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(Vizsla and links to the past)

The driver stopped at a rustic roadside inn. It had been an uncomfortable three hour drive to the East-Southeast of Budapest and even Pamela seemed to have lost her bearings. Our luggage had been placed in the bonnet (trunk), but we kept our duffels - with our weaponry - on our laps the entire trip. Selena, Pamela and I were squeezed into the back seat, while Alkonyka sat up front with our amiable driver. He was full of interesting tips, jokes and local legends. If he wanted us to forget he was part of a company of killers, he failed.

Selena ignored me. Instead, she tried to engage Pamela in conversation three times over the course of the trip. Each time, Pamela responded with chilly disdain. That left Selena a tad bit grumpy by the time we stopped.

"Leave your weapons," Selena demanded. This clearly wasn't the Kazakhstan consulate. This was the ass-end of nowhere with Black Hand all around. Pamela and I left our duffels outside the vacated car, stretched out some kinks and began handing our personal weapons over to the driver and Selena.

"Is that everything?" our driver smiled. Alkonyka was coming around to our side. She gave up my spare Glock-22 that I had given her and her father's Special Forces knife.

"No," I answered. "We have a ceremonial dagger. To take that is a terrible insult." He motioned us to give them over and I did. Pamela's followed mine two second later.[www.m0w@l\(w\)\(c\)0m.c0m](mailto:www.m0w@l(w)(c)0m.c0m)

"Only him," Selena directed me to the front door of the inn. I looked to Pamela. We both shrugged.[www.m0w@l\(w\)\(c\)0m.c0m](mailto:www.m0w@l(w)(c)0m.c0m)

"Alkonyka, relax," I smiled at my latest female of interest. "I'll either be back soon or the snipers hiding about the place will kill you so fast, you won't notice." Blink. I wasn't joking.

As my eyes were adjusting from the bright day outside to the inn's dark interior, two men patted me down. I obviously hadn't been lying about disarming, but they did have me remove my light ballistic vest - it was way too hot for my duster. I suspected that they wanted me to get redressed, so I put my shirt back on, unbuttoned, and then added my jacket... I took my time since they were both being dicks.

Finally, they allowed me to walk into the bar proper. Sure enough, a mid-to-late 50ish woman was sitting at a round table in the back. Halfway to her table, I deviated, jumped over the bar, and poured myself a nice German lager. Stein in hand, I walked her way.

"I didn't say you could have a drink," the Vizsla commented.

"Oh, my apologies," I shrugged. I put the stein on a nearby table and waited.

"Have a seat," she directed. I came up to her table and examined the three empty chairs. I held back until she pointed to the chair opposite her. I sat down, but didn't make eye contact. Instead, I examined the various paintings and photographs on the walls. It was an old place.

"You killed Matthias, even though you knew he worked for me," she uttered.

"I can confirm that information to be correct," I looked her way. That... wasn't what she expected.

"Why?"

"Why what?" I countered. There was a method to my madness; this was going to be a lesson in competence, and what happens when you don't respect it.

"Why did you kill Matthias?"

"I needed a reason?" I tried to look pensive. "Maybe I didn't like the cut of his facial hair?"

"Do you think this is a joke?" she replied dryly. "The Black Hand always avenge our own."

"Damn," I looked perplexed. "No one told me that when I arrived. Can we call Matthias's extermination a 50/50 bad call, both ways?"

"Matthias was my cousin," the Vizsla continued.

"My condolences," I sighed. "The next Black Hand douche-bag the Amazons waste, I'll have them ask if he's related to you first. How's that?"

"You are so not likely to have that opportunity," she pointed out.

"Oh," I laughed, "you are so wrong about that."

"You are far stupider than I had been informed," the Vizsla's eyes narrowed.

"Nope. You and your cast of 'Dumb and Dumber' have been treating us like idiots since we touched down at Ferenc Liszt International, so I'm pretending to be that simpleton sock-puppet just for you, Vizsla. You've added to that by heaping disrespect and derision on my people," I grinned.

