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I stopped walking, torn by warring impulses. Having lost my father so recently, I was freshly acquainted with her pain and loss. Nothing I could say would change a damn thing. Instead...

"Marilynn," I said in a low, steady voice, "Hayden betrayed House Ishara. I would have cut out her heart with my own hands, given half an opportunity. Grow up, or join her."

That took the air out of the moment. My voicing such opinions was so unlike me, unless you were Kimberly, or Pamela. They knew me better. Marilynn snarled and leapt to the attack. Her House Guard did their jobs and held her back. My verbal smack to the face hadn't really stopped the air in its tracks. The wind was wreaking mayhem with our hair, clothes and my ritual shelter.

The sky was bleaching from pink to yellow. There wasn't much time. I couldn't imagine what even one second in the Black Sands would mean for Hayden. I trembled, thinking about the spirits of all those 'Runners' we had turned our backs on. I stepped into the roofless, cloth shelter constructed by someone who knew what they were doing.

I prepared for my shawl and the incense. Buffy put a hand to my chest and offered up a bowl with a miniscule amount of clear fluid. I took in my sisters. They all had red-rimmed eyes. This time out, they would shed the tears and blood ... because we were all equals in this decision. That was the true meaning of the tears in the bowl and the blood to be spilt.

In this moment, we were all Ishara. We stood as a house united before the face of our Goddess and our Ancestors... ours. I knelt down in my proper place, Helena handed me the first name. I read it aloud, set it aflame and declared the ghost dead once more. I dipped a fingertip on the bowl then pressed the finger into the glowing embers. I opened her sight to our ancestors. Buffy leaned forward and cut her finger, letting off a drop to sizzle among the small flames.

Six names. House Ishara grew by six members. Sure, they were dead; in most cases, dead for decades with their unheralded services forgotten by most. No more. The wind didn't die down yet in my imagining, it quieted a bit. The white fabric facing East, past the sliver of Manhattan left to us, the boroughs beyond, then Long Island and finally the great Atlantic, turned orange then yellow.

I took one last breath.

'No.'©©w.m•VIEŁw©rm.Ċ(•)©

'Fuck you.'

Helena handed me the seventh name. I prepared to declare Hayden dead. Not Hayden Anahit.

Our former High Priestess had shorn her hair and died in shame, confessing her treason to her People in this irrevocable act of submission to her heart and the will of the Seven Martial Goddesses and the Fifty-three Amazon Houses. A crude epitaph might be 'She took the Bitches with her' because she'd done just that.

Hayden had done more in the act of dying to snuff out the resistance to the New Directive than any living act could have accomplished. This was more than executing old Heads of House so that their apprentices could rise up and take over the reins of their defiance. It was fairly practical to expect the Councilwomen's hand-picked successors would pursue their elder's agenda. It was also contrary to every instinct in the Amazon collective psyche.

Hayden had proclaimed that nothing short of death could extirpate the shame of her actions and those of her 'co-conspirators' then perished before anyone could challenge that ruling. To Amazon eyes, that wasn't spite, or petty vengeance. No, to the Amazons, Hayden had died before she could be proven 'Right' – that she and those on the list she'd given St. Marie were traitors.

For the apprentices turned Head of Houses, to pursue the policy of traitors was madness. That didn't mean they would embrace men and 'Runners'. There was still deeply embedded prejudice. What it meant was that to organize against the 'Runners' and the New Directive was a gross betrayal of their duties as leaders of the Amazon race. Hayden had made that clear seconds ago.

Buffy got my attention with a furtive hand motion. I looked to her, she was staring the other way so I followed her gaze all the way to Sydney's eyes. Sydney had cried much of last night and she was crying now. She gave me a curt nod. Hayden had passed beyond the Sunlit Realm and was now waiting on me.w(•)©.n(•)•êŁw•r(•).c•M

'No.'

'We've had this discussion. I'm not listening.'

"Hayden St. James, you are dead," I sniffled. She had saved me when I needed it most. I shoved the paper deep into the glowing shards of burnt fragrances.

My finger blistered, my skin started to brown then blacken. The paper refused to catch fire.wWw.Ń•••êŁw•r(•).c•M

"No," I grunted.

