

942

"Touché," she acknowledged my above average mental status. Next came a list of names. It took me a few seconds to focus on them.

"Oh, what happened to them?" I inquired.

"What makes you think anything happened to these people?" she parried.

"Oh, I'm betting Javiera gave you a list of names and there is only person left alive out of that group," I felt introspective. "I wonder where Anima is hiding."

"What happened to those people?" she persisted.

"I don't know. I've been napping for the past week, but I'm betting they all met nasty ends," I told her.

"Why were these people murdered?"

"Were they murdered, or are they merely deceased? See, if I give you my opinion, you will have to pursue that line of inquiry which will only hurt one person who has already been hurt enough and save somebody who shouldn't be saved," I explained.

"Why do you get to determine who gets saved?" Virginia pressed.

"As opposed to who? You and Javiera? That's laughable. Why don't you go down the net worth of the families of those unfortunate corpses, then tell me how balanced your justice system would be? Please understand, I don't hold you and your profession in contempt," I met her hardening gaze.

"To prove to me that I'm wrong, all you have to do is honestly tell me that high-priced lawyers, legions of specialists that confuse juries and enormous bank accounts to keep the appeals going indefinitely while the guilty roam about on bail equates to the legal process working fairly and impartially," I reposted.

"That's not the same thing as..." she got out before the door opened and several people traipsed in, including three SD personnel. Last came Troika and she was coldly furious. "I was promised more time with Mr. Nyilas," Virginia protested. She was ignored.

"Ishara, you are coming with us," Troika snapped.

To be fair, the medical attendant wasn't overly torturous as she pulled out the muscle stimulatory aids and applied the bandages. It still sucked. That was ameliorated somewhat by the read I was getting of Troika. I waited for the last restraint to be removed before speaking.

"I refuse to go with you," I stated firmly even as I sat up. See, I needed something to happen that was beyond my ability to obtain.

"Take him," Troika directed two of the SD babes. My captors had gone out of their way to make sure these Amazons weren't ladies I knew.

"Stop," I declared with authorities. "You cannot touch me against my will as that violates Hayden's ban on me entering blood feuds and wrangling me anywhere against my will constitutes a blood feud in Ishara's eyes."

"It is Hayden's order," Troika snapped.

"Has she lifted the ban? If not, these ladies will be breaking Hayden's decree."

Troika harrumphed then gave Hayden a call. For the purpose of this meeting, the ban was lifted. That was what I needed so off I went. I waited until we got in the elevator and were heading up before launching my strike.

Pamela would have been so proud. If Troika had given me an ounce of dignity, I couldn't have pulled it off. As it was, the first stab took her just under the left eye, the second punched through her cheek and spitted her tongue. The third nearly severed her upper lip and then the SD were on me.*w.nóve(w)stM.COm*

"Blood Feud!" I screamed. "You stole from me!" Troika was about to come back at me, knife in hand. One of the SD got in the way. What I had done was illegal - blood feuds needed to be approved... except for one tidbit of law Pamela taught me and it was about to come into play.

"You cannot wound him while he is in our custody, Troika of Šauška," the Amazon protested.

Troika gargled something through the ruin of the left side of her face.

"I will peel off a meter of your flesh for this insult," she managed to oozingly communicate before we reached the top floor. For my part...

"Unhand me."

They didn't.

"Unhand me, or am I no longer Head of House Ishara."

"Do not attack her," the SD leader stated.

"Would you care to explain to me why you are giving me that order?" I mused.

"Please, Ishara," the woman ground out. "Do not attack Troika of House Šauška."*ŴWw.NóV£1(w)Ormm.£Om*

"Very well. I pledge that from this point until the end of this meeting, I will only act against Troika in my own defense," I promised. "Now give me your sidearm."

"You may not bear a weapon in Hayden's presence," the SD leader reminded me.

"I asked for your weapon, not your legal advice," I insisted. Another shot of bigotry.

"I will not. You are not acting rationally," she stated. Troika snorted. That was okay, because I saw an excellent substitute close by. My deviation from the group was so casual, they barely noticed. I wasn't making a fast break to nowhere.

I walked up to the wall and, Vranus be praised, yanked one of a pair of matching battle axes off the wall. Support studs went flying. Like all weapons in Havenstone, this one was real. The SD closed ranks, boxing me in.

"You may not bear a weapon in Hayden's presence," the SD leader was at the end of her patience with me.

