

## 976

"Tübātu," I reminded them. 'Goodwill'. It was a polite way of saying 'stop your chariot, rest your arms and your mother won't have to come begging for your corpse'. It was best to let opposing nobility keep their dignity in our business. Today's enemy might be tomorrow's paymaster.

I blinked and things changed.

Planting followed harvest and harvest followed planting. It had long ago become a blur. Shammuramat had grown older. Her first son became king when he was of age. I had long exceeded my welcome and my desire to stay. I was fixed to this small patch of the greater world by a rare emotion - empathy.

It had come out of nowhere. We were campaigning against the Scythians raiding over the Zagros Mountains and followed them into Urartu. Night had fallen and I walked the camp as was my habit; being killed a few times in your sleep will make you err on the side of caution. Shammuramat was gazing out over the river Arkas.

"I though all the scouts have returned," I asked as I stepped to her side. A cool, early autumn breeze blew down the valley, tossing a few loose locks of her greying hair. She always had one patch shorn short which made her left-side braids prone to unwind.

"They have. We head back for Nineveh with the dawn," she murmured, her mind elsewhere.

"Do you ever dream of home?" she asked me out of the blue.

"No. I don't dream anymore. I rarely sleep and if I did, I would hope to dream of something less boring," I snorted in amusement. She had never talked about her home... to anyone as far as I knew.

"You will be going to Lydia when winter comes," she stated tensely.

"King Gyges needs someone with experience beating Cimmerians," I answered. The true reason was that I was no longer welcome on the Assyrian payroll because I insisted on recruiting only non-Assyrians into the ranks of my ferociously effective little band of one hundred; never more and rarely less.

"Shemtsu is a fool," she grumbled.

"That is unfair," I countered. My willingness to argue with her was one of my charms in her eyes. "He is an excellent Treasurer and he makes sure your vassals pay their tribute on time and in its full amount."

The silence was hurtful to me because Shammuramat was never one to obfuscate her thoughts, especially around me. It was one of her charms, to my way of thinking<sup>*www.NxvE@woR©.CoM*</sup>

"Salmu Eretu, the northern night sky has no answers for what ails you. Get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to start out cold before it bakes us," I called her 'Black Cloud' in Akkadian.

I had first used that name twenty years ago to insult her, highlighting her tempestuous nature. In the Assyrian court, having just received recognition for my quick thinking, Shammuramat had belittled my accomplishment - throwing my body between her, her unborn child (the man who was now not-so-gently ushering me to the border) and a Kassite noble and his retainer bent on killing them both.

Had my deed not been witnessed by half a dozen reliable sources, I wouldn't even have received that tawdry token.

[OKH] "He sought glory without risk," she spat out her insult in a tongue alien to this court. Unfortunately for us both, I had worked for a Babylonian family for a few generations and they had been kind enough to turn me from an illiterate commoner to a man of some education.

Ironically, they even taught me my native cuneiform long after my birthplace was barely a memory.

[OKH] "Well aren't you a black cloud on an otherwise waste of a day," I replied somewhat bitterly. Her eyes widened, then narrowed and then I heard her laugh for the first time.

[OKH] "Should I tell them what you said?" she mocked me and my predicament.

"But of course," I grunted in Akkadian. I'd screwed up. My inner thoughts were 'please not decapitation, please not decapitation' because getting my head on straight after that was a real bitch.<sup>*Ww@.f@vElwo(r)mm.cóM*</sup>

"You've been nothing but a black cloud bent on turning the choking dust at my feet into a grasping, muddy morass. Why stop now?" I announced loudly. If you are going to die, die well. Having died too many times to count, remembering my last words were all I had left to look forward to.

The guards, familiar with the Queen's temper and stunned into inaction by me clearly embracing a long, messy death, stood around uselessly. Had I been allowed a weapon in the royal presence, I might have thought which one to kill first.

"I gift you, a lowborn man of the South (Sumerian), with honors and you respond by insulting my wife?" King, Shamshi Adad V growled as he rose from his throne.<sup>*www.NóVélw@R©.co(n)*</sup>

"Husband," she stood to join him. I thought it was a pity she rarely smiled. "You asked that I too give a gift to my savior and the savior of our son (all unborn babies were sons back then until roughly half had the audacity to gender switch while exiting the womb). I have chosen." I was expecting my life for the moment and a day's head start to the border.

