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(The Four Days)

I was still in New York when the Council convened, but I had to leave before all the key matters could be settled. Despite some of Buffy's objections, "we" (meaning me) and House Ishara had decided that switching up leaders in the midst of the upcoming pivotal events would make matters worse, not better. Daphne pledged to me, to Buffy, to the Isharan ancestors and to Ishara herself to give true, diligent and continuous service until I, Buffy, or Helena dismissed her.

She would be Buffy's social eyes and ears, as well as her translator and voice. I imagined that translating for Buffy would be 'creative' at times. An added oddity was that Buffy insisted on being called '****', which meant 'First' instead of '*****' which was the traditional 'apprentice'.

Krasimira okayed it. The term 'First' had been used before in Council. Its meaning was a bit different though. 'First' implied a deep, romantic relationship with the Head of House that included possessing insight into the Head's mindset. Buffy thought the title fitted her perfectly.

"Best to keep those bitches at bay from the get-go," Buffy snarled.**wWw.(n)Ove(())wOrrn.COm**

It was difficult to keep my head and heart from becoming unsettled over what transpired as I packed for my trip to see Aya. No one on Hayden's list ran. No Head of House said 'fuck you' and barricaded herself and hers in some holding and dared the sisters to come get her. They awaited the convening of the Council, showed up and silently took their seats.

There was no opening song. The Leader was not there to begin it. As the first order of business, St. Marie stood and related the how's and where's of Hayden's demise. With that brief preamble, she read off the list of names. The condemned stood when their names were called, drew forth their blades and sheared off long locks of their hair, declaring their 'House-less' status.

SD members roughly seized them - they were nothing more than traitors to the race by that point - and dragged them into the hallway where two separate Security Detail women put two bullets in their hearts. A quick, thorough and efficient way to deal with the trash. I had been told their bodies would be cremated. Their skulls would be maintained only for the purpose of genealogical study.

In the Council chamber, Krasimira reaffirmed the relevant Amazon legal code provisions. The Golden Mare would direct the Host until a Regency Council could be formed. Only then did St. Marie and Krasimira begin the meeting's invocation. Buffy cried and she wasn't alone. A full third of the Council had new faces and a terrifying shift in direction had been established.

No, the echoes of gunfire had not made the new House Heads proponents of men and 'Runners'. What those women were looking at was the deathly reality that defying those two forces was treason. Hayden had established that. And by taking her own life, she had charted a path the rest could not deviate from. Based on what I learned from Katrina, Beyoncé, Daphne and Krasimira, the shift started out gradually, then became a roaring current**wWw.(n)ð⓪ⓈⓌoRm.(c)øM**

Issue One was not the Regency Council - it was war. They acknowledged it; they affirmed the Epona/Ishara initiative of creating alliances with the United States Federal government (Javiera), the 9 Clans and the Earth & Sky. They formally directed the Host's efforts to the destruction of the 7 Pillars and Condotteiri. After all, resolution by the obliteration of one's foes was standard practice.

The justification was the Condotteiri's murder of three members of the Security Detail and of Ferko Nylas of Ishara by way of Vranus (he was on the Rolls for all eternity now) and the Seven Pillars' attempted murder of Temujin, the Supreme Khan of the Earth & Sky and retroactively an ally to the Host. That statement was more for the Earth & Sky as a symbol of Amazon dedication to the task at hand than a clerical matter for themselves. But like my Father, Temujin's life was elevated to something of value in their eyes.

If the Amazons felt you were a threat, they rarely argued about it and half those arguments happened after the fact. The second the Condotteiri soldiers fired on the clearly identified SD leader at my Burnham home, the war option was on the table. That Council decision was tidying up the issue in case it became historically significant later. After all, not being tidy 2500 years ago had led to 'Me'.

The most critical part of those two votes (declaring war on the Condotteiri and on 7 Pillars) was the reminder the Host needed to pay attention to their core values - self-defense and protection of their young. An eye opening moment took place during one of the breaks when Kohar Marda - Ursula's former apprentice, now Head of House, approached Buffy.

According to Daphne (Buffy was contemplating being attacked), the surrounding conversations muted. Kohar politely asked for a meeting with Buffy to discuss the qualifications Ishara used for selecting inductees. Runners! The successor to the Amazon who had sent Leona to assassinate me was now asking how to add 'Runners' to her house.