"You are incorrect," I glowered. "There are two occasions I may bear a weapon in proximity to the High Priestess. One is in defense of her person. I am not here to defend her." Harder than any kick to the head - they paled then the anger set in.

"How dare you?" the SD leader seethed.

"The proof of the necessity of my action stands before me right now; an Amazon defying a House, a First Ancestor and a Goddess on her own initiative and in defiance of everything her ancestors fought, bled and died for," I glared.

"Give me the axe," the leader insisted.

"No. You will have to fight me for it," I made my stand. She was about to do just that when one of the others spoke. Tears were slowly eking a way down that one's cheeks.

"Step away from Ishara, or I will kill you," she told her leader. "You are wrong and Ishara is right though it sickens me to admit it."

To add to the macabre, one SD trooper aimed at my 'savior' and the fourth aimed at the third. Civil war.

"You know what he plans to do," the leader stated.

"It is not our place," the second Amazon insisted. "I cannot face my ancestors letting this abomination pass."

"He is the abomination," the leader persisted.

"No. The abomination is any full-blooded not of the Council deciding what the Council will and will not do. We now know there were once male Amazons. By the will of our ancestors it was so. Never before have we, the elite of the Host, acted as if we knew better than they," the second Amazon said with righteous conviction.

"Go," the leader mumbled softly. The woman on the verge of killing her was most likely a close and trusted friend. Grappling with that sudden rift between sisters was occupying her mind at that moment, not my escape. I moved around her, keeping out of the line of fire as best I could and went with Troika to Hayden's portal. I didn't thank the woman.

That would have been insulting because what she did, she did for her people and the hundred thousand that had come before her. Finally we rolled out the Old Kingdom Hittite/Amazon.

"See what you have done," Troika hissed. I didn't bother to reply. I was sure, dressed in light green scrubs, I cut a valiant and imposing figure.

"Cáel Ishara, what took you so..." and then Hayden saw it. For a second, St. Marie almost cut me off. Katrina stood up. She wanted to stop me. In her mind, Hayden was one of our allies, but, as I had told her, she (Katrina) didn't get it either. Madi, Beyoncé, Fatima and Krasimira were also present and now highly disturbed*wWw.NóV£1ŴO(+)m.©OM*

"Take yourself to the cliffs," I announced clearly as I dropped the axe on Hayden's desk. She had stood at my final approach and bore hate my way. "The Goddess Ishara rejects you and has taken herself from the Temple. House Ishara has lost faith in you. Your insults are lengthy and I do not feel like wasting any more time with you."

"How dare you?" Hayden spat. "All the times I have shielded you and this is how you repay me? You were a mistake from the beginning."

"A mistake we can rectify right now," Fatima snarled. She rose up and drew her knife.

"Excuse me, but didn't we gather here for a different purpose?" Krasimira mused softly.*(w)ŴWw.NóV£1ŴO(w)rm.COm*

"Kill him and end the curse," Madi growled.

"Oh... in that case can you kill me first?" Krasimira sighed. "I see no need to postpone the continuation of my chat with my mother." At Krasimira's age, her mother was most likely dead.

"Krasimira, you cannot defend him!" Fatima wailed.

"Defend him? I am not standing in your way, Fatima. I do know that the statue of Ishara fractured and fell into two pieces in the Temple," she related - certainly retelling information they already had. "House by house, we see nothing but the back of those who fought before us. Five of my augurs had shorn their hair and thrown themselves into the fire. I can do nothing except report what I have witnessed.

I cannot appeal to Ishara to lift her curse. I hope one of you can because if you can't and you kill her CLEARLY designated heir we shall all go down to ignoble ends," the Keeper of Records remained serenely poised as she delivered her doom-laden news. "By the way, Troika, what happened to your face?"

"He stabbed me," Troika burred. "Let me kill the bastard." I half-turned. St. Marie interposed herself between the two of us.

"Cáel, lift the curse," St. Marie demanded.

"Lift your damn curse," Fatima and Madi chimed in.

"Cáel, lift the curse and then we can discuss things," Hayden tried and failed to sound humble.

"If every woman in this rooms fatally slits their own throats in the next fifteen seconds, I'll plead to Ishara to lift the curse," I said. There wasn't a headlong rush to commit suicide. The only one so inclined was Krasimira. I motioned her to stop.