

975

"Before passing your final verdict on my tongue, give me ten minutes in private to convince you of its multitude of other uses," my fearlessness riposted@www.novÉlworm.Cómm

"Boys with pink lips do not interest me," her eyes narrowed.

"Me neither. See? We are already finding common ground in less than five minutes. Give me another century and I'll have 'letting him die slowly' off your list of possible ways for me to go," I proved I wasn't going away.

Shammy allowed, then crushed, a tiny smile.

"Last chance, Isharan - Ishara. I only came here to present my challenge to the current High Priestess. I have a pathetic, contemptible bit of filth to deal with," Shammy declared. She was referring to her death sentence.

Normally, the High Priestess was the final source of reprieve, but I got the feeling Shammuramat was committed to spilling a sea of Amazon blood to force her way to a pardon.

"There is no High Priestess. She took herself to the cliffs eight days ago."

"That was exceptionally insipid. What made her do that? I smell the copper taste of blood and burning stench of flesh on the wind. There is a war coming," she glowered.

"Too bad you are going to miss it," I sighed.

"Unlike you, I do not desire to talk my enemies to death," was her chosen insult.

"Due to your limited vocabulary, consistently bad attitude and onerously boring desire to have a one-track conversation, we should all count that as mercy."

"The only mercy any of you will see from me is knowing you have died a warrior's death," she threatened. As a man with a long history with angry women and a more recent bout with casual killers, I counted her continuing to talk, not kill, as a victory. Women lie all the time, very often to themselves.

"I can balance your gift of mercy with a gift of mercy of my own," I began chiseling away at her desire to return to the red, red haze of battle.

"I do not need your mercy, Ishara," Shammy answered.

"I am not talking to you, Shammuramat. I am talking to Anat." If looks could kill...

"I care nothing for Anat. They turned their back on me long ago," she spat. Having died in shame, she had no clue that all her descendants had long passed into extinction. She, like yours truly, was the last 'survivor' of our line.

"Your reckless self-loathing is appalling, Shammy," I grinned. She was PISSED-OFF!

"I am Shammuramat, Warrior-Queen of Assyria, Mother of Kings, She who slays all who oppose her. I do not need..."

"You are..." backhand. Oh, I saw it coming and was able to bend with the blow. It still hurt like a mother-fucker.@www.novÉlworm.CóM

"They need you, Shammy..." earned me an open-palm slap that attempted to snap my cervical spine.

"That's two, Bitch," Pamela sounded bored. "Wind up for another, the gratitude ends and the slaying resumes."

"For someone who has clearly never found the courage to take that long overdue trip to the cliffs, you have developed a sudden distaste for living," she said to Pamela.

"Think so, Shammuramat? I have gone to the cliffs and come back from the dead ahead of you ... and certainly with more insight and wisdom.

Before you give us another teaspoon of your arrogant disdain, take a good look at the man who stands before you - a REALLY good look."

Pamela was constantly educating me in Amazon lore - 'know your enemy' being a recurring mantra. In that case, I couldn't blame her for withholding a certain someone's history. No, not Shammy's. No, she meant to tell me, yet withheld that crucial tidbit because of my still fragile mental state and the impact she feared it would have. It turned out she was right to do so.

All three of us were bushwhacked by circumstance. Despite her general tendency to take no one's council, Shammy gave me a second, far more intense scan. She'd already felt something she couldn't identify when she was around me. Her Amazon 'stillness' and single-minded devotion to her mission had repressed her desire to dwell on those instincts.

I've been told that gay men go through the same emotional yo-yo crap that we straight dudes do. I was starting to think those people had been lying to me.

[Akkadian] "*****?" 'White Hair' Shammy whispered to me a nonsensical yet passionate sobriquet in a tongue she had no reason to think I knew.

Her face lost its rock-hard contempt for all life and became one of shocked recognition, love and sorrow. I was her 'White hair' and by that, I knew she was referring to the white horse hair crests every man in my (?) hand-picked fraternity wore on our helmets.

[Akkadian] "*****?" 'Black Cloud'.

If there was any doubt, it was the hair of white stallions, sacred to the Aryan people whose warlike mien I, the humble son of a potter from Umma, had adopted. For what seemed like an eternity, I lost the ability to discern the present from the past.

