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"Do these two count as 'public'?" Buffy snarled. She meant Javiera and Nicole. Pratt was in another car and the only others with us were Rachel and me. This was going to hurt.

"No," I sighed. WHAM! The Charlie Horse from Hell!

"That's why you have bodyguards, you jerk," Buffy nearly cried.

"Ah... we were with him," Rachel tapped Buffy's upper arm.

"Oh." Long pause. "I... I apologize," Buffy said sheepishly. "I had no idea you were getting smarter." That was probably the best apology I was going to get. It was still my fault.

"You do it out of love, Buffy," I rubbed my arm. Buffy gave me a heartbreaking smile.

"Was that domestic violence, or assault?" Javiera snarled. "Neither one is allowable under Illinois law."

"It is a Human Resources Team-building tool," I lied. "In some places it is called Obedience Training, or Negative Reinforcement."

"I have never seen another human being take a beating like Cael can," Rachel complimented me.

He is also incredible in the bed room," Buffy added on. Javier didn't know what to make of the menagerie of 'not-normal' women who hung around me. She locked eyes with Buffy.

"I mean REALLY fantastic," Buffy licked her lips. Nicole nodded in agreement.

"I can't use any of this," Javiera muttered after several minute of silence. "It is all a type of shared delusion... with fourteen dead bodies attached to it."

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"Ah, the guy with both femoral arteries shot out made it? Whoa, we've got some top notch surgeons in this city," I nodded.

her that poor Horace of the Burnham PD had done the deeds was pointless.

my life and had talked to me for less than ten minutes. She excelled at her craft - punishing lawbreakers.

"I conclude you know the name of the three dead women and the one living one," she began, "because we haven't a clue who they really are. Their cover identities aren't perfect. We simply can't get anything about them behind the fallacy of their existence." She waited.

"If you can help us put the wounded woman in some sort of shared protective custody, I can probably 'suggest' that she be more cooperative," I counter-offered. Rachel nodded.

"The eight other bodies at the house..." Javiera shook her head. "Four were dead and by that I mean reported dead from four to nine years ago. The rest - Hell, they were all twisted fucking savages. Every one of them had Interpol warrants out for them, for questioning. No accusations seemed to stick to them: misplaced evidence, dead witnesses and falsified death certificates."

"Does this mean anything to you?" Javiera paused to get some more information.

"Yes. Reference the men running for their lives," I nodded.

"Cáel?" Rachel cautioned me. "This is not something you can rush into."

"Actually, it was you who clued me in, Rachel," I looked at her.

"Given an opportunity to have only one gun of a given type, would you choose one you knew intimately, or a totally random one?" was my rhetorical question. Professionals trained with a large variety of weapons, yet every Amazon I had met had a preferred weapon; one that if they could have it with them, they would.

"The Zastava M2," Rachel nodded.

"It is not used in too many places and only Peru in this hemisphere. Someone really loved that gun - enough to bring it from whatever killing field where he was currently employed to my home," I said. "Since the other likely culprit passed on a chance to kill me last night, I am sure enough to pick a fight."

(Holy Cross)

It had to be odd in so many ways for the people who knew Dad and, to a lesser extent, me. They gathered by the graveside. It wasn't much. Dad had been cremated as had Mom. They had these small granite markers - no headstones for them. They had been so much in love. All they wanted is to be laid to rest, side by side. Mom had insisted on cremation. I thought I knew why, but it had done no good.

The true oddity was obvious. The islet of normalcy was the small funerary party with me. My Aunt - my Father's Sister - was here and somewhat in shock. She and Dad hadn't been close... so much unsaid. When my Grandparents died, Dad was only nineteen and Stella was sixteen. Stella's lifelong friend had moved to Maryland a few months previously.

Stella reached out to her friend, her friend's parents talked to Dad and Stella went to off to be a mariner. Seeing her occasionally as I was growing up was the extent of our relationship. The priest did his thing. I wondered what Christ thought of this mystic fur ball that was the amalgam of my life. My hope was that he was quietly urging me to do the right thing.