Mysticism may have played its part. Respect for Hayden's final appeal to alleviate her shame played a role too. In my mind, the ultimate factor was that this was a practical choice made by a lethally practical race. War meant deaths. Every House knew the ages of their young, thus the rate at which their numbers would be naturally replenished and what forces they needed to put forth as the conflict raged on. The answer to meeting their strategic obligations was the 'Runners'.

Kohar had stepped forward first for a more personal reason. Ursula had been in the forefront of what now was derogatorily referred to as the Cult of Blood Purity - undeniable treasonous thinking. Shame drove Kohar. Ursula had died house-less, but lived and ruled as a Mardan. Only a heartfelt repudiation of Ursula's policies could diminish the burden of Mardan guilt. Kohar had to go first.

The rest of the Council wasn't busting down Ishara's door in a rush to follow Kohar's example. That didn't matter. The glass ceiling the Host had been stomping down on the heads of 'Runners' for fifty years had shattered. The final act of tragedy, in my mind, was that the glory of that moment would go to House Ishara, not House Anahit. She was my ancestor now, not Sydney's or Marilyn's.**(w)wW.(n)øV(ø)tworM.com**

When the Amazons looked back on history, Hayden Ishara had given her all for her people, changing the very direction of the Host's lifeblood. She would stand exalted with our greatest heroines... bearing my name. From everyone's evaluation but Buffy's, my First did a wonderful job being fierce and polite in an equal, measured and deserved manner. Katrina even hinted that some of the Council leaders preferred a less-effective me to be at the next meeting.

(On the Road to Aya)

For me, the diplomacy revolved around Delilah and Virginia... I had already fallen on my knees and begged Odette to let me go see Aya 'alone'. A few sexual-charged hours later, she agreed. That left four choices for the role of my two agents. They wanted to go 'as is'. Rachel informed them they would be murdered in-flight and their bodies tossed out over a convenient body of water.

Rachel felt that the only reasonable course of action was for them to not come. That way the two could live a few more weeks. However, she would settle for stripping them down, doing a full body scan and then sealing them naked in airtight coffins (with a suitable amount of oxygen) for the journey. I suspected they might still slip out the baggage compartment somewhere between takeoff and landing.

I cut through the clash of egos and made the final decision. Delilah and Virginia would be stripped and thoroughly examined. Initially I had the chore. Rachel was deeply suspicious of my true intentions. Freed of any electronic devices and with their weaponry in my keeping during the trip, they would be blindfolded as we made it to Aya without bloodshed.

They applauded my wisdom by roundly refusing my decision. Pamela was of no help. Ten minutes into it, I informed them I was going alone - completely alone. They laughed, snorted and chuckled. Rachel reminded me that I didn't know where to go. I lied and told her that Katrina had given me the coordinates for the super-secret juvenile, all-feline [yes, I meant cats], survival training school.

Fine, they would just keep me under constant surveillance. I responded by assuring them that despite my lack of spy-like abilities, I would escape and get to relive my Summer Camp experience with the only woman who respected my Demigod-like combat status. Their laughter hurt my feelings. Pamela stepped up and told the room they could either respect my compromise, or she would help me evade them.

It was even more depressing to see the room full of women who had previously been mocking me suddenly 'snap to' and quickly agree to my earlier suggestions.

"It is okay," Pamela told me softly as the actual mechanics of my vacation were figured out by others. "I didn't want to play Bill Munny to your Ben Logan."**wvw.n0V(ø)fwðR(m).c©m**

Pamela's eyes flared brighter than any phoenix's rebirth. She'd stumped me.

"The Unforgiven, my Son," she patted my cheek. "It is a western made in 1992 starring Clint Eastwood, recast masterfully by 'Yours Truly' and... we need to work on you making a convincing Morgan Freeman."

"Doesn't Freeman end up in a pinewood box in the first third of the movie?" Virginia mused.

"I didn't want to dishearten him," Pamela grinned. To me. "He ran off alone and got himself killed."

"I was what... not even a year old when that movie came out," I responded with indignation.

"You've never heard of Block Busters, Netflix, Redbox, Dish, Hulu, or late night, Spanish language television?" Pamela snickered.

"I only watch Univision for their sports coverage," I countered.