

## 1016

My fingers had barely combed my wet hair out of my eyes when I came face to face with Ajax. He was even more imposing in person than he had been in the vision Tadófi had imparted to me. He was a few centimeters over two meters (6' 9") and one hundred and forty-five kilograms (320 lbs.) of solid muscle.

He was also a hairy cuss, with long, thick black hair, a trimmed mustache and beard, and body hair evident on every bit of exposed flesh, except his palms. I wasn't certain who would have out arm-wrestled who - him or dead uncle Carrig. He was equipped in a modern style - firearms and body armor similar to his men. On the plus side, he was smiling at me.

What followed was in his native language, Mycenaean Greek.

"I was told you didn't lack courage," he noted.*ῶww.ṠoṽE(i)WorM.Cōm*

"I am indeed fearless," I retorted, "but I make up for it by being dumb as a stump." Laughter all around. By that time, the assembled Greeks amounted to over twenty men, Molpadia / Kwenhamai and four large hunting dogs.

Oh crap, they sympathized with me. I remained optimistic in the face of death and that resonated with them - these ancient warriors.*WWW.rovEfwOR.M.Com*

"I am here to kill you," Ajax stated.

"Yes, that was my view of the situation as well - one of us having to gak the other," I corrected.*WWw.nōvEilwō(r)m.Com*

"Are you prepared to die then?" he regarded me with a certain kinship.

"It depends on how I die," I grinned. "If it is 'death by zug zug'... well, I ain't going out like that. Be prepared to shoot me as I run away." More laughter.

"I like you," he patted my shoulder. "You have a knife. We can knife fight?"

"I'm not 100% up on the rules for parlay, but I was thinking that we would be working out arrangements for a fight at some set time in the future," I said.

"You would be wrong," Ajax shook his head. "Your people, the Amazons, used dishonorable means to kill me and my men, so I am not obligated to treat you as an equal."

That was Ajax being an asshole. The Amazons poisoned him because he'd lured the Amazons to a dinner, then drugged, raped and enslaved them. Bringing that up would be pointless. History had painted him to be a misogynist and Molpadia / Kwenhamai - I was going to start calling her Kwen - was screwed if she was hoping Ajax would restore her mother's honor.

There was an upside to all of this. I really hadn't expected Ajax to confer safe passage with his offer of parlay anyway. I thought he and his men actually understood that was my expectation coming into this. For whatever reason, they didn't translate my actions to be anything but assisted suicide. Their bad. My Hail Mary was really just my opening gambit. Life finds a way.

"I will meet you half way," I offered. "You have chosen the time and the place of this parlay, so it is only fair to allow me the choice of weapons."

"Out of respect for your personal courage, I will agree. How do you wish to perish?" Ajax nodded. I presented my 'secret weapon' - a bag of knucklebones.

"You are wagering your life on a game?" Ajax scoffed.

"As opposed to a whole series of martial contests I have no chance at? Yeah, I'm staking my life on my hand-eye coordination," I grinned. Knucklebones is the granddaddy of modern day Jacks and was played at the time of the Trojan Wars.

"I suppose it was too much to hope that any scion of the Amazons would choose to go out like a man," Ajax muttered. I hit him. I hit him hard enough to rock him back a half step. The group mirth quieted down.

"Beware Greek," I growled. "I am Cael Wakkō Ishara and my people left your body buried in the soil of Troy. We have survived all these centuries while the remnants of your children are nothing more than curiosities in museums. I will banter over my life. My kin are not to be mocked."

"Your kin are cowardly women," Ajax laughed. "It seems you wish to die at my hands. So be it."

"You know much of cowardice and nothing of men," I snidely responded. "There is nothing terribly honorable about killing people anyway." Why wasn't the crowd rushing in to pummel me? Smack-talking was the martial norm for these guys.

In a way, they accepted that Ajax had that hit coming for his insult to my people. And Yes ..., they hated the Amazons too. But that didn't mean any of them would get a bye when insulting them in my presence. Had I denigrated all the men of Salamis, Ajax's kingdom, I could have expected the punch I gave him.

"I'm sure you and your gang disagree, except all of you ended dead because you were lousy hosts and pathetic jailors, so your opinion can't be all that useful, now can it?" I dredged up our common history. "Ajax, you remain a bully, a thug and an insult to true masculinity. Let's dance, Brony," I defied him.

"You remain amusing to the bitter end. Are those your last words?" Ajax was getting ready to rip me to pieces. I wasn't going down without a fight.

"On second thought," I fell into my Brazilian jujutsu stance, "it might as well be 'Where there is Valor there is Hope'."

"You have valor without merit, Cael... Wakkō... Ishara... Nyilas... whoever you are," he mocked me. "Die knowing I will send everyone you love to the Black Sands... including your 'daughter'," Ajax chuckled. If he thought threatening Aya was going to unsettle me, it only showed he had no idea who Katrina was. Aya had far more effective guardians than me. I was still going to make sure he died with as much extra pain as I could pack on for daring to bring her up.

