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"Hana Sulkanen, would you do me the honor of consenting to be my partner, spouse and better half?" I requested.

The conversations around us sputtered, then ceased all together. Even the wait staff was looking our way. Hana... Hana was stunned, quite literally. It began with a tremble in the lips. Her eyes watered up, then she gulped twice. Her eyes flitted over the necklace, then back at me.

"Yes I will, Cael Nylas," she sniffed. "I will be your partner, spouse and equal half."

A nod followed, then came the applause and murmurs of approval. I stood, placed the box in front of Hana, drew forth the ancient necklace and waited. Hana pulled her hair aside so when I stepped behind her I had no problem putting it around her neck and hooking the clasps. After that, taking my seat felt like such a relief.

"I... I don't know what to say," the maybe future Mrs. Cael Nylas regarded me with teary eyes. "I didn't expect something like this." She reached her right hand across the table.

"It gets better." I took her hand, turned it palm up then began tracing lines with one finger along her palm and wrist. "This makes you the 'presumptive' Princess of Hungary and Transylvania."

Hana didn't miss a beat.

"This is from our friends in Asia," she stated. "I'll make sure to use my aristocratic credentials when I get there." That scared me.

"You aren't seriously thinking about going there for the next few weeks, are you?" I grunted.

"I have to," she persisted. "No one knows what to make of this 'Khanate' situation."

"Um, war, plague and most likely famine before too long - those are all good reasons not to go," I urged her to reconsider.

"Cael, I'm the only one who can go that might make a difference," she stated defiantly.

"These are my employees and I can't leave them hanging in the wind while this situation re-writes the rules in that part of the world," she confounded me.

"Security?" I questioned.

"We have our normal security staff," she sounded less than thrilled.

Her people were there to stop trespassers and thieves, not true bodyguards. Week one, when I was alone, 40,000 Amazons seemed like the Mount Everest of obstacles. Now, I felt like having double than number still wouldn't be enough. Roughly 4,000 of my sisters were ready and able to perform offensive operations - 10% of our population, which was very impressive.

Given time, the Golden Mare could muster 5-6,000 more. The rest would guard the holdings of the Host and keep our internal economy running. Wars were hideously expensive. Unlike every other secret society, Amazons rarely used proxies and never fought combat by proxy. The 9 Clans were the same way...

"Ghost Tigers," I whispered.

"What?" Hana hadn't been able to make that out.

"I think I can get you two professional killers to protect you," I grimaced. The Ghost Tigers weren't bodyguards. Like the other eight clans, the Ghost Tigers were assassins.

They either operated alone, or in groups two - mentor and student. This technique made them incredibly hardy and resourceful. They also operated in Siberia and Turkish Asia - right where Hana was going. Asking Temujin for help would be counter-productive. Not only did the warlord need every man and woman he could throw into the fight, Hana was my business. WWW.NOVELWRITER.COM

By acting as his diplomat, I was fulfilling my military obligations to the Khanate. The extent of Temujin's charity had been to not take the Sulkanen holdings. The security of my yurt was still my duty and mine alone. I could ask Selena... a favor for a favor.

"If you succeed, I promise to listen to their advice," Hana compromised.

That wasn't a pledge to follow their advice. Hana would still do what she felt was right and in this case 'right' meant going into a war zone to look after her people - the men and women Jormo Sulkanen's investment group hired to work for them in that part of the world. A key part of that workforce operated the biggest refinery in Central Asia, which was pumping out the lifeblood of the Great Khan's war machine - diesel, gasoline, and aviation fuel.

The People's Republic could read an economic flow chart as well as I could. They knew the Achilles Heel of any modern military was petrol and the main sources of that for the Khan were the refineries at Pavlodar and Shymkent (aka Chimkent). Shymkent had been owned by Chinese interests and Hana was already hearing rumors that key facility operators there had been... liquidated.

Hana was heading out in two days - New York - London - St. Petersburg - Omsk and from there to Pavlodar by a corporate-owned Su-80GP if she could, or by Range Rover overland if flying was too unsafe. Unsafe?

"I'm not hungry," Hana announced as the waitress put our dinners before us.

"When do you have to leave?" she inquired, automatically assuming I had to be somewhere else... which I did.

