

947

Never judge a friend by what they give, but of how much of themselves they give

Editing magic performed by KJ24 and Shyqash, plus contributions by the regular gang of brigands and neer-do-wells

There is a bit of mangling of the Iliad going on. My apologies to Homer and the countless singers before him who carried the Iliad down through the dark centuries until the Greeks figured out how writing works

(From the floor of Katrina's office)

First thoughts... I was on the floor where I had fallen, surrounded and being manhandled in the tenderest way. That was a romantic means of relating to my mummification. Those little Band-Aids that had been applied when I woke up from my coma had failed the 'Câel is a Smeckle-head' test.

All the crud they had pumped into my system and amperage they had channeled through my muscles was not the same as eating and exercise. Having a sexual romp with two ladies? My Goddess made plans for my body that my caloric bank account couldn't afford, thus me passing out. Unlike my time with Miyako and Estere, I had a feeling my two sofa-buddies were ovulating.

Fatherhood was on the way. How my infant would survive the continuous poisonous assault on the augur's lymphatic system was beyond me. Her guardian... let's just say I dealt with sneaky bitches/Dot on a regular basis and leave it at that.

"He is awake," Tadófi alerted the room. "You must leave so I can deliver my message to him in the privacy he requested."*wWw.NoVéIWorM.com*

"I am almost done," a different Amazon voice stated. She was the medico dealing with my wounds. By the aroma, she had slathered on two coats of the healing goo that was becoming as comfortable to my nostrils as my soap-on-a-rope. A few more rounds of adhesive tape and the exodus from the room began. I hadn't opened my eyes because I was unprepared for the looks of anger, disappointment and concern surely leveled my way.

The door shut and my eyes opened.

"The Conqueror, the Champion, the Friendless and the Foe have all escaped the Land of the Endless Black Sands and returned to the Sunlit Realm," Tadófi whispered upon my lips.

Huh? That was it? Seriously, four freaking titles without...

And here came the rest – faces. Faces with eyes and eyes with a purpose. Names... not names I wanted to hear at the moment. Bad fucking news all around. It couldn't be something helpful like the identity of the next High Priestess – NOOOOOO... that would be good fucking news. Okay, time to turn this frown upside down.

I could make this work for me. How... I wasn't sure.

"Thank you," I responded to Tadófi's plea of understanding. Outside of having impregnating sex with me, the Sex-Master... Timothy was going to Nerf-shoot me for that... she'd endured spiritual, mental and physical grief and torment to be with me here today. She waited, kneeling beside my head.

"Kiss me," I requested. It was a moist act, full of compassion and understanding. I racked my mind for the names and their importance. "Who was Shammuramat?"

"I don't know... but this helps, right?" Tadófi expressed her need to make the reward for the sacrifices to make sense. Five dead sister-augurs.

They had to find that son-of-a-bitch!

"Tadófi, we are back in the fight," I grinned. "You and your sisters have given the Host a mighty weapon in the upcoming struggle." I knew that to be true because I knew who and where the Conqueror was, I knew he wasn't ready to be revealed, his enemies were closing in and he was ignorant of that fact. I was going to have to rain on his parade to save his life.

The five augurs hadn't died futilely. The Weave of Fate had shielded the man and it took the augurs' fanatical devotion to cut the threads and expose the truth the Host needed most. The Champion – hell, I knew who he was. I chuckled. Tadófi was confused. The Champion was coming to kill me... me and a bunch of other Amazons, because blood feuds tend to run both ways.

The Foe. He was easy enough. Granddad. The Bastard just wouldn't stay dead. I had a clue to what was going on now. I wasn't sure how useful that knowledge would be. Still, knowledge is knowledge. That thing crawling around inside my brain? No help there. That left Shammuramat. That name was familiar. Even when I finally placed it, I didn't understand her role in things.

Why her?

"Krasimira," I called out. I struggled to sit up and with Tadófi's help, I did so. The Keeper and two guardians entered as well. One, Sikia, hovered over her companion/augur.

"What is the link between Shammuramat and the Host?" I inquired. I saw no recognition in the Keeper's eyes. "She was the first ever "independent" queen of a nation-state – Assyria."

Krasimira sat on the sofa and retrieved her tablet from inside her robes. She began working with the electronic history of the Amazon race.

"9th Century BCE," I added. Slowly others migrated back into the room. Buffy, Katrina (not good and not happy), Elsa (really not good) and Desiree. Pamela leaned against the door sill, neither in nor out.

Katrina sat behind her desk. The phone came out and whispered conversations began in earnest. I had shoved us straight into a war which looked like a free for all at the moment. No one trusted anyone. No one could afford to. I had to change that. The only saving grace was that it appeared no Secret Society had planned for the Protocols to abruptly end a week and a half ago.

