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"Mmmm.... nice ass," I observed. "So, how the pain begins?" I addressed the room behind me.

"What makes you think you are about to experience pain?" Saku replied.

"Oh," I turned around, "you are not going to kick my ass for letting those three walk?"

"No," Pamela snorted. "We will wait until we deal with this heir to House Illuyankamunus, then ambush you the moment you feel safe."

"Does someone want to bring me up to speed on what is going on?" Selena queried.

"House Illuyankamunus is the house of the dragon," I pointed to Alkonyka and the gorgeous Nordic-style dragon tattooed along the entirety of her right back and shoulder. The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. I checked. Yes, I had Fortune Cookies.

"The lady who walked away has come back from Underworld Hell with Ajax from the Trojan Wars to wreak vengeance on the Amazons." I gave her a lopsided grin. "Molpadia's mom was mocked by Ajax and she is hoping that she can restore her mother's honor and let that woman find piece with her ancestors... Achilles having already exiled to the Elysium Fields."

"Ahh..., as Miyako and Estere said, you are a sexually-charged, kind-hearted yet charming idiot," Selena nodded in comprehension of the warnings of her fellow female 9 Clan killers.

"What is with the 'Death Song' thing?" Delilah inquired.

"That's what her name means in the Amazon tongue," I exhaled, happily having avoided, however temporarily, a beating. "They have loads of cool ones - 'Bends copper tubing with her thighs', 'Frisky with Wine', 'Gets naked at the river'...." I bantered. I saw that Alkonyka was feeling both tired and left out.

[Hungarian] "Now, how can we help you," I said, "and, do you speak any other languages?"

"I am comfortable with English, though I speak Romanian, German, Serbian and Russian as well," she volunteered.

I love European girls and their oral skills.

"I am still not sure why you will help me," Alkonyka began our pow-wow. We had exited our hideout and were making our way back to our 'safe house'. "You don't even know what you are up against," she pointed out. She wasn't condescending. She'd seen us fight and knew we were well armed.*wWw.NaveLwo:rm.cOm*

"Enlighten us," Delilah requested.

"I am hunting down an international white-slavery organization," Alkonyka started. "They lure rural girls from Romania, Moldavia and the Ukraine with promises of modeling, or secretarial work. When they show up for the audition, they kidnap the women, transport them to a city further west and force them into prostitution.

Since the girl doesn't know the language of the city she is in and has no identification, she can't run to the authorities," she continued.

"They grabbed your... younger sister?" Pamela asked.

"Yes," Alkonyka agreed. "When she didn't show up the night of her 'interview', I went looking. I found three of the scumbags closing up shop and made them tell me what had happened."

"Made them?" Pamela mused.

"My Father was former Romanian Special Forces," Alkonyka answered. My hereditary homeland had gone from Hungary, to Romania, back to Hungary and finally ending up as Romanian territory in the twentieth century.

My ancestors called themselves the Székely and were one of the three races of Transylvania (the others being the Saxon Germans and the Romanians). "He taught me how to fight, shoot and live off the land. He and my Mother perished in a railway accident four years ago."

"How do you know she is still in Budapest?" Selena inquired.

"I don't," she replied. "I've been circulating my sister's picture and the picture of three other girls who were taken at the same time on the streets, rail stations and to the police."

"You've been putting yourself out there as bait," I reasoned.

"Yes," Alkonyka announced defiantly.

"Good," I smiled. "That should make finding them all that much easier." No, I wasn't calling her stupid or frantic. She was utilizing her meager resources. "Do you know anything else?"

"Only a name - Branko," she admitted.

"That still doesn't explain how and why you are helping me - us, not really?" Alkonyka was still puzzled.

"We are the best kind of friends you can have," Pamela grinned wickedly. "Men and women trained from the cradle to be warriors, slayers and to be utterly fearless - and who see you as part of our family."

"Because he and I come from the same part of Transylvania?" Alkonyka mused. "That's nuts."

"Welcome to my life," I snorted.

"Okay, what do you want from me?" she reposted.

"After we find your sister, I'll need help finding some people in our home region," I said.

"Who?"

"Hopefully I'll know by the time I get there," I smiled. She looked at me.

"Is he joking?" Alkonyka scanned the others.

"I so wish he was," Delilah smirked. "Just wait for the punch line. It is a doozy."

