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"Well, I think we are done here. I have to go and try and cobble my life back together. You ladies have fun pulling off your 'Thelma and Louise' final act while I figure out some way for House Ishara to survive the upcoming war," I shrugged. Of course they didn't let me leave. Fatima on one side, the Golden Mare in the middle and Troika on the other. She had to be in a shitload of pain.

"Lift the curse. If we are going to war, we need to be whole," St. Marie urged me.

"No."

"Why should I stop these two from killing you right now?" she glared@rww.11Ovetw@rm.com

"Because he is an Amazon," Krasimira muttered. "You should need no better reason.

Ah... this is why we must die... thank you Cael Ishara," she concluded. "A terrible sadness has gripped our people for as long as I have been Keeper. I found it lurking in the shadowy corners of my office when I was elevated. I now imagine it haunted my predecessors for some time as well. At least I will pass on knowing the name of our assassin."

"The assassin is right here," Fatima spewed her hate at me.

"You are correct," Krasimira chuckled. "The assassin is indeed in this room. Its name is Amazon. I need a moment, please." She stood and walked to the doors. What she wanted didn't take long at all. "Gun," we heard her request. The magazine fell to the ground. The sole bullet did not follow.

Krasimira walked tenderly into the office as if every step tore like fishhooks at her flesh.

"Take yourself to the cliffs, Hayden," Krasimira intoned as the one-shot pistol fell on Hayden's desk. "I no longer know you." Krasimira took in the whole room. "We show anger when we should show humility.

We are proud of our shame. We are arrogant of our weaknesses. We have heaped insult upon insult on our ancestors yet are now aghast that they turn away from us," she shook her head. Her gaze settled on St. Marie. "I am not one warrior alone, but one of a thousand warriors who have fought before me"... isn't that part of the oath of every member of the Security Detail swears?"

Katrina fell to her knees.

"Please Cael. Please save us," she begged me. Something was very wrong with that.

"How dare you?" Fatima howled at Katrina. Instead of being ashamed, Katrina's supplicant's face turned first into a grim grin, then one of gallows laughter.

"And that is why we are all going to die," Katrina declared as she stood once more. "We are too proud to ask a man for help. We know what Ishara's curse is doing to us. You clearly don't care. You would rather die than admit that our damn ANCESTORS have placed a male here and now. Open your eyes!" she nearly screamed. "They sent a MAN for a reason - to open our eyes before we kill ourselves."

You scream 'what gives him the right?' Ishara gives him the right. Nothing else matters. What I am asking you is 'what gives you the right to reject Ishara?' because that is what we have done. How could she make her will any more plainly obvious to us? Cael has never stopped trying to save us and you two want to gut him like a lamb, or (to St. Marie) break his body.

Hayden, I will not place my rejection upon your desk. You have been as much a mother to me as my actual birth-mother. I love you. Since we first met, I have only wanted to make you proud of me and serve your will. What has gone wrong? How have we come to this? You were the one who told me we had to find a way to save our race... and now, when it stares us in the face...

Why can't we accept it? How have I failed you, Hayden? What did I do wrong to not prepare you for this moment? It was my duty to keep you informed in all things and I can find nothing to excuse my failure," Katrina had gone from disappointed to heart-broken. Katrina prized herself on being able to stay ahead of any crisis.

Here, at her greatest challenge, she hadn't been able to help her friend and mentor survive this calamity. I imagine that was the final blow for Hayden. Katrina had risen up through the Havenstone system as Hayden's protégé and had given Hayden her all.wor(w).1(c)veLw@rm.com

"Until this moment, I have never considered myself a coward," Hayden murmured.www.10p(e)Lwo(r)11.co@

"You are blameless Katrina. In the final analysis, I sacrificed my courage for my life. And now I have neither. I can regain my courage here at the end and be true to the duties I was given," Hayden's resolve strengthened with each word. She took out a piece of paper and created a list. "St. Marie, on this list are traitors to the Host. Gather these Amazons and prepare them to challenge my accusation,"

St. Marie stepped forward, took the paper and quickly read it.

"Hayden, this includes a third of the Council!" she gasped.

"I am well aware of who I have accused. Please see to my final command, old friend," Hayden sighed. I could see a terrible weight lifted from her - the cliffs.

"Final..." St. Marie and Katrina groaned.

"Yes. I will dine tonight with my family, then take myself to the cliffs with the dawn. I feel that will be a good end for me," Hayden mused. "Will Ishara forgive me, Cael?"

"No Hayden. It is not her way, but I will. There will be a place in Ishara's halls for you. I pledge you that," I suddenly felt a sorrowful pit in my stomach.

