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The second factor was the boogeyman of the West that had been burning bright-hot over the past twenty years - the Islamic identity movement. It wasn't just fanatics running around the Syrian Desert, or the Afghan/Pakistan border. It was a strong undercurrent in the Muslim world that recalled the halcyon days of the Caliphate.

The original Mongol Khanate hadn't championed any religious doctrine. It had been the Mongol-Turkish successor states that had turned Islam into a weapon to strike down their enemies. That was the history that Temujin and the Earth & Sky were embracing. This was both a jihad and a struggle to reassert their ethnic identity.

The Russian Federation had arrogantly discarded Turkish appeals. Turkish nationalists were incensed, but they were never big fans of Russia anyway. It was the commuters on their way to work who found this utter dismissal to be insulting. It was the Imams who spoke out against still more sectarian oppression. It was the journalists who wrote a few scathing articles about the new Russian imperialism.

When that tiny core of Earth & Sky seized power in those four countries, their power was more ephemeral than substantive. The important factors working against them were that they had relatively little power in those countries and no organized political support. (They had been a secret society, after all.) What they did have going for them was an antsy, dissatisfied public and an on-edge military.

Remember, the Chinese had launched a series of apparently unwarranted attacks into their nations only forty-eight hours ago and had given these countries some trumped up claims of combating terrorism. The militaries of Kazakhstan and Mongolia discovered that they were at war before sunrise. Not knowing the score, unengaged PLA border units began clashing with their Mongolian and Turkish counterparts.

In War as in Love, the same rules held true. The quality of your 'game' was secondary to who approached the girl first. If the girl was on the prowl, you were the answer to her desires. Unless the second guy to show up was remarkably superior, she'd stick with the one who recognized her qualities first.

Girls are not nearly as shallow and superficial as guys would like to believe. Unless she's looking for a three-way, she'll take the guy she feels is the least likely to stick with her for the night, rather than become a date-jumper herself. (If she is a party girl, all bets are off.) For the militaries of Kazakhstan and Mongolia, they were about to be that 'second guy' to get to Lady Victory if they didn't get moving.

If they hesitated much longer, they knew they'd get clobbered. The unknown person talking to them from the Ministry of Defense was saying that their countries were at war. Shots were being fired. If those generals and colonels had believed there was still time for rational discourse, they would have realized they were engaging in madness.

But every second that passed increased the likelihood of planes being caught in their bunkers, runways being cratered, their troops being caught in their barracks and their reserves left unarmed in their homes. The Khanate was broadcasting that a State of War existed. The legitimate governmental infrastructure hadn't adjusted yet... so those militaries went into 'pre-emptive' strike mode.

[End World News]

So the UN was meeting in Special Session, trying to figure out what had gone wrong in Central Asia. The UN representatives of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan didn't know what was going and as seasoned diplomats, they kept their mouths shut. Only four people in the UN knew the real score.

One was my old friend, Oyuun Tömörbaatar, Kazakhstan's Permanent UN Representative. He was fresh off the jet back to New York and most likely, the Khanate's silent ambassador. The other three didn't include the US. No, two of them were Sir Grant, Her Majesty's Representative, and David Donoghue, Ireland's Representative and member of the Illuminati - the O'Shea faction.

There also was yet another 'slight problem'. The former Mongolian Representative seemed to have vanished and his Youth Panel Advisor was handing over his own bona fides... which no one at the UN could confirm because the Mongolian Capital, Ulan Bator, was in the midst of a regime change. Until then, Tuguldor Batjargal could speak and talk, but not vote.

That news wasn't all that relevant to the Amazons. To the US and the Brits, it was critical. The US Cabinet was still assembling and had no specific orders for their UN Ambassador yet, so it fell to the United Kingdom to make the first move. From the minimal expressions Delilah and Chaz were slipping our way, the Amazons were getting 'Brownie Points' with at least one world government.Ww.nOv6lwoRm.c6m

I had little doubt I was gaining status in Temujin's eyes too. I had delivered diplomatic contact in less than eleven hours, even if it was the British, and not the Americans, putting forth the first feelers. I was soul-sick looking over at Katrina and Elsa. They respected my pain by not congratulating me on a successful diplomatic stratagem.Ww.nOv6lwoRm.c6m

St. Marie had already honored my initiatives by agreeing to send help to the ninja. I doubted such a mission was in the Amazon War Plans Manual. In their past, Amazons always fought alone. Even allies were little more than different factions fighting the same enemy. In the past two weeks that had changed.