I was getting curious about exactly when I was going to see Dot Ishara again. I shouldn't have bothered. Walking up the stairwell in our concrete gulag, a piece of mortar fell off and clocked me on the top of my head. Only my patented Nylas Super-Impact-Resistant Skull saved my brains from shooting out my ears. For me, it was lights out and a killer hangover on the horizon.

{Ishara}

"Wake up," Dot Ishara sang to me. My pain-free noggin was in her lap and she was once more playing with my hair. "I've averted my gaze." Looking into her eyes was unhealthy*wWw.NoVELwôr©.côm*

"What hit me?" I sighed. I was looking around. This visitation, I was on a wind-swept plain. I could hear horses neighing in the distance. I was on the primeval Great Hungarian Plain - the Alföld.

I nestled the back of my head into her bountiful bosom.

"A sizeable piece concrete that was poorly poured forty-six years ago. It's been waiting for you," she mused. Pause. "You know, if I could read your mind..."

"No - not happening. I like you all tingly and on edge," I guffawed.

Dot Ishara swatted my right shoulder playful. Had it not been playfully, I'd have come back to consciousness as 'Lefty'.

"That was very nice of you to exit the domicile with Pamela so that your path would cross with Ildiko Lovasz. Now you must find Angyalka Lovasz," Ishara enlightened me.

"They can guide you along the proper path from there," she added.

"Oh my Goddess!" I feigned a gasp. "That was actually useful. Here, have a Fortune Cookie." I metaphorically tossed her the sugary treat.

"For millennia, worshipers have raised temples in my honor, named their firstborn after me, dedicated their lives and sacrificed incense, gold, animals and even slaves to gain my favor, yet this is the first time someone has actually given me something I asked for," Ishara mused lyrically.

"Does this mean we are closer to having sex?" I poked.

"Yes," she blew sweet fragrances around my head.

"Sweet!" I clapped. More laughter. "Dot Ishara?"*wWw.NoV©/Wôr©.cOm*

"Yes?"

"Thank you," I blindly sought out her hand to hold. "Thanks for keeping me in the dark, as opposed to deceiving me. I know, as a girl, it has to be tough on you."

"OW!" she squealed. "I am never going to forgive myself for making you that pledge (me forbidding her from reading my mind). So, you see me as just another woman in your life?"

"No," I protested. "As I said, you would rather stay mum instead of lying to me. That's pretty much as 'feminaciously non-feminine' as you can get." I pulled her hand to my lips, planting a kiss on her palm.

"That means I find you sexy without the need of a Babel fish to understand you," I simplified my response. That deep breath - slowly released - was a womanly reaction I was familiar with. She wanted sex, yet didn't have the time. "I need to get back, don't I?"

"I may not be able to read your mind, but, trust me, I can read your heart," Dot Ishara purred. "I will see you again before too long."

{Wakefulness}

How did I know the dream was over? PAIN! Oh Goddess, my teeth hurt, my ears were ringing and I felt nauseous as hell.

"Uggghhhh...", I moaned softly.

"Hey. He's awake," Virginia called out.

"Stop screaming," I whispered. The scenery had changed - the motif was the same. My head was resting on Virginia's lap. I wasn't sure how healthy that was for a man with a concussion. Mona's face swam into my view.

"How do you feel?" our medico asked gently.

There was one way to be sure I was still functional. I reached up and tenderly groped Mona's breasts. She could have stopped me. Her ballistic vest made my feeble efforts futile, except to prove my depth perception was spot on.

"He's fine," Mona called out - loudly.

"I could use some breast-feeding," I pleaded.

"He's definitely fine," Virginia chimed in.*WwW.NoVeLW:zM.cOm*

"So, how did it go?" Pamela asked me from the door. Due to the size of the room, that was all of a meter from the foot of the mattress/bedsprings that rested on the floor.

"I'm in pain," I mumbled. Alkonyka peeked around Pamela.

[Hungarian] "You are alive!" she exclaimed. "Your companions told me this happens to you a lot and you would be fine. I didn't believe them."

[Hungarian] "A lot is overstating it. I'm going to have a nasty hangover in the morning, but I'll live."

[Hungarian] "They seem to be under the impression you were talking to your Goddess," Alkonyka said somewhat mockingly.