Into that romantically tragic scene, Krasimira snorted with amusement. Eyes turned to her. Hayden shook her head, held up a hand to forestall the Keeper until she rounded the desk and left her office for the last time.

"Who is on the list?" Fatima stormed up to the Golden Mare and looked over the list.

"I am on this. So are you Troika," Fatima growled. "This is insane. We'll destroy Hayden over this... this... piece of filth."

"I don't care if I'm on it, or not," Madi seethed. "I'm with you."

"There is a small manner of little known law you may wish to be aware of," Krasimira chuckled.

"The ruling of an honorably deceased High Priestess may not be challenged."

"You two are under arrest," St. Marie whipped out her pistol. Being with the SD, she was allowed to be fully armed in the High Priestess's presence.

"What do you mean?" Fatima looked to Krasimira.

"Cael has killed you all and he didn't even mean to," Krasimira gave a dry chuckle. "By his act of kindness to Hayden, which I now think Hayden was counting on, our former High Priestess goes to an honorable death - taken into the Halls of Ishara in death. Unable to challenge Hayden's decree, you are all going to be executed and your names stricken from the rolls.

You will wander aimlessly for all eternity while Hayden will live in the company of her sisters thanks to a man and his love for someone who was clearly his enemy," Krasimira kept snorting at the dark comedy. "Your sole avenue of spiritual survival lies with a man you tried to kill mere moments ago."

"This is insane," Troika shouted and came at me. The room exploded with the sonic resonance of a pistol firing. I may have imagined it, but it appeared the bullet took Troika at the juncture of the right eyebrow, nose ridge and right eye. Whatever the entry point, the .45 ACP slug painted the wall behind her with her grey matter. St. Marie turned quickly on Fatima.

"Troika wasn't on the Council, so I could kill her for attempting to murder someone who was. I can't kill you immediately, but please believe I will put a bullet where it hurts if you don't do exactly what I say," the Golden Mare menaced. The debate was truncated by the four Security Detail ladies storming the room.

Orders were dispensed and the wheels of Amazon society burst into motion. A side effect of my stunt was I had put St. Marie in charge until the full Council could meet to create some sort of Regency Council to pilot the ship. There was zip gratitude aimed my way on her part and I didn't blame her one bit. I was headed out before things got too organized.

I wanted some 'me' time.

"Cael Ishara, we have not resolved the matter that brought us to this disaster," St. Marie growled. I was at the door. I looked over my shoulder at the Golden Mare, turned back toward freedom and saw Pamela.

"Shoot me," I told Pamela. I was grappling with the horror of what I had just said when I returned to the darkness. MOTHER-FUCKER! I hate women!

(Mutter... mutter... mutter)

I became aware of my hazy, fugue-like dream state. Sadly, it was familiar and undoubtedly going to become even more familiar while I lived.

"Upset with me, Cael?" she asked.

"You had me tell my friend to shoot me... yeah, Ishara, I'm a little cranky right now."

"The question was rhetorical. I can read your mind," the Goddess snorted.

"What happened to me?"

"She bounced a bullet off your skull. You'll be okay. I am the Goddess of Medicine after all," she reminded me.

"From an era when trepanning was popular. Color me unimpressed. Oh... and I apologize."

"You will get me the fortune cookie next time," she lifted. Something crucial occurred to me.

"Hey! I haven't had sex in a week. That hasn't happened to me in four years."

"I don't think you are ready for that stage of our relationship yet," she tickled my nose.

"Wait... did you just put me in the Friend Zone?" More laughter. "Seriously," I sighed. "Hayden?"

"I forgive you," she soothed me.

"Forgive me? I killed her. That is not okay. Wasn't..."

"No, my Cael. We are a blood-thirsty society and the ultimate mistakes are answered with the ultimate punishments. I cannot fully express my pride in you for what you did, even in opposition to my will."

There was a pause in our relationship and conversation. I thought she sensed my turmoil and aided me in finding some level of peace. With her kind of entity, I would never be sure.

"What did Carrig do to me?" I asked.

"I don't know." That was not what I expect. Evasion - yes. The ugly truth - no.

"I find the concept of an omniscient, omnipotent deity to be self-defeating," she mused.

"Sort of negates the whole Free Will thing," I banteredsw(e)w.11@VeLWorm.0pM

"Besides, what is the point of beseeching a being that already knows what's going to happen to you and would have saved you if that is what they wanted?"

"Yeah," I groaned sarcastically. "I much prefer the divine ones who randomly fuck with your life because they can, rarely provide useful information and won't even put out on the second date."