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(Right where I left off)

I was the oddity. My antics had only enhanced my allure, especially to the pre-twelve group that stood closest - nineteen pairs of little eyes looking at me expectantly. I swept the crowd with a polite, somewhat shy smile. For the girls from the freeholds, I was most likely a contradiction to everything they'd been taught, or experienced, before now.

The ghastly nightmare slinking around the bright sunshine Aya fanned into radiance by her proximity to my heart was that the male percentage in the Amazon world was plummeting rapidly. Mass executions will do that to a population. We were being efficiently and mercilessly put down and not replaced by the 'normal' means anymore. Every week there were fewer of us around for the children to notice.

Adding to their confusion was that Amazon girls were actively discouraged from forming bonds with any males they did encounter, especially the few still walking around the holds. From what I had gathered from my casual inquiries, the old Amazon male slave population was dwindling to zero fast.

Cultural ruthlessness married to a creeping racial insanity had led to them burning their old lifestyle down before a new one had been raised up. To these little girls, it meant that men were regarded in one of two ways: In their own microcosm, the girls were taught that males were the equivalent of a plow horse they saw wandering about, but they were denied the opportunity to interact with - a lumbering, yet relatively harmless animal.

To girls living an urban lifestyle, there was the constant watchfulness of their family guardians that taught them men were not to be trusted. Men were not some evil that needed to be destroyed. It was more that if they knew about the culture the girls grew up in, the males would crush their elders and steal them away into their chauvinistic malignancy.

Outsider women were viewed the same way because they would rather sleep contentedly in their male-created fantasy of equality than face the reality that life was a constant state of warfare - only things paid for in blood and sweat had value. Outsiders of both genders, by refusing to grasp that truism, were essentially parasites. You didn't kill all leeches. You only dispatched the ones threatening you and yours.

And then there was me. I had to face facts. I had a penis. Even tucked snugly in my cup and shorts, it was the beacon of our differences. That was the starting point of every encounter with a Full-blood Amazon - I wasn't one of them and they had been told to never see my 'kind' in a beneficial emotional context. Amazons were not supposed to have those kinds of relationships with men.

"I've missed you too, '\*\*\*\*\*', " Aya bumped foreheads with me. I was 'a Son of the White Stallion' who 'ran with the herds of Epona'. I was so proud of her. She had woven together a Magyar myth with an Amazon naming convention. Epona, the Celtic Horse Goddess and Aya's matron divinity, was worshiped with the sacrifice of foals - Amazons offered up fillies (female baby horses) whose spirits ran with the Goddess in the Spirit World.

When the pre-Christian Magyars went to war, they sacrificed a white stallion to entreat their deities to grant them victory. No one was about to slit my throat, or cut my heart out. I was made sacred - a spirit stud in Epona's vast herd of mares. How freakishly accurate.

"I love you for your brains, you know that, don't you?" I whispered to Aya.

"Yes. You are saving up your other love for Mommy," she kinda/sorta teased me. Out of the semi-circle of children, three stood out. More accurately, they were dwarfed by their companions. I took the group's indecision as an offer to advance.

"Hi," I addressed the smallest three members of the audience. "Are you the Fatal Squirts?"

"They are not allowed that name," Sophia interceded. "No Amazon child deserves an acknowledgement before their trial." I half-turned and nodded her way. *W(w).cVef@QŔm.Com*

"(Cough) '\*\*\*\*\*', " (cough, cough). "Excuse me, please." If she spoke Phoenician, I was boned for being obviously disrespectful of her authority and would have to take whatever punishment Sophia felt I deserved.

Otherwise, I was getting away with binding 'leads to death' to 'blood-death wound' in that ancient and highly extinct tongue: 'fatal - squirts' indeed. Her hand fell on my shoulder.

"I have heard you laugh at death," Sophia remarked. If I was on Zoosk, all you would have to do was type in 'Preference: Amazon Male Who Dares Talk Back' - and there was my smiling mug, all alone, staring back at you.

"Before I confess to anything, do you consider that an asset, or liability," I grinned.