[Hungarian] "I did and she told me you could help us right now, Ildiko Lovasz, if you wished," my revelation shocked her. "Don't worry about it. The Goddess, Dot Ishara, wants us to get Angyalka first." Somehow, I knew her real name along with the knowledge that she'd deceived me.

There had been one bit of drama I'd slept through that helped my case. Odette had surrendered one of her shirts to Alkonyka/ Ildiko. The Lost Amazon had multiple tattoos and each had a history. One was the copy of an inscription from a maternal ancestor's grave.

"Ahd van bátorság..." she spoke each word with intensity.

"... ott van remény," I finished up the creed. Honestly, I'd heard, or seen it somewhere as a kid. Later, I regurgitated that saying to impress some Amazon chicks. "Great, we have the same catch phrase." Alkonyka took off her shirt, revealing her lilac bra.

Her tattoo was in Hungarian written in an archaic fashion. "Where there is Valor" arched over her belly button and 'There is Hope' dipped beneath.

[Hungarian] "It is from an ancestor's grave," she told me. Okay, I was good with that. "She and her brother defected to Michael the Brave at the Battle of Sellenberk seeking to restore Székely rights.

She was mortally wounded during the battle. Those were her last words to her brother, urging him and the others to keep fighting," she finished. I wondered how much of that was historical fiction. Still, I imagine it sounded better than 'fuck, this hurts', or 'kill the bastards'. That still didn't explain how it ended up in my encyclopedia of extraneous sayings.

"All that this is fascinating," Selena grumbled from the next room. "The Vizsla wants to see you outside of town tomorrow morning at eleven. She is sending a car - you, me and two others. The rest must wait." The Vizsla was a girl - a woman - probably ten kinds of mean to be a leader in the Black Hand.

"That's wonderful," Rachel called out. "Everyone needs to crash out. We have work to do and I don't want us getting sloppy. Cael, a moment please," she beckoned me toward our small and smelly bath closet. Calling it a room was too generous. Getting up sent me tumbling down. My equilibrium was still recalibrating. My second attempt was successful and I staggered in that direction.

Once we'd wedged ourselves into the bathing space - I had to stand in the tub - Rachel shut the door, crossed her arms and stared at the floor.

"I... ah... I can't defend my actions except to say I followed my gut and my heart," I sighed. I'd let her down big time.

Getting into multiple fights, sparing (another) sworn enemy and doing what our host told me not to do... yeah, I'd screwed the pooch.

"Who are you taking with you tomorrow?" Rachel asked. She was otherwise immobile. I took my time, wading through my cranial aches, new information and imperatives.

"Pamela and Alkonyka," I reasoned. Now she looked up.

"Why her? We don't know whose side she is really on," Rachel countered. "Why not Chaz?" Chaz was a good choice and his wounds hadn't slowed him down.

"No," I rejected that. "We have got to get out of Budapest ASAP. I don't trust the Black Hand and they have reasons to be pissed with me," I stated.

"Yet you are going to Goddess knows where to meet with one in the morning?" Rachel glared.

"Alkonyka's sister is in trouble. To find her, I'm going to have to squeeze our hosts for some information," I began to explain.

"When we go to meet the Vizsla, the rest of you will be making for the Romanian border in whatever kind of transport you can arrange. Use Riki to help. Pamela and I will find out where this Branko is, negotiate the return of the girl and exit as soon as we can. We'll rendezvous with you once the mission is accomplished," I revealed my plan to both of us as it rolled off my tongue.

"Okay," Rachel nodded. "It is reckless, yet has merits. The forces tracking us will go after the larger group, which will be better able to deal with any incidents. You will make a hopefully stealthy raid and link up with us when we've established a stronger base of operations."

"You are saying that to make me feel better," I looked at her. Rachel groaned and nodded.

"Pamela is not invincible, or immortal, Cael. She won't be able to bail you out of trouble forever," Rachel reminded me.

"That is why I want you to keep your team together," I replied. "If I get caught, the four of you have the best chance of rescuing me." That earned me a reluctant smile.

"I was hoping that was why you didn't choose me," she confessed. "It means you are learning."

"That was needlessly cruel and unasked for," I joked. "As we both know, my thick skull is why we are chatting right now." Rachel rushed across the few centimeters separating us and gave me a breath-stealing hug.

"Don't die," she whispered.

I didn't bother telling that was part of my plan too.