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"They are not my people. They are the ones who denied me my proper place in the world and robbed me of my future. Before I die... it is too late," her powerful frame bent under the weight of her encompassing doom. "Have either of us asked anything from the other?"

"No."

"I am asking now. Alal, come back for me. Find a way and bring me back so I can resolve this unfinished matter. Promise me," she looked back over the lake. $\mathbb{W}w.\left(\cdot\right)\varepsilon\check{v}\hat{e}\textcircled{\text{W}}o\textit{r}m.c\hat{o}M\mathbb{I}$

"That is not something within my power," I reminded Shammuramat.

"You will find a way."

"I will continue to decipher how the divinities, demons and spirits accomplish it - one day." Sleep called to her while I had found something else to roam my thoughts while slumber eluded me. "I cannot promise you..."

"If you cannot promise to come back for me," her words hung there for several minutes. "Avenge me."

'Avenge me' plus researching the keys to reading the Veil and finding the spots where a mortal could slip through to the God-like realms and the Land of the Endless Black Sands could take forever.

"Why?" That wasn't 'why should I?' or 'why is your call for vengeance just?' I would because I had long held the belief anyone I called 'companion's was one with me against all existence.

I had long ago added Shammuramat to that small list. Harm one and we all bled. We paid blood for blood, either twofold, fivefold, even tenfold if they really pissed us off.

"I had a twin sister, but she was not my twin, or my sister. Everything I won through feat of arms and martial cunning, she accomplished with soft words and clever ploys," the exiled Amazon began.

"Artimpasa, of my blood and the house of Anat, challenged me for the leadership of our tribe when our Great-aunt died. Despite my obvious favor with the Goddess, my so-called wise and courageous elders chose my twin over me. I immediately called my sister out to let combat decide who was truly the selection of our ancestors.

Like the coward she was, my sister declined. Before the next rising Sun turned the grey fields to gold, I came for her, cut down her guardian and dueled her. For all her weakness of character, she was nearly my match in skill. I was gravely wounded before I ground down her defenses. I forced her to her knees, gutted that bitch while she still breathed and read my fate in her entrails." $\text{ww}\mathbb{W}.\text{no}\mathbb{V}e\mathbb{I}.\text{w}(\cdot)\mathfrak{R}\text{mm}.c\hat{O}M\mathbb{I}$

"I promise you," I pledged to set my sails into the unknown - the uncharted - the destination sane men avoided out of the fear of madness and practical ones simply out of fear. We never spoke of it again - not one word. She was sullen and withdrawn on the way back and I knew it was my time to depart soon after our return to Nineveh.

'Come back for me'.

It was a year later. Black Cloud knew all along that her days were numbered and the sickness inside her would never relinquish its stranglehold over her. Cancer maybe? It didn't matter. No apothecary knew any cure and she would take nothing for the pain, choosing to die with a clear-mind, even as her physical form wavered and perished around her.

I had been barred from her funeral by her son, the King. My people, the Sumerians, were derogatorily called 'clay-eaters' - a man from the mouth of the Twin Rivers. I would never be the equal of a true Akkadian. That my people had been irrigating with canals, building walls and trading with the cities of the far off Indus while Akkadians were wandering goat-herders meant nothing.

No one who mattered remembered. Had any man not of Shammuramat's blood called me that to my face, I would have cut them down. They knew it; she knew it. To stop the bloodletting, she had sent me to Tyre to take care of matters best left to merchants and other professional liars. True until the very end, Shammuramat was like me, an outsider.

She never again spoke of her people, but I saw that void haunting her eyes that came from having no place to call home - akin to me. Umma was nothing more than a dusty mound the last time I went back. I had found onagers grazing in the inner sanctum of the temple of Shara, once so forbidden and frightening. The herd wasn't afraid to graze on the hallowed grounds. I still believed in gods and goddesses. I just hated them for their false favors, their insatiable hunger and their conviction that they were better than humanity.

The night of that fiasco of an award ceremony, she had me dine with her court. A place of honor was set aside for me, only one step down from her exalted majesty. I lied to those nobles and aristocrats about of my home and upbringing in order to expunge some of my commoner stench from their refined nostrils. I revealed nothing of the 'magic' that allowed me to take a spear piercing my chest and exiting my spine and not only living, but quickly dispatching the offending lancer as well.

Without mentioning that 'little' detail, I regaled my hosts with the blow by blow encounter with the Kassite nobleman, exaggerating his bravery in the attack and then the bowel-loosening terror that he exhibited when he realized who he faced... the Queen, not humble old me. Even then, she laughed at that conjured memory: me downplaying the saving her two lives.

