

## 1009

"That is neither necessary, nor friendly," I countered. "We are supposed to be building bridges."

"Right now you are utilizing my resources to no good end I'm aware of," he mused.

"Is there someone else we can talk to?" I pleaded.

"No," Matthias scoffed. I nodded then looked to the closest of his two bodyguards.

"Is there someone else I can talk to?" I addressed the man. I turned my body as I did so, unmasking Pamela who placed a silenced .22 round into Matthias' skull via his right eye.

The man's brains turned to mush and he slumped over, dead.

[Hungarian] "Is there someone else I can talk to?" I repeated to the bodyguard. He stared at me. "You know that Matthias set us up. We don't blame the Black Hand, just him. He thought being in the 9 Clans would protect him - it didn't. Now, do you want to talk, or leave?"

Bodyguard #1 looked at #2.

[Hungarian] "They will let you leave without conflict," Selena spoke up. "They will honor my agreement with the Vizsla." The two men started backing out. The Vizsla was the Head of the nearest Black Hand Chapter - similar to an Amazon Head of House.

[Hungarian] "Take the body with you," I requested. They cautiously returned, grabbed Matthias under each arm and dragged him away.*www.novell.com*

[Hungarian] "We will be in touch," the lead bodyguard stated. It wasn't meant to be a threat.

[Hungarian] "Selena, you can leave with them, if you wish," I said.

[Hungarian] "I'm okay," she relaxed. Once they left, she looked at Pamela. [English] "Very smooth. I didn't even see it until too late."

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Riki blathered. Odette ran to her side and help her into a free chair. "I almost got killed. I mean, I looked into his eyes and I knew he was going to kill me. What have I gotten myself into?"

The poor woman was trembling uncontrollably.

"I think the lesson here is that the only people we can rely on are each other - no one else," Vincent stated.

"He was going to kill me," Riki cast about. I went and knelt beside her.

"The second that man threatened your life, he was dead, Riki. No one does that to any member of the team. You do your part and we'll keep you safe," I patted her hand. Running away to the safety of the embassy would have been so easy for her. I wanted her to stay. The choice had to be hers.

"You really killed him?" Riki whispered.

"Deader than Hell," Odette piped up. "Crossing one of C  l's ladies is the fast track to the Autobahn of Pain," she boasted on my behalf. That statement grabbed Riki's attention.

"Who are you again?" Riki inquired.

"I am Odette Sievert," my bed buddy smiled.*www.novell.com*

"What do you do? What are your skill sets? Who are you with? Why are you here?" came next.*www.novell.com*

"Oh... C  l met me at a restaurant where I was a waitress. I slept with him that night. A week later, I stopped going home and I've been with him ever since."

"I thought he was engaged to Hana Sulkanen?" Riki was puzzled.

"Oh, he is. I'm his fuck-buddy and his least crazy female friend," Odette clarified. Pause. "I'm a high-school graduate too."

"But why are you here? You don't even have a gun," Riki kept babbling.

"I don't know how to use a gun yet, or martial arts, or all those nifty weapons the rest of this troupe use, but I'm going to one day. Right now I'm here because C  l is pretty stressed about his trip to see Aya... and I wanted to go on one of C  l's adventures," Odette confessed.

"So... you are the comedic side-kick?" Riki blinked.

"Hmm... sure, that sounds good," Odette smiled. "Wait! In honor of our quest to Transylvania: Have you ever heard the story of the female vampire and male werewolf who fell in love with each other? They had to fight the opposition of their families and other people, they even lost friends but in the end they got married and lived happy together for a time."

"Yes?" I asked.

"But tragedy came when the werewolf died suddenly the day they celebrated 25 years of marriage," Odette faux-frowned. "Does anyone know why?" We looked around.

"Silver anniversary?" Vincent guessed.

"Yes," Odette exulted. "The autopsy determined the werewolf couldn't withstand their 'Silver anniversary.'" Groans went around the room. Odette seemed inordinately pleased with herself. "Wait! I've got more," she pleaded. I hugged her. The French kiss was a welcome addition. The 'outsiders' took their second deep breath.

Some things were sinking in. Pamela. Everyone had seen her as a quirky, unique gray/white-haired pony tailed lady, constantly joking with me. She was that. She was also a remorseless killer. Matthias had screwed up twice and that was all it took for him to become a corpse. Delliah and Virginia had gone down that road once with her already at the Summer Camp.