"Later tonight," was the best I could do as far as my own safety was concerned. "Let me guess, you want me to go talk to your father."

"Absolutely. I have little doubt this will be public very soon and I don't want someone congratulating my Father tomorrow morning at work." I stood, retrieved my money clip and heard the waiter gasp. I smiled at her, then dropped three hundreds on the table.

"Cael, you are armed," Hana gasped softly. WWW.NOVELWRITER.COM

"Oh this." I shrugged. "I've cut down today because of the government meetings... that means three pistols, two tomahawks and one knife."

"Do we need to worry about the police?" she whispered once she came to my side. We were angling for the door.

"Thank you for your assistance," Pamela spoke to the Soccer Mom. "I'll make sure the Clintons put you on their Christmas card list." The woman looked thrilled. Pamela was tossing currency at the table she shared while Saku picked up her plate and a bottle of wine.

Wieslawa had been in the process of leaving when she mistook Saku's actions for civilized behavior and grabbed up her food and drink. The three of them were making for the exit. The maître de was about to intervene over the stolen accoutrements when Buffy and Helena walked in the door. One look at the Buffy storm front moving in encouraged him to seek shelter elsewhere.

"Don't!" I glared at Buffy. "Just don't." 98% of the time I liked putting up with Buffy's mood swings - tonight was the other 2% and she was going to have to suck it up. Pamela parted Buffy and Helena so I could lead Hana outside... where Velma and company were waiting for me with two GL-550's.

"Did you drive here?" I asked Hana. Hana was scoping out the security now encircling the two of us.

"No, I took a taxi," she informed me.

"My convoy it is, then," I accepted the reality that my bid for even limited freedom was at an end. I escorted her to the second black armored escort and trundled us into the middle row of seats.

Saku and Wieslawa worked their way into the back while Buffy sat with me and Hana. A minute later, Buffy finally broke the silence.

"You owe me an explanation," she stated as she stared at me. She didn't glare, just stared.

"He doesn't owe you anything," Saku grumbled. "He is your Head of House."

"You don't get to be a part of this," Buffy spat back at Sakuniyas. They were both angry.

"Buffy, he is..." Pamela got out. This was my problem, not theirs.

"Stop," I signaled Pamela and Saku. "Buffy, I ran away this evening because I'm not a team player. I never have been. I like to do my own thing and I've been happy that way."

I didn't join Havenstone to be a part of the Host. Initially, I stayed out of fear... fear that what limited freedom I possessed would be taken away from me. I didn't volunteer to be a member of a house. I certainly never dreamed of being the Head of a House. I don't want to be responsible for anyone but me. I certainly never sought out the forces currently tearing my life apart.

I'm doing the best I can, Buffy. All this crap has been foisted on me and I'll do the best I can because I feel that I can't stand by and do nothing, but don't for a second assume I like it, or want the responsibility. In case you missed it, part of my responsibility is the death of thousands, probably millions of Chinese and a land war in Asia.

The hard, cold facts are that I didn't do anything wrong. The Condottieri murdered my father, the Seven Pillars had been planning for years to make their play for Global Domination and the Earth & Sky had been preparing their atrocity for nearly twenty years. The Host's best chance of survival is to fight now. My decision on the 'Runners' was the correct one. WWW.NOVELWRITER.COM

That still cost Hayden her life and the life of around fifty other Amazons. I killed men in hand-to-hand combat, barbecued God knows how many more, and witnessed hellishly twisted souls enslaved by the Seven Pillars - and no one should have to see that. Buffy, "I put my hand on her thigh, "I didn't sign up for any of this. I never wanted to be a soldier, leader and diplomat of any kind, yet here I am."

"Cael, I only want to keep you safe and I can't..." Buffy began to make her case.

"Not happening," I interrupted (bad habit of mine). "My vacation tried to kill me. Buff, I was in the midst of a freaking army and I still nearly died." Pause. "Buffy, I think I've been trying to emulate Katrina's leadership style. That's a losing proposition."

She is way tougher mentally and has been a personal level to disassociate her emotions from a death toll. Not me. I am going to keep things on a personal level and that means I'm going to do things in person, not in person with my Death Squad. Is that clear enough for you?" I sighed.

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