"I withhold judgment," was her reply.

"I don't mean to 'laugh at death'. It is because all the other choices suck and... perhaps I've been called stubborn, bull-headed and 'not having even a passing acquaintance with common sense' a time, or two," I shrugged with my lovely burden curled around my left arm.

"No names - our tradition and my command," Sophia laid down the law. Sigh. I put Aya down. She didn't cause me a hint of trouble because she knew my heart. I unbuckled and handed her my two guns (my Glock-22, and . 380). I motioned one of the mini-Amazons forward. She shuffled up to Aya's side and received my two tomahawks.

Not only was no one leaving, the rest of the camp started coming down to see what was about to transpire. In my short stint at Havenstone, I had developed a reputation as an exciting fun-guy/irrepressible troublemaker.

"I feel your decision is founded on misinformation, or your rendering to be unjust," I told Sophia.

"Explain," Sophia requested.

I hadn't disarmed for my sake, or hers. I gave up my weapons to affirm my desire to talk. I placed myself at my sister's mercy - thus expressing my trust in her. Amazons are not savages, just violently inclined.

Later, Pamela would remind me that my behavior was precisely what Isharans were supposed to do - seek peace.

"Aya has taken a position as intern with Executive Services at Havenstone," I explained. "She held my position and served effectively for four days with good work reviews from the head of the department herself," I added.

"She has served in a caste, been assigned duties by members of that caste, performed errands and accomplished all that was asked of her. Doesn't that create an allowance for Aya... as she has been considered for a caste?" I was fishing for an excuse based on my instincts for these people.

"She has never been selected, chosen and been anointed to a caste, so her preliminary experience does not qualify," Sophia said after a few seconds of introspection. "Next?"

"She has charged forth into battle on my behest." The archery range *W@w.n6Ve()worm.cOm*

"You were not an acknowledged member of the Host when that happened. Next?"

"She's tried to kill me," I tossed out there.

"What?" many exclaimed.

"NO!" Aya gasped.

"When did this occur?" Sophia's eyes twinkled.

"At the archery range. She shot at me twice," I responded *w-w-W..mOve/worŔ(n).c(s)tt*

"She was practicing," was the counter. "Next?" *w-w@.N6vE@w(s)rMl.co(m)*

"Not next," I smiled. "I didn't have permission from anyone to step beyond the shooting line.

In doing so, I accepted all calls to combat. Both Leona and Aya shot at me. Aya shot twice and came close once. Leona only hit me after I gave myself up to protect three Amazon children."

Pause.

"Okay. Aya has served in combat, no matter how one-sided..." Sophia began.

"I was armed for part of the fight," I interrupted hurriedly. Aya's first arrow.

"Accepted. You were a viable combatant before that as witnessed by other Amazons in earlier encounters. She and another Amazon shot at you without any other claiming traditional ownership of you," Sophia nodded. The Leader had given me a 'bye' on my intern status.

"Aya may bear an honorific," Sophia loudly proclaimed her change in course. To Amazons, screwing up was a distant third to not owning up to what you did and not learning from your mistakes. Besides, I could tell Sophia was warming up to me... as a male and an Amazon.

"My war band?" Aya chirped.

"You do not have a war band, Aya Epona... but whatever name you use among yourselves is not a matter I will concern myself with," Sophia stated firmly. "Fifty days, Cael." That was the end of it. Sophia turned and began walking uphill, conflict successfully resolved.

The Fatal Squirts had emerged with a semi-official status, I had emerged without a new series of wounds and I had wrangled forth a small down payment for all the love and loyalty Aya had showered on me.

"Best Daddy in the World!" Aya shouted. "Mamitu! Mamitu!" Destiny.

Amazons weren't huge believers in luck. They put their faith in training, planning, experience and diligence. For them, victory was a matter of destiny. Let the sloppy, treacherous Greeks invoke 'Nike' - Victory, or 'Tyche' - Luck for tossing them a positive outcome in battle. My side weren't thankful for the win they deserved.