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"If it is you, or me, Pamela, it will be me first," I mumbled back. I would pay the price to keep Pamela out of hell and that was what she was afraid of. Shammy shook us apart.

"Why don't you try and explain this to me?" the former queen commanded.

"Alal found a way to bring you back," I smiled at her. "He kept both promises. For a thousand years he has bent a great deal of his time and resources on destroying the Amazons - us, thus avenging you.

"As for 'coming back for you'; Granddad's - your Alal's - research uncovered that Sarrat Irkalli's first gift, that word, among other things, made him incapable of ever finding the missing pieces of his soul.

"He and anyone under his direction was purposely blinded to their hiding places and if he drew close they would move away. So he devised a way to recover them. The first part of his plan was conceived before you died.

"He knew the value of funerary goods and how they were carried over into the afterlife."wWw.N@veLw(o)(:m.coM

Shammuramat patted her helmet - my helmet, or more accurately, Alal's helm with its crest of white stallion hair. The first of many tears worked its way down her cheek.

"What he gave you was more than an article of armor, it was the very symbol of his 'legend'; an integral part of the impression he made on the Weave of Destiny, courtesy of Sarrat Irkalli.

"He knew that piercing the Veil was pointless if he couldn't find you, so he made sure he could when the time came. The second part of his plan was..."

"To get himself 'gakked'?" Dellah volunteered.

"That is nuts, even for your family, Cael," Virginia added.

"Hush before I cut off your wagging, mongrel tongues," Shammy snapped. I lowered my head.

"They are my guests, 'Black Cloud,'" I sighed. "Respect me, or leave."WwW.ñóv&Fw@rM.co@

"You don't tell me what to do," she turned her confusion-stoked furor on me.

"You are right. I don't tell you what to do. In fact, I'm finished telling you anything," I glared back.

"Have a nice walk out of the desert," I said as I turned to leave. No one should be surprised that she grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back around.

"We aren't done," she snarled. "What happened to 'White Hair'? What were his plans?"

"To all who value my dignity, or have affection for me," I spoke loudly, "shoot me before this Anathema harlot tortures even a single word from my lips."

A dozen weapons pointed my way. It was good to be loved. It was better to be loved and obeyed.

"Check and mate, Beast," Caprica stated calmly.

"He is a Head of House and you would give him an ignoble death, murdered by his own people?" Shammy countered.

"I'm not going to shoot him," Caprica gave a brittle smile. "I can't promise you what the rest will decide on as being appropriate."

"It only takes one of us," Rachel pointed out. "I love him. Make of that what you will."

"You don't want to die," the former Queen pinned me with her gaze.

"You are absolutely correct. I am fresh out of any desire to die before screwing five hundred women. I don't have the guts, nor is my despair so deep as to embrace this unwelcome suicide. I've done that the prerequisite number of times this year, and it is only July. I've met my quota, so I really, truly want to live," I explained.

"Still, my duty is clear. If you are not with us, you are against us, Shammuramat. If you choose to act as if the only thing that matters in life is yourself... my oaths to the Host don't leave me much wiggle room."

"This isn't over," she seethed, even as she took a step back.

She wasn't leaving, only claiming this conflict was over. Nope. Not going to happen. Not by a long shot.

"Come. Sit with me, Sister," I addressed her. I handed my holstered Glock to Priya. I was mindful that the camp was preparing for evacuation and wary of further attacks.

"I will not," Shammy cut a dramatic figure, pivoting away with her posterior-length damp hair whipping behind her. My surrendering of weapons implied I wanted to negotiate. She was rejecting that offer.

"As a very wise woman once said, 'destiny cuts both ways.

If we listen, it prepares us for what we must do. Destiny also places us in situations where we know what should be done. We do not hide behind such concepts as Fate. We Amazons bow with respect to Destiny because she gives us the freedom of choice. We know what we must do, but the voice, step and blow are ours to make.'

"Alal manipulated Destiny to bring you back. Mission accomplished. He sacrificed his immortality because of his promise to you," I grinned. "Welcome back and have a nice second life. Before sending Granddad away forever, I'll ask him if it was worth it."wWw.m@veLw@rM.co@

"An empty jab," she mocked me. "You won't give up your life to kill him."

"I don't have to," I chortled. "I now know there is a way to rip a person's soul from their body. Removing that rancid piece of filth belonging to Grandpa 'Cael' from the real me will be a pleasure. Even my ability to do it is thanks to you saving my life multiple times this morning. How rich is that? At least you are consistent in your ingratitude."