"No," Sydney groaned.wŴŴ.no••êŁW•r(•).c•m

"NO!" Marilynn howled her denial of what lay before us.

'No.'

"Fine," I muttered. I stood up, drew my trusty (I hoped) Glock. I popped out the clip and handed it to Buffy. There was no sense in wasting even a single bullet this close to a bloody conflict.

"Cáel?" Buffy's voice trembled. "Cáel Ishara..." What could I say? I stepped past her then past Tiger Lily who unfortunately stood guard at the compass point I chose to take. She didn't stop me either though I could see the horror dawning on her face. See, I had a gun with a bullet in the chamber. I had a weapon.

Like most skyscrapers, Havenstone Commercial Investments had two barriers to save me from my madness. The two meter tall chain link fence was the first obstacle. I was sure it would be an embarrassing impediment to my reckless defiance to the decision of my ancestors and my goddess. That might inspire someone to commit sacrilege by hindering me. I would not be stopped. I also shouldn't have worried. Pamela would never let them get close to me. The wire ties holding the links to the closest pole snapped.

With three good kick/stomps the fence had failed in its purpose. I moved over it and to the second barrier, a 'meter plus a smidge' trench that, besides stopping someone from rolling off the roof, collected roof rubbish for easy removal. I jumped it. The view from this perch was breath taking, made all the more thrilling by the winds plucking and pulling at me.

Where the gusts trying to yank me off, or pushed me back? Maybe it was Hepit, Goddess of the Winds, weighing my selfless intensions against my abysmal judgment. No time for her. I had a funeral to attend. I pulled out my knife with my left hand. I really contemplated my action plan and it was really trying to suggest that my sisters should never have unstrapped me from that hospital bed.

"I, Cáel Ishara, cannot live with the shame my Ancestors and Goddess have heaped upon me," I cried out. Yes, I was making my Death Pledge. I extended my right arm out until it was level with my shoulder, gun pointing off to the Chase Building. I wouldn't shoot at them. That would render my pistol no longer a weapon and that just wouldn't do.

"I swore to Hayden, in front of the Golden Mare and the Keeper of Records that I would bear her spirit into the halls of our Ancestors. To deny me this is to put a weight upon me that only an eternity of loneliness can bring." I desperately willed my right thumb and fingers to unclench. My hand didn't want to. It, like most organism, wanted to keep on living.

My digits twitched. My suicidal brain was winning.

"I shall shear my hair before I hit bottom, dying without a House and dooming myself to search for Hayden in the afterlife even if it takes until the end of time." The words were coming to me easier now. I was on the precipice in more than one way. The winds tried to lift me off the lip of the gutter.

I still had a weapon to drop, sealing my pledge and confirming my displeasure.

"I die denying you so that MY HOUSE does not have to lift up my shame when one of them steps up to replace me. Good..." I nearly lost it. My fingers finally gave enough that I could feel the metal of the grip begin to slide down.

"Cáel!" Helena screamed with every ounce of her being. "IT BURNS!" Whoops. Almost died there. My heart felt victorious. I had honored my word to... no, I hadn't won a thing. They had. They hadn't doomed Hayden. I had. Not with my denouncing of her by dropping the axe on her desk. That had been unavoidable.

My failure was way before that and it came down to one little word.

My.

My House. My House Ishara. That was what my ancestors and my Dot Ishara – Eeeek! Almost got sucked off there.

I pushed off the lip with my feet and calves, propelling myself backwards over the trench. Two sets of hands grappled with me and unceremoniously dragged my stumbling form over the now well-trodden fence. I had to face up to the fact that I was an Amazon and I was appointed by them to lead my house after torturous centuries of waiting.

My House. I was the heir of Vranus, son of Ishara and, as the old adage goes, I could not let this cup pass from my lips. Neither Rachel, nor Tiger Lily – my rescuers – said a word.

"There is something I need to take care of," I told them through a forced smile. Hayden was waiting and she had waited long enough for me to come around to her way of thinking ... long enough.

I was a leader of the Host. I had better start acting more like one.