[WARNING: What follows is a diversion from the central storyline, but it is crucial to understanding why certain members of the supporting cast are behaving the way they are.]

(808 BCE near Halab in what is today's Northern Syria)

For me, Cael Nyilas, it was a return to last night's horrifying scene that engulfed me. The screams of dying horses and moribund men crying the pantheon of life's final regrets. Blood, piss, voided bowels and the stench of comingled sweat and leather filled my nostrils. The true cacophony of battle was all about. The battle shock faded into an innocuous background distraction.

In my heart of hearts, I felt at ease, even content. We were cut off and surrounded yet hardly hopeless. Men - my brothers-in-arms and the younger noble sons of Assur and Nineveh combined to put a press of shields, armor and flesh encircling us. Those 'pampered' aristocrats stank with fear and well they should. Death was still possible before their relief arrived.

I hurt... Shara (my deity?), I was wounded, but it meant nothing. I laughed; a primitive version of 'atheists and foxholes' passing through my mind. This body had lived through much worse. The closest man, her deceased husband's cousin, and I lifted the shattered wooden chariot off the person our circle was centered on. My arm was extended to her.

She was glorious, fierce and half-drunk with battle lust. I could feel her talon-like fingers through the leather and 'parzillu' scales guarding my bicep. She half jumped and was half pulled to her feet. Her kinsman presented her 'misplaced' sword, hilt first. In her eyes, I saw the burning intensity of the Shamash (Sun God... consort of Aya?) at the height of the Burning Season.

Her martial mirth exceeded any other noise as it passed her lips@www.novÉlworm.Cómm

"You took your time getting here," Shammuramat taunted me - not a true reproach. "I was so bored, I decide to take a nap in the shade of my conveniently overturned chariot." She defied all fortunes that conspired toward her demise; her own breed of madness.

"You looked so peaceful in your sleep, I didn't want to wake you," I bantered back. Her 'kinsman' scowled at my familiarity with his monarch. My champions - more like brothers to me than any kin born of my blood - had carved a gory swath to her stranded bodyguard. Mounted on Median steeds, we had pressed back the entourages of two Aramean kings bent on her violent passing.@www.novÉlworm.Cómm

A barricade of overturned, or unattended chariots gave us space to dismount and perform our very visible rescue mission. All the pieces were right where she wanted them; everything unfolding according to her plan. Focus the enemy in the center with her person and the banner of Assur while the rest of her chariots and all of her cavalry swept through an unguarded wadi and fell upon them from behind.

Brilliant. Somewhat less brilliant when faced with the desperate energy of our enemies, but her victory was already a certainty. The allied Western Kings were sure my command was attempting to snatch the Queen back to the safety of her infantry. Those hardy, foot-bound souls were still holding their own against the greater mass of the enemy footmen.

The children of rebellious nobles bent every bit of their remaining energy, squandered their last reserves to ensure Shammuramat didn't escape. If the positons were reversed, they would have eagerly abandoned their troops and sought safety to the rear. The idea of Shammuramat being overwrought with terror was absurd.

Our opponents' bellows for our blood turned into wails of despair. The charging, plumaged steeds of Assyria had appeared behind them. Our enemies had nothing left to slow the new arrivals down, much less stop them. For those who dared defy Shammuramat, Queen of all the Akkadians, the slaughter was just beginning.

"Come 'Alal' (that was me...); I promised 'Atarshumki' I would kick his head over his own city walls before sunset and I always keep my promises," she shoved one of my horse-holders aside and took one of my steeds. 'Alal' was not the name my father gave me. It meant destroyer and it was blasphemy to lay claim to it.

"Killing kings will cost you extra," was my impious response.

Assyrians nobility barely tolerated mercenaries most of the time. My men and I didn't care. I hadn't taken up the killing business to make friends and my troops felt the same way. What mattered to us was that their coin was good and delivered on time. That was a good thing because whores and merchants were loath to advance 'our kind' anything on credit.

"I'll meet you half way," she grinned manically at me while my fighters and I raced for our mounts. (Saving the junior nobility wasn't what she were paying us for.) "I'll let you take any prince you capture as a hostage." I nodded. My men cheered hungrily, despite the choking dust. As long as I didn't get too greedy, the Kings would pay for their sons. Now we had to capture the bastards.