

994

(The Lowest Moral Denominator)

My first week at Havenstone, I'd biked to work alone on most days and I'd enjoyed that. I'd have treasure it more if I had glimpsed my future. I loved people, not crowds. I knew about violence, yet I had no affection for it. I was a confirmed bachelor. Now I was staring down both barrels of marriage. I had had also become a walking arsenal with a lethal omnipresent entourage.

This situation was so fucked up that I had to stop by Caitlin's place just to see Aya. My favorite sprite gave me a hug and reminded me that I had to do what I could, not worry about what I couldn't do. She was my 9 year old Svengali. She was my little Valkyrie. In truth, she was the only woman knew I loved and that was the love of a father for his daughter.

On the elevator ride up to the penthouse suite of the Midtown Hilton, I thought about Dad. What would Ferko Nylas do in my shoes? It would be easy for someone who didn't know him to imagine my dad getting up on his high moral horse and telling me to just do the right thing... except that wasn't him. What he'd tell me was to not pass the buck. I had to deal with this, unless I knew someone else who could and would do it better.

It wasn't about 'being a man'; it was being a member of the Human Race. We all pitched in and got the job done, or it didn't get done ... and millions died because we refused to accept any responsibility for what was going on. That was my Dad - 'do what you can' and 'never be afraid to ask for help if you need it'. After the age of ten, he never told me I had to do anything. He'd tell me what needed to be done and leave it at that www.Nove11World.com

So I wouldn't forget the pictures I knew I'd be seeing before too long - the innocent dead. If the sorrow broke me, it broke me. Until it did, I could not turn away. I had to 'do what I could'. That put me heading to a meeting at three o'clock in the afternoon in the penthouse suite.

After my non-breakfast with Iskender, we had driven straight to Havenstone, where I demanded an immediate, private meeting with Katrina. This wasn't an info-dump and then out the door. No, I was part of the process now - one of those fools who were responsible for the lives of others. Katrina and I had argued about compartmentalizing my terrifying news.

Her reasoning was clear. We were at war with the Seven Pillars. The basis of the 7P strength was China, so anything bad that happened to China was good for the Amazon Host. I nixed that. It was Katrina's job to think about our security. It was mine to juggle how we related to the rest of the planet. Absent the Golden Mare's opposition, Katrina couldn't stop me from doing my job as I saw fit.

The Golden Mare was out of immediate contact, so we moved forward on my proposal. Katrina called Javiera, validated Vincent's call, and then suggested she bring in someone from the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Ft. Detrick. Katrina wouldn't tell her why www.Nove11World.com

I dispatched Delilah to talk to her MI-6 guy while I made my way to Nicole Lawless's law offices. I need to talk to my Aunts. An hour later, I dismissed a somewhat piqued Nicole from the room, then laid out the upcoming crisis to my Mom's clones. I hesitated a minute before dropping the other bomb - Grandpa Cael was back.

Was I sure? I countered with, "Do you know who Shammuramat was?" www.Nove11World.com

Why, yes they did; Grandpa had a bust of her in his main office.

"Well, she's back, in the flesh and that spells all kinds of problems".

The six aunts present agreed. They invited me to fly to Europe with five of them. Much to their surprise and joy, I agreed. I told them I would be a party of twelve with plenty of firepower. They were less pleased about that.

I exited that scene, only to engage in another, somewhat unrelated, bit of diplomacy. I met with Brooke and Libra for lunch. They brought Casper, who was seeing a specialist in New York and had expressed an interest in seeing me again. Into that volatile mix, I placed my request: 'Could Brooke put up a friend for a couple of weeks while I made other arrangements?'

Yes, this was a 'bizarre' friend. Yes, this was a violently bizarre friend. Yes, she walked around with enough weaponry to scare a seasoned SWAT officer. And yes, she was a mass murderer. Cool... if I agreed to stop by and see how this 'friend' was doing - and gave Libra advance notice too, then they were fine with it.

Thus Shammuramat - Saku became Brooke's roommate. Insane? Not really. Putting Saku inside Havenstone on a regular basis was going to result in a blood bath. Saku was abrasive and she was a criminal in the minds of her 'sisters'. This gave her an 'out', some space and time with a civilized person who she couldn't emotionally bowl over.