It was a combination lie/gross exaggeration. I didn't know what Gong Tau did and I was a long way from making one of their spell casters cough up the knowledge, but she didn't know that. I had gotten her to reengage in conversation, plus imperiled my life at the same time. "You know nothing!" she screamed.

"I know a self-deceiving, malicious cunt when I see and hear one," I calculated the distance between her and my upcoming battery.w@veLw(o)(:m.coM

"Your sister wasn't weak, she was smart." Shammuramat had passed the ability to articulate clearly; her scream was more animal than human.

"The Host couldn't afford your manly way of thinking. They couldn't afford the infighting. And they certainly couldn't afford a leader that put her own desires over the welfare of her House. Basically, they couldn't afford you. Your sister loved you so much that she couldn't bring herself to kill you." I became more and more gripped by that ancestral rage.

"I know this because I know there was no way you could beat her guardian, a champion of Anat, and then your twin. No way. See, I am only beginning to understand Amazons, but I know women rather well. I know love and hate ... and you aren't even a difficult read."

A bloody, red storm was about to break.

"You don't want justice. You want validation to cancel out the look in your sister's eyes as you executed her. I know you didn't hang around for the judgment of your sisterhood. No, you gave your sister an ignoble end by causing her to decide between her sister and her House... and she chose you. She let you live at the cost of her own life - she loved you that much.

It seems loving you is hard on a person's afterlife," I continued. We were a breath away from carnage. I've seen women vicious, selfish, conceited, deceitful and vengeful. I'd also seen their hearts break. It was never a welcome sight to my eyes. Something inside her cracked, then crumbled. This wasn't my 'lover' lore. It was from one of the 'I'm lonely and it's your fault' lessons.

Women wanted their conflicts to be emotionally satisfying. Men wanted to make themselves look better, smarter, stronger and more successful. Women lied to be 'right'. I crudely called it the Cleopatra syndrome. 'De-Nile's' any fact that pointed out your wrongdoing until you could deny the 'fact' was a fact at all. It then became a rumor before it finally became a fabrication of your enemies.

The end product is the woman believing her own tale, I shit you not. Men are caught up by their lies. Women are held hostage by theirs. That is one of the huge gulfs between the sexes; men fight using facts, or fight their way out of their own lies. The ladies fight for the truth - their own, imaginary truth.

They rarely give up that truth, though they will publically deny it for the sake of resolving the argument. Guys, don't think for a second she believes she's wrong. The woman will get around to punishing you later. Scarce were the reactions I was getting from Shammuramat so the abrupt abandonment of her lies caught me off-guard, until I considered her abysmal history.

Her timeless wanderings in the Endless Black Sands, every step on the residual debris of all those souls sentenced, as she was, to that desolate landscape devoid of meaningful positive sensory input. The only stimulation you were given were the visions of the wreckage of the life you left behind.

Despair had shattered those 'lesser beings' and their spirits crumbled into the fine dust that others trod upon. That lonely existence had stripped away so much of her until only hate and hope remained. She held on to hope that an ageless friend would succeed ... because he always saw a task through to the end.

The timeless torture had eroded that, yet it was her only way to assuage her anger. In the same way, her hate had dwindled until only two aspects remained - the memories she clung to concerning her motivations and the memories that led up to that crime... and they didn't mesh. The lies she had built up to secure her rage had gone from an unassailable mountain fortress to a glass house and my barb had been the final blow in a long series of deconstructions aimed her way.

Litmus test time. I handed over my tomahawk harness to Priya as well.

"Salmu Eretu Anat, sit with me and talk about what we must do," I reoffered. That was both a gift (Alal's name for her, not her forbidden Amazon one) and an obligation (her acceptance of the name 'Anat'). I was Wakko Ishara.

My House didn't grovel before our enemies and beg for a cessation of hostilities. No, Ishara created the advantageous peace, leading with honesty and truthfulness until the rival negotiators broke faith. Unlike other diplomats world-wide, Isharans headed off conflicts, peacefully resolved skirmishes (fights that happened without a pledge of warfare), conveyed the High Priestess' overtures of a cease-fire, but never offered submission.

I could not bow before Black Cloud - I didn't have the authority. I couldn't pardon her - the only person who could do that didn't exist at the moment. Picking up Ishara's ancient mandate, I could seek an advantageous peace. Based on a hodgepodge of archaic policy and my audacity, I would turn an enemy into an ally.