She had been laughing while she decapitated the noble's charioteer and I was shoving a dagger into the eye of the princeling who had so offended us both. The result of that 'sacrifice' on my part was now sitting on Shammuramat's throne: her eldest son. He had officially forbidden my attendance at the vigil and the funerary rights, although I was too far away to care.

'Come back for me,' she had made me promise. It was hopeless. Every woman I loved died. Every man who guarded my back, broke bread with me and shared my wine would end up just as dead. The joke was on the Assyrian court because the final act of contempt was mine. I hadn't been a simple sell-sword for some time - centuries.

I had finally figured out that as powerful as any weapon in my hand was, wealth in all its shapes was better. I had bribed a slave to secret my helmet in her tomb while darkness gripped the land. I had also paid off a wine merchant and a few 'red-lips' to entertain the tomb guardians so the slave could complete that mission.

They had buried her and placed heavy stones upon her grave. Part of it was honoring her. Part of it was fear as well. Even coughing blood on her death bed, she scared the crap out of some of the most ruthless people I had ever fought for and against. I didn't blame them.

'Come back for me'.

There was no coming back from death for anyone, but me. My only fears were mutilation and burning. Those took time to recover from. Fear of angering some selfish entity by violating a tomb barely registered. My shield-bearer handed me my new helmet. The trip to Tyre had not been a total waste. This land smelled like her. The winds whispered to me the sound of her bow and the cleaving of her blade.

West? East? South... I hadn't been to Egypt in a while... not since I realized that all gods lied. Even with an arcane tradition older than me, no magic their pantheon would teach had brought one Egyptian back from the dead. In the Nile's favor - it wasn't here. I decided on West. That held the best chance of me being able to drown my grief in a lake of blood.

Besides, there were rumors from beyond the Cimmerian straits... rumors of long-hair warriors with shrill war cries reminiscent of the Temples of Ba'al and the screams of virgins as they were sacrificed by being tossed into pits of flame; not a noise you soon forget. I might find her kin there and let them know she had passed into oblivion... as I took their lives and inflicted the vengeance time had denied her. Amazons.

'Avenge me'.

"Cáel? Is that you, Alal?" Shammuramat gazed down at me. "You never came back and I can tell you never avenged me either." That was more a stock assessment than a condemnation.

"No, he is not Alal," Pamela intervened. "Nor is he Baraqu. He is Cáel, Alal's grandson."

"That is impossible. He... you said you could never have children," Shammy regarded me while voicing her doubts to Pamela.

"No. Wait!" I had collapsed. The absence of pain suggested I had been grabbed before I hit the dirt. Many hands helped me up so I could balance on shaky feet. "Wait... Pamela, how do you know who Baraqu is?" Pamela's jaw clenched tight. "You cannot cross over to the Endless Black Sand unless you have your true name" and Cáel O'Shea must have found a way to get half of his name back. $\text{ww}\textit{-w}.\text{no}\hat{v}\hat{e}\textcircled{\text{W}}o\textit{r}m.\left(\cdot\right)\text{c}\hat{o}M\mathbb{I}$

Bread crumbs.

"Pamela, you somehow found who/what/whatever was Baraqu's soul fragment and gave it back to Cáel/Alal/Granddad... so he could pass on."

"But he cannot truly die while a portion of his soul remains in the Sunlit Realm," Pamela's look of pain sent my way was worse than heartbreaking.

She knew. My mentor and friend could end the existence of the greatest enemy the Host had ever known and by doing so, complete the task destiny had placed before her. She knew where the third piece was. Now I did too. The purpose of Carrig's device had been more than a memory dump.

It was a catalyst to wake up the slumbering shard that was part of the patch-quilt of my soul.

"Shit! Didn't JK Rowling do something exactly like this to that freakazoid, Voldemort?" I groused. Pamela stepped up and hugged me tight. She was crying $\text{w}\mathbb{W}(\cdot)\mathfrak{f}\mathfrak{I}\mathfrak{Q}\mathfrak{P}\textit{-s}\mathbb{W}.\varepsilon\left(\cdot\right)\left(\cdot\right)\text{c}\hat{o}M\mathbb{I}$

"I'm always going to have eyes on you now that you know," she whispered into my ear.

See, Pamela would be denied entry into the Hall of her Cotyttia ancestors while any part of Cáel/Alal/Baraqu still 'lived' and that final piece of the puzzle was inside me.