Three blows. It took him three pulverizing blows to put me where I wanted to be. Being a martial legend apparently had its downside. He may have been one of the most epic warriors who ever lived, but now, fighting the sexiest male doofus to have ever challenged him, he neglected to keep an eye on the terrain we were fighting on, or more accurately, he disregarded my stratagem - which included me not dying.

Two blocked punches drove me back.

The third blow, the kick, sent me flying into the river. It took every ounce of willpower I had left to force myself back to my feet. I half-lunged back at Ajax, prepped my lungs for a long, underwater sojourn, then turned and lunged into the current. With the most powerful strokes I could muster, I swam deeper and deeper.

My progress startled a Starry Sturgeon that bolted in a slightly higher, nearly parallel path to me. That poor bastard must have lived 60 years to get to his 2. 3 meter (7' 6"), 80 kg, (176 lbs.) size.

The critical factor at the moment was that, in the muddy waters of the Tisza, his wake was far more visible than mine.

Ten assault rifles opened up on what they thought was yours truly. I owed my life to that one tough fish. He must have soaked up fifty rounds before finally going belly up. I swore by Dot Ishara that if I survived scenic Central Europe, I was going to sponsor a Starry Sturgeon reintroduction program. I had thought the Starry were extinct on the Tisza... and now they probably were.

What I didn't know was the gamble Pamela was engaged in. How stupid of me was it to give her sniping advice? Pamela borrowed one of the girl's iPads, recorded herself looking into it for ten seconds then looped the footage. She placed the iPad far enough in her primitive blind so that it could be confused for her actual face.

Pamela then settled in beside her rifle with her own spotter's scope and went looking for her opposition. She couldn't simply move to a secondary location because odds were my P-90 might not have the range to reach ole Teucer. When I leapt beneath the water, Teucer blew the iPad to pieces. Pamela spotted the shot, rolled over to her gun and returned fire.

Teucer must have realized that human heads don't explode like that - he was firing a . 50 BMG - and understood that he was on the wrong side of the sniper/counter-sniper equation. Upstream, he was busy throwing himself out of the tree he'd been using to shoot from when Pamela put a bullet through his left collarbone where it intersected his throat.

Had he not been diving deeper into the forest she would have killed him by severing his spinal cord between the C2 and C3 vertebrae. As it was, he got to live, but he would be convalescing for quite a while. Now with Teucer dealt with, it was time for Ajax and company to feel her wrath. She put three of them down - one definitely dead (a human head doesn't expand like that and survive).

She would have put a bullet into Ajax, except one of his men tackled him to the ground. Killing the SOB would have made her Christmas, but stopping the Mycenaean from shooting at me (aka Mr. Starry Sturgeon) was her primary concern. My lungs were on fire by the time I clawed my way under the vessel and came up on the far side. Jolan had slowed and moved toward the west bank when I swam to meet Ajax.*WwW.πσρεLworm.cOm*

The engines were roaring to full power again. Orsi and Monika, shielded by the mass of the main cabin, helped me up. This time it took an extreme effort because I was even more bruised and completely exhausted from my extra-long underwater swim and generally having my ass-kicked. I didn't have much time to recover. As soon as Ajax's group had made themselves scarce, they began taking pot-shots at the boat.

It was a harassment tactic. They could shoot at us while using the trees trunks as cover. Even if a limb, or piece of underbrush deflected, or slow downed the round, we still had to keep crouched down and on edge. The 'race' was on for Mindszent. Ajax's crew had to get back to their vehicles, then race to the ferry landing.

If they could get people on both banks, it was pretty much over for Pamela and me. A long history of equivocating during my college years, plus my incarceration at Havenstone, helped me formulate a plan. I borrowed Jolan's phone and called the United States. I was dialing in a bomb threat from a source everyone would believe - the CIA. Don't laugh.

I had finally found a use for Senior Field Officer George Cresky, after all. It took four rings. The poor bastard was probably sleeping in on... early Saturday morning. He was probably curious how I /Katrina found out his mobile number as well. That would wait.

"Wa... huh..." George mumbled. He didn't recognize the number calling him.

"George! Wake the fuck up," I raised my voice. "This is Nyilas and I have a problem."

"Nyilas... how the fuck do you have my personal number?" old George bolted awake.

"Funny story - I'll get to it later. Right now I need for you to fabricate a bomb threat against the ferry at Mindszent, Hungary.

Get that ferry to the east - I repeat EAST - bank of the Tisza River," I explained.

"Is there a bomb on the ferry?" he questioned.

"Of course there isn't a bomb on board the damn boat. I'm being chased by fifty mercenaries and bad shit is going to happen to me and six hot chicks if they reach that ferry," I related.

"So you want me to send a false terrorist bomb threat to a NATO ally in order to save your ass?" George was drawing this out.