"It is your choice to make," the King allowed.

"From this day, until my passing, this man may always speak his mind in our lands," she demanded. She had a habit of fatally correcting anyone who saw her as less than co-ruler. The hesitation was deafening.

"As you will," Shamshi Adad V acquiesced to yet another of his wife's odd 'requests'. From that day forth we had been fast friends. She never asked about my immortality, where I was from, or how I ended up with my elite band of professional killers. I returned the favor. It was an unspoken understanding that in a few years, or decades, she would die and I would leave, not necessarily in that order. We had shared more years than I had given to any one person in quite some time.

"There is nothing left for me but ash," she declared with morbid certainty.

"Should any of us expect any better?" I did my best to offer words of comfort she would accept.

"Oh no," her noise was too bitter to be a laugh. "I had my own 'Life beyond Death' and it was stolen from me, along with my birthright."<sup>*Ww@.@ðv-Lw0xm.coM*</sup>

"We are chasing the thieves?" I asked.

"Yes and no," her face grew grim once more. "These were not the ones I was looking for. They share some bonds with some of the Scythian tribes who live on the far side of the Sea of Death (the Black Sea). These raiders weren't from those tribes."

"Why are you turning back?" I questioned. "You know your Assyrians are loyal. They will follow wherever you lead. Your son won't begrudge you these few hundred. I'll come too."

"Why?" she turned and looked into my eyes. She still had that blazing fire in her eyes. She was teasing me. If she asked, I too would follow and my men would follow me.

"The Scythians have been raiding the Lands of the Two Rivers from... well, before I graduated from 'spear for hire' to a 'seeker of a mastery of war'. The rich plunder of their camps will provide plenty of incentive for my men plus we can sell the horses when we come back," I stated.

"I do not have the years left to spend on such a campaign," she sighed. I had never heard a hint of defeat in her speech before. It was unsettling and rather tragic.

"I have squandered my years in marriage, being Queen and raising my boys. I tried to make Assyria my new family and I am revealed to be a fool. You had it right. We will always be outlanders. No matter how brave, loyal, just and smart, we would never be allowed in their sanctimonious circle," she said. "You. I should have ridden off with you after my first born was acknowledged (the present King Adad-nirari III)."

"We could have gathered up some more fighters, ridden over shattered Phrygia, to the narrows (Bosporus) and into the lands of the Thracians. There is a legend of a great river that pours out from the western shore of the Death Sea. What I seek is up that river."

"How many would we face?" I grew equally serious.

"One," she coughed. "Me." My confusion was obvious. "I am not asking you to fight me, Alal. I want you to come back for me."

"I can't. That is not how it works," I stated.

"How does it work then?" she looked into my eyes. The fire was there, but banked and waning. I didn't say anything. "I have never seen, or heard of you entering a temple."

"Your men go. You do not stop them, but you have given up any pretense of worship," she pressed. "Do you not believe that anything exists beyond your senses?"

"I believe," I sighed. "I believe people are fools for giving offering, pledging their fidelity, pleading for mercy, or extending thanks to any deity. Those Shar-an (gnats) do as they will, unless it is to punish us for treating them like the spoiled children they are."

Shammuramat regained her long-stilled laughter.

"I have always felt a kinship with you through our mutual bitterness."

"Bitterness comes with familiarity," I snorted in amusement. Lovers had passion. We shared a simmering anger that came from being irredeemably wronged.

"I was born Baraqu, the first son of a potter in some city that no longer matters. I was a failure as a potter and an embarrassment to my house and my clan," I began a story I hadn't told another soul in... I couldn't recall. "In those days, the Priest-Kings declared wars and demanded each clan of the city give forth a certain number of males to fight. My family volunteered me and two rowdy cousins.

Outside the gates, my clan elder gave each of us a cowhide shield and a spear with a small spindle of copper at the tip so we wouldn't think it was a staff. We marched... I forget which city we were fighting that time. Three days later we found the enemy behind a deep irrigation ditch that had dried out for the season. Our orders were simple - 'There they are. Attack!'

My elder was at the back of our mob, making sure none of us ran away. My older cousin made it across the ditch first, but was speared twice; once in the right kidney - I can still remember my first sight of blood - and once, piercing the shield and lodging in his ribcage. My second cousin and I were pushed from behind into the fighting. I stabbed at one shield, doing no harm.