The Padre finished, the co-workers and neighbors came by to give their condolences and then ran the gauntlet. The gauntlet? Yes, the herd of Amazons, O'Shea kin and four other clumps of people who I didn't know, yet undoubtedly would soon. Selena and Miyako were present along with a third female who looked luscious in a burqa-shaped covering and a diaphanous veil. Javiera, Pratt and Nicole were somewhat out of place with their lack of arrogant lethality.

A limo driver came to take Stella away.

"I have some issues to deal with, Aunt Stella," I comforted her. "Vér a vér." It had been ages since she'd heard Hungarian so she wasn't sure what I meant, but she knew it was bad. One of my O'Shea aunts was coming my way until the menace of the closing Amazons halted her.

The others had no clue what they were about to behold. I doubt outsiders had ever been privileged to witness anything like it. This was a declaration; it was my mission statement. Ishara did not hide. I took off my coat, folded it, placed it on the damp grass then knelt on it. Buffy stepped up with the bowl of incense and followed my 'coat to keep your knees clean' stunt, sitting perpendicular on my right.

Helena followed suit on my left, placing a shroud over my head and leaned over the bowl. Gamble number one: the incense lit up instantly. Gamble number two: it really did burn my eyes - no more Desiree slapping me around. I was sure she'd be heartbroken. Gamble number three: while using my nifty little Amazon blade to gather my tears, I managed not to cut myself.

The inductees were much more impressed when they realized what I was doing under my head covering. The next step had me pulling back the shroud, standing up, and striding over the burning bowl of incense. Helena called out the first name. The lady didn't need any prodding. The Amazon walked over to my coat and knelt.

Helena wrote down her name and handed her the slip of paper. My Keeper motioned to the bowl. The first applicant placed her named slip of paper on the embers. The simple message flashed up and was consumed. That was unlooked for. I declared her old self dead. With my tears, I opened her eyes to our ancestral history and with blood, I brought her into our future.

She had entered House Ishara. She wasn't the only one crying either. What Rachel and her team thought was unknown to me. They were being hyper-vigilant. Esmeralda kept stealing glances our way. Things went along with joyous solemnity until the fourteenth woman, Alicia, knelt before me. Helena handed the paper over, the Amazon dropped it on the incense and nothing happened.

I was about to move on to the next part of the ritual when I caught sight of that. Buffy, Helena and the lady were all staring at the offending bit of tinder. I bent over and, with my index finger, pushed it into the embers. Nothing - no heat, or fiery consumption. I put some spit on my finger and pushed again. This time it burned me. The paper was fine. Damn it...

'Come on Ishara!' I screamed mentally. 'Can't I have a simple bit of theater without you mangling someone's dreams?' There was no supernatural scolding, or retort.

"Alicia, Ishara believes you have not yet finished your walk outside our House," I consoled the woman - Alicia Holt. As she stood up, faced gripped with disbelief, Buffy rose and took her away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alicia shoot me a poisonous look. Buffy had anticipated this and was making sure the woman didn't make a scene. The last six women were even more nervous than the previous thirteen. Thankfully, Ishara was accepting of the remainder and we all transited to the group celebratory hug.

Act one has passed safely, Act two had an unexpected bump and here came round three. The 'dignitaries' started swooping in. Outside of the O'Shea's, none of the guests wanted to have another group behind them, or hemming in them. Two of the groups held back and since one was composed entirely of Asians, I was betting the other group was the Egyptian Rite.

One of my now four aunts came forward. My small crowd of Isharans gave her barely enough room to approach the grave. She placed a green rose upon my Mother's small marble marker. I wondered what my Mother would have thought of her sisters finally finding her... green rose? Who made green... probably the same sick son of a bitch who made female clones of himself?

The other three followed suit, placing the roses in a radiating sunburst on the small piece of marble. Through the wall of Illuminati security came... the Missing Link. Oh My God. I had heard of V-chested males, but this was insane. I swear his upper arms were as big as my thighs. The problem was the hips and legs of the body didn't match-up to the torso, arms, neck (or lack thereof) and shoulders.

The upper, steroid-addicted half belonged to a two meter tall giant. The lower half belonged to, maybe, a subpar man of a meter and a half This monster didn't have a receding hairline (actually, he did); he had a receding forehead. In homo-sapiens, if you roll a marble off their heads, it drops and hits the eyebrows. On this guy, it was a gentle ski-slope all the way down