By my interpretation of events, the Augurs had bound us to the Earth & Sky. By conception, I was tied to the Illuminati. I had manipulated my birthright via Vranus to intertwine the blood of House Ishara with that of the 9 Clans. Was I making a difference, not only within my Amazons, but to the World at large?

Maybe I was. I would have been happier if I wasn't being such a spaz, stumbling from one encounter to the next, hoping I was doing the right thing. I would have settled for doing the least harm. To survive this, I had to get back to my roots - ambitious playboy. I was going to let people down because of my sexual ambitions. Okay.

If I suddenly began to embrace traditional Western morality it was going to break me. I had to prioritize. I was giving women, trapped in the ghostly place between the outside World's secularism and Amazon spiritualism, immortality. I had two unborn daughters and one unborn son who might actually want me around as they grew up.

"Cáel?" Helena beckoned me. I hadn't heard her come in. I had no idea she was here, which implied another disaster had befallen people in life I cared about. She foisted a box on me. It was wooden, about 30cm x 30cm x 10cm. It had a simple latch that I flipped so that I could look inside. Inside was...

"We - the Isharans - decided that if you are going to make a pledge to this outsider woman, then you should give her something of us," she explained. "We were unaware of you making other arrangements, so three of us examined a few of the artifacts Krasimira had transferred to Havenstone and decided on this."

I put the box down on the side table. The necklace inside was beautiful, fragile and ancient-looking.

"It was the gift of a Parthian princess to an Isharan Emissary from... we think it is from the 2nd century," Helena explained. She meant 2nd century CE.

The artifacts transferred must have been from the repository of the Amazons - location unknown - that had been held in the Isharan vaults. My House had anticipated my mind-splitting day and selected an engagement gift for Hana Sulkanen.

"The small selection of rings was unpromising, so... we figure she knows you are unconventional," Helena shrugged.

I began crying. I hugged her, then motioned Buffy over to share in the 'family' moment.

"You are getting married?" CIA Officer Cresky ruined the mood.

"Yes. I proposed marriage to Hana Sulkanen and she has accepted, but circumstances interrupted my search for the ring," I interlaced deceptions with the truth.

I did not mention the timing of the arrangement in order to buy Hana some time to prepare for the CIA rectal probes coming her family's way. I had forgotten the company I ran with.

"Officer Cresky, if I may?" Chaz spoke in a smooth, yet lethal intonation. "I suggest you circle-file that bit of data." Cresky looked his way, still so sure he knew better than the rest of the room.

"Very well," Chaz nodded to Cresky. "Before you trip over your own arrogance, think about what we are doing here? Highly equipped mercenaries operating without concern for legal prosecution, bio-terrorism on a scale to rival the European colonization of the Americas, and a military conflict on your soil involving perhaps seven hundred well-armed, experienced light infantry and Special Forces... does any of that ring a bell?"

"Thank you for that summary, Mr. Whoever-You-Are," Cresky smirked. That lasted about two seconds before FBI Agent Vincent stepped over and landed a painful Gibb-slap (that is from NCIS) to the back of Cresky's head. "What the fuck!" Cresky spat as he stood up, spun around and began to draw down on Vincent.

Whoa... we are a fast crowd. Cresky's sixth sense kicked in just in time to realize every Amazon, two of the three Brits, two of the Illuminati and Virginia all held guns pointed at him. Vincent hadn't even bothered to defend himself.

"Everyone put their guns away," I stated calmlyWw.nOv6lwoRm.c6m

"Let me shoot him," I added with a vicious gleam in my eye. "I've got diplomatic immunity."

"Good point," Delilah responded gleefully. "Chaz, go get some of those curtains. We'll used them as a drop cloth. I'll call housekeeping."

"I like this plan," Buffy jumped in. "I think we can stuff his body in the refrigerator."

"I'll make sure to leave a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door when we leave," Helena finished up our murderous conspiracy. They weren't done with Cresky. Color Sergeant Chaz Tomorrow strode purposefully to the closest drapes and yanked them down with no effort.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do this," Vincent extended a palm to Chaz.

I couldn't begin to describe how stupid that was... had Chaz not been a consummate professional. He dropped the curtains, moved past Vincent and returned to his station by the M-6 leader who was continuing an unbroken telephone conversation. No sooner had we re-holstered our firearms...

"Sulkanen eh?" Senior Field Officer George Cresky looked back at me.

The entire time Deidre, Riki, Javiera, Katrina and Captain Moe were on their phones, giving and receiving information from their various organizations. That explained the lack of refereeing over the people with authority... unless you counted on me to be in charge. No one was. The ATF guy had open his laptop and was streaming some data with Elsa looking over his shoulder.