"Ah... I found it," Krasimira spoke up. Because I'm me, it was at that moment I finally realized that someone had put me in my biking shorts in an effort to provide me a modicum of modesty – with the benefit of blood being smeared on the inside. "She abandoned the Host, she was put under a death sentence for killing her twin sister who was chosen to lead House Anat over her."

"Anat?" I queried.

"The other dead First House," Krasimira sighed. "They were renowned for their berserkers. Some would drape themselves in the entrails of their enemies in the midst of battle to increase their ferocious appearance."

"Oh, how sweet... what was Ishara known for?" I was surprised I'd never asked.

"Ishara were the emissaries of the Host," Krasimira informed me. With the Amazon practice of killing embassies sent their way, the extinction of my house made much more sense.

"What does this mean?" Desiree took charge of matters since Katrina was still busy on the phone. In a few short weeks, Desiree's prestige had definitely increased. Katrina was her sister in more than name now.

"Where to begin... Fine, why don't we refer to the Mycenaeans by their proper Amazon name?" Everyone but Buffy was glancing about nervously*W(ø)w.nôC(æ)LWorM.C(ø)M*

"You used the name, didn't you?" Elsa rubbed the bridge of her nose, dreading the response.

"Yes..." I answered.

"Because no one warns him of shit," Pamela huffed. "You assume an Amazon education with no basis in reality. You act like he grew up with our fairy tales and phantasmal histories. Everyone in this room, but Buffy," she acknowledge my First, "knew he spoke our language and the accompanying risk. Still, no one warned him."

"You didn't warn him," Desiree skewered Pamela with a glance.

"Not my job, Buttons," Pamela chuckled. "I relish the rest of you being made to look like idiots too much to be useful to Câel unless it really matters. So he invoked an ancient malediction. What is the worst that could happen?"

"I'm going to make a huge deductive leap... am I the reason the Achaean hero Ajax and his boys are back from the dead and coming after us for some Ako-level vengeance?" I groaned. (That's the 47 Ronin for us Westerners) Silence.

"That's not your fault, Sport," Pamela snorted. "Mano-man, was I a dumbass for doing nothing. I'll take the blame for that one ladies. Damn Câel, you would have to pick the Unconquered One, wouldn't you?"

"Who is this guy and why does he hate us?" Buffy interjected. Pause.

"Our ancestors poisoned his wine so that, in his angry haze, he mistook his own men for his enemies and slaughtered them all... back during the Trojan War. Afterwards, he committed suicide in anguish over his crime... Death opened his eyes at the last, he saw our treachery and managed to curse us as he died," Krasimira informed the lot of us.

"And my using that word brought him back? That sounds... weak," I grunted.

"The word would not have been enough," Tadófi comforted me. "There must have been some sort of rift in the curtain of Reality that allowed the others to slip through. I don't understand how... oh no," she gasped as the pieces came together*wWw.nôVéIWorM.C(ø)M*

"I'm willing to believe that was the price of doing business," I petted Tadófi's cheek.

"Please enlighten us," Elsa grumbled.

"I need to find the Earth & Sky ambassador and set up a new meeting. Using what Tadófi has gifted me with and the sacrifice of her fellow augurs, I can secure an alliance for us if only I can make up for the whole stunt Troika played," I grinned. "Any ideas?"

"We could call them," Pamela produced my phone. "Seems some lady named Hana Sulkanen has been trying for days to get in touch with you. She hunted down the owner of the necklace, they talked about your current physical state – courtesy of Odette – and the owner of the necklace has expressed a continued interest in meeting you, and only you. It would appear that they really don't trust the rest of our merry little band since your first disappearance."

Hana... and here I had killed her step-brother... the one she despised. An unexpected benefit of civil discourse – my People's chance of survival had doubled. Pamela lobbed my phone and I caught it.*Ŵwø.nO(·)(ø)ll(ø)orM.c(ø)M*

"What of the other two?" Tadófi pushed down on my euphoria. "Was the Foe dead as well?"

A quick look at Pamela told me she knew the answer to that.

"The Foe is complicated," I lied. "His return was an inevitability, so we count that as a draw. The Champion – bad news. Let's put Shammy in the 'maybe' column and the Conqueror is a win for our side."

A Berserker Queen, fresh from the Underworld, who we were honor-bound to kill ... or the 'other lost heir(ess) to a dead House' that was going to make us cobble together some nonsense to bring her back into the fold. If I wasn't the male leader of a spiritually significant All-Girls social club

aramilitary outfit, I might have been daunted by my prospects of achieving the latter.

"The thing going on inside your head?" Elsa asked. That explained her presence. My mental capacity was still suspect. Was I still me? Could I flip out with no warning?