It was a chilling reminder that Pamela dispensed death effortlessly and with swift precision. Chaz appeared more at ease after that revelation. If he had any doubt that the majority of his companions were consummate professionals, the last six hours had dispelled them. As long as we were on the same side, he was in good company.

Virginia and Vincent were still law enforcement, so Matthias' execution was disturbing. In context, it was also something they could live with. The man had been a human predator, Riki's life had been in danger and the danger had been dealt with without risk to Riki. They weren't about to advocate sidewalk executions for jaywalking, but the outcome was acceptable.

Riki... was more happy to be alive than anything else. In a perverse way, she was more onboard with the program than before Matthias had shown up. Why? We had killed someone to protect her. Unlike the impersonal firefight at the Metro 3 station, this had been upfront, in her face. There had been no angry words and escalating tensions.

Her 'team' felt her life was being threatened and they removed that threat. In the annals of Foggy Bottom, she'd heard about those kinds of 'Cold War/Terrorist' encounters. Saigon, Tehran, Benghazi... all places where State Department personnel had been in life and death circumstances. Now she could add Budapest to that list... though she knew she couldn't.

This mission had 'Plausible Deniability' written all over it. If she did survive this, her outlook on those late night drinks with other members of the Foreign Service would be very different. There were no 'exciting shootouts' and 'pulse-pounding races for freedom'. Her new experiences had demolished those quaint Hollywood notions. No, Riki had decided that the next person to put her at risk should end up being dead just as fast as Matthias snuffed it.

After those introspections, we had to grapple our next two problems (meeting our contact had been task one). Our 'safe house' had enough food for four people for three days. We needed more food.*www.novell.com*

Like all great espionage missions, we decided to split up and look for clues. Not really. Pamela wanted to get the lay of the land and Rachel wanted to get more food. I wanted to go with Pamela - I was wired, so she took me, Delliah (she was supposed to be keeping an eye on me) Saku (because we didn't want to fight her off) and Selena (ditto, plus we didn't trust her).

Mona had to stay to tend to Virginia and Chaz. Rachel wanted Charlotte to check the wiring for the place as well as figure out which walls we could blast through if horizontal mobility became a question. Riki was in no shape to go anywhere. Vincent would have to stand watch over the rest. That meant Odette and Wieslawa were going out with Rachel and Tiger Lily on a food run.

(The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo)

Fate is a bitch who has my life on speed-dial, or I'm exceptional luck for other people ... which I pay for in blood - take your pick. Rachel and I were in phone contact every ten minutes to be on the safe side. Close to our domicile was the local Red Light district. It was several blocks of prostitutes with the added bonus of an open air black market.

The place was a monument to moral depravity, criminal enterprise and human misery. The cops were blatantly bought and paid for (or scared), the streetwalkers too young, too strung out, or too burned out to care. I could buy any weapon from a switch blade to that one guy who swore he could get me an RPG-16 and 4 warheads.

Drugs of every stripe, bootleg DVDs, dog-fights and blood sports were all being hawked. For a pittance, I could beat a homeless guy into unconsciousness. It was also a tourist Mecca for things illegal and illicit - a bit of a 'walk on the wild side'. It wasn't that the tourists were all that safe either.

Everyone was in danger from the street gangs; and on the top of that rubbish heap were the Romano (that's male gypsies to the less ethnically sensitive). Like the Amazons, they were pretty immune to penetration by their enemies, had a callous disregarded for the rest of humanity and made good use of their small numbers.

That was where the similarities ended. They were a gang of thieves, thugs and pimps - criminal entrepreneurs. Their threat came from the most organized and ruthlessness, not from any real martial skill. They had a unique language which they causally bantered about in. Why Grandpa Alai knew it, I don't know, but he did.

As I said at the start, The Great Weave of Fate has my ass on speed-dial. We found an eatery open this late and were learning why it was open at 11 pm in this neighborhood. The gang would have wrecked the establishment if the owner had tried to lock the doors. His, his wife and niece served up the palatable, cheap fare with nervous smiles.

Two older Romano and a younger punk, close to my age, had a table close to the door. When Mom came out to deliver their orders (the rest of us had to go to the counter), they kid wasn't happy with it. He pushed Mom aside and went back to the kitchen to retrieve the young lady. For some 'unknown' reason, the whimpering, struggling girl was not enamored with his charms.