If Saku got physical with Brooke, we both understood that House Ishara was going to cancel her return performance. Amazons could defend themselves, so we were fair game for her rude behavior. Brooke couldn't, so she was hopefully out of bounds. Saku had agreed to the arrangement without comment.

She'd already figured out that no other Amazons wanted her around and there simply wasn't room at my place. With that chore done, I was able to see Miyako off before her flight to Tokyo by way of Seattle. Selena was with her, but not going. Miyako did have three Amazons in case things got rough.

The Marda House guard woman looked mature and humorless. Her age wasn't a problem. She was a grandmother, yet if she thought she couldn't keep up, she'd have taken herself to the cliffs before now. It turned out she had been in Executive Services before returning to House Marda. My diplomat ... I didn't know her, but she seemed eager enough. The member of House Ishara was a brand new recruit named Jenna.

She was from Acquisitions and spoke seven Asian languages, including Japanese. She looked absolutely thrilled to be heading off into danger. I instructed the younger two to obey the Mardan. In private, I 'advised' the Mardan that our main mission was to be of aid to the ninja. Information gathering would be secondary. More Amazons were on the way. She gave me a nod.

For this critical mid-afternoon meeting at the Midtown Hilton, Wieslawa lead the way off the elevator. Buffy went next, then me and finally Saku. Delilah and Vincent had already arrived with their appropriate factions. Katrina took a separate elevator, with Elsa and Desiree. Pamela was... somewhere. After she'd pointed out a half-dozen people from four different agencies in the lobby, she told me to not wait while she went to the bathroom.

At the door of the Penthouse were two familiar faces from the NYPD, Nikita Kutuzov and her partner, Skylar Montero. When Javiera's investigation followed me to New York, they had been drafted into the taskforce.

"Hey ladies," I smiled. My last meeting with Nikita hadn't gone well.

"Cael," Nikita smiled back. "How have you been?"

"More trouble than normal," I shook her hand.

"We can tell," Skylar relaxed somewhat. As Nikita's partner, she had to know that our relationship had soured when she started investigating me. Katrina's group came up.

"I think you are the last to arrive," Nikita informed us. This time, Desiree was the first one through the door. I could hear the conversation trail off. Wieslawa went next, then Katrina, me, Buffy, Saku and finally Elsa. I decided to toss 'civilized' behavior out the window seconds after entering. Virginia Maddox of the FBI, the initiator of the Amazon children's airlift, was here.

I hugged her and after a moment, she hugged me back.

"Priya says hey and," she blushed slightly, "she's counting the days - all forty-five of them."

"Don't forget - I owe you," I grinned then patted her shoulder. Javiera was next.

"Cael," she headed my familiarity off. She was a Federal Prosecutor after all.

"This is the head of this taskforce, Jonas Baker (deep breath) Associate Deputy Undersecretary of Analysis for Homeland Security (ADUAHS) (deep breath)." I extended my hand, so he shook it. He looked somewhat annoyed by this whole encounter. Javiera was duly nervous because of his poor initial attitude. The introductions went around.

Half way through it, Pamela showed up... from where, I didn't know. Delilah, her MI-6 boss and the British professional killer Chaz were there, much to the chagrin of the Americans. Vincent was there with Javiera. Cresky was representing the CIA plus there was ATF, ICE, Riki Martin (?) from the State Department and a man in a civil servant's salary suit and a military demeanor - Captain Moe Mistrano.

"Fine," Mr. Baker began. "I hope you aren't wasting our time." His gaze flicked between Katrina and me.

[Old Kingdom Egyptian] "May the Blessed Isis bring understanding to our meeting," I intoned. www.Nove11World.com

"What was that?" Baker turned on me.

"Praying for guidance," I replied. Isis wasn't in the Amazon pantheon, but I could sure use her help at this point. Baker was going from put-out to pissed-off. If that is how they wanted to play it, their choice. "Are you the specialist from Ft. Detrick?" I asked the Captain.

"Yes, I am and I hope this is worth my time as well," he gave me a steady gaze. Oh, I really needed that.

"Anthrax - China," I stated and weighed his response. Oh yeah, I had his attention now ... which meant his bio-warfare unit had some idea about what was happening in China.