a combination of my right leg and left arm, I managed to struggle my way upright. By that time, Aya had circled the practice mat and was at Katrina's side.

"He was very brave," Aya insisted. One of Oneida's senior women coughed.

"Nothing happened so nothing has changed," Katrina stated. It was a lie and both sides knew it. It was the whole loyalty/martial valor thing. Inside their closed little minds a balancing act had taken place—my worthlessness as a male against Oneida's value to her people. Aya was easy to discount as she was of Katrina's house.

I had no clue who Oneida was yet still rallied to her when she desperately needed help—Hayden's obfuscation be damned. Yeah, Oneida had been young and foolish. Her challenge had been given to make Constanza back off. When Constanza called her bluff, pride took over. Oneida had been foolhardy and overly status conscious. Constanza had played Russian roulette with their House's future and almost won.

She'd be wise to avoid darkened corridors for the next few weeks too. There was not only Oneida's house but the houses allied to it to worry about despite Hayden's expunging of the official record. For me, it was time to be dragged over to my cute doctor friend. I had been slashed twice by the spears during my jump and not noticed it—adrenaline no doubt.