"You tried to have me and my entourage murdered and Matthias paid the price for that. Everyone knows I'm here. And after your bungled attempt to have me killed, no one is going to believe you did anything but murder me, if I don't show up eventually. Now do you prefer the stupid me, or the brighter than normal me?"

"If you think acting like a smart-ass is somehow endearing, you are mistaken," she let me know.[www.m0w@l\(w\)\(c\)0m.c0m](mailto:www.m0w@l(w)(c)0m.c0m)

"Whatever," I shrugged. "You called this meeting. What do you want?"

"Beyond killing one of my lieutenants, I wanted to know what you are doing here?" she studied me.

"I would like to leave now. I'm wasting my time here," I responded.

"I want answers," she pressed.

"You have been given the answers to both your talking points - Matthias died because of your orders and I am here looking for three lost Amazon bloodlines," I replied[www.m0@l\(w\)\(c\)0m.c0m](mailto:www.m0@l(w)(c)0m.c0m)

"That seems bizarre," the Vizsla expressed her doubts.

"Bizarre? You are talking to the sole male Amazon House Head in three thousand years," I reminded her. "Besides, you only just now finished telling me how the Black Hand look after their own. The Amazons are the same way; we have lost kin who need to be made aware of their background."

"What do we do about Matthias?" the Vizsla asked.

"In all honesty, had he not personally threatened to stab a member of my team, I would have settled for kicking the crap out of him. He put a knife to Ms. Martin's throat. That assured his death sentence. I think the Host will be willing to accept my hypothesis that Matthias was acting on his own initiative, which should settle the matter."

And just like that, the expediency of the Black Hand shown forth. The truth of the matter was that he had acted on the Vizsla's orders. Unfortunately, that would have meant my side would have come after the Vizsla and she would have had to avenge his death - lots of needless bloodshed. So Matthias posthumously became a rabid dog gone rogue and one who ended up crossing the wrong people. No vengeance required by anyone. We could get back to business.

"That is settled. So, what do you want from your new allies?" the Vizsla inquired. A certain level of cold-blooded ruthlessness had been required to achieve her spot in the Black Hand. Likewise, honesty was the best policy when dealing with casually lethal people. They didn't like self-important asses wasting their time.

"I need to find an individual named 'Branko'. He has kidnapped a young lady who is one of our lost Amazons. We don't require any aid, but if you could leave Selena with us, it would be appreciated," I requested.

"What are you going to do when you catch up with this 'Branko'?" she questioned.

"I'd like to say I am going to buy her back, but I think we both know that is a pipe-dream. He's not going to like me interfering in his business, so I'm going to kill him ... and any other bastards who are in close proximity," I confessed. She studied me for over a minute.

"Do you wish a piece of advice?" the Vizsla said.

"Of course," I nodded. It cost me nothing to acknowledge her vastly superior experience.

"Take a step back," she advised. Seeing that I didn't understand, "If you recall every single death by your hand, you will go mad. You don't possess the detachment of a true killer, C  el. Not every member of the Black Hand is an assassin.

Your driver, Josef, is from a long line of Black Hand members. He doesn't have what it takes to get close and personal in order to kill a human being, so he drives and provides security. He still matters and serves a necessary function." That was almost nice of her. The advice was based on her decision to keep me around as a useful tool. Going nuts would derail that.

"There is the life we wish to lead, and the life we must lead, Vizsla," I recalled. There was so much there, whirling around in my skull, it took me all this time to find the link I was looking for. Recall every single death by my hand... "On January 26th, 1847, the Black Hand Chapter House of the Wolf in Verona was wiped out - there were no survivors."

"If you say so," she regarded me oddly.

"Yeah, look into it. Then come back to me when you have the right questions," I stood up. "And 'Branko'?"

"I will relay information on this individual to Selena. We should have something by the time you get back to Buda..." she got out before one of the bodyguards came running our way.

He had his H&K MP-5 out and was in deep conversation with his ear piece.