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[Hungarian] "Our two spotters failed to respond correctly," he told the Vizsla. She gave me another quick once over.

"My people?" I rose slowly.

The Vizsla gave the man a subtle hand gesture. Seconds later, pushing Alkonyka ahead of them, Pamela, Selena and Josef came running through the door. Pamela and Selena had our duffels. Two more Black Hand materialized from a back room.

The Black Hand was actually a small outfit. Each Chapter had two or three houses, each with four or five true assassins and maybe six times that in support personnel/recruits in each location. That meant the entire Black Hand organization numbered less than 1000. They had several thousand peripheral contacts across their sphere of Europe and they could purchase some sort of private security given time. But their best protection was their hidden nature and small size. That also meant what we had was what we had. There was no Black Hand SWAT team on the way.

Working with hand gestures alone, the Vizsla was directing us to a trap door behind the bar. Josef's phone rang. He hesitantly answered.

[Hungarian] "It is for you," he offered it to our host. She took it. Halfway through the caller's diatribe, she shot me a suspicious look.

[Hungarian] "Why don't you ask him?" she stated, then handed me the phone.

[Mycenaean Greek] "Hello Nyllas. Do you know who this is?" the man on the other end stated.

[Mycenaean Greek] "Yes, I do. What do you want? I'm kind of busy here?" I grinned. It was laughing at death all over again.

[Mycenaean Greek] "I can relieve you of your pressing schedule. You and the other Amazon step outside and I'll make it quick."

[Hungarian] "No can-do Study," I smirked. "If I go out there, it is going to take a while."

[Hungarian] "I sincerely doubt that."

[Hungarian] "Don't sell yourself short," I jibed. "I figure clipping off those bull-sized testicles of yours is going to take some work. But I do promise that after I make you a eunuch, I'll use a condom when I bend you over and make you my bitch too. Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

[Hungarian] "No. I think we have a mutual understanding," he laughed. "I'll be seeing you soon." He hung up.

[Hungarian] "Who was that?" Vizsla inquired. She wasn't alone in her curiosity.

"Ajax," I beamed confidence. I was confident my tenure on this Earth was ending real soon.

[Hungarian] "I think we should be leaving," Vizsla suggested.

"Selena, help Alkonyka get her sister back," I requested. "I'll catch up when I can. Pamela, you do what you feel you need to do. Vizsla, they are after me, so I'm going to keep them busy while you get away," I explained.

No useless 'you don't have to do this' nonsense. She knew the score, I wasn't a member of her outfit and she wanted to live. She did do me one favor. She gave another hand movement. Selena slit Josef's throat in a surprise motion.

He didn't die right away. Selena's slash made bleeding out inevitable, but he'd be a while in dying. Odds were, that only Vizsla and Josef knew in advance where we were meeting. Whatever payoff the Condottieri had put in his bank account wasn't going to do him any good. Selena bent over his still-thrashing body and removed his pistol.

"I will bring you Angyalka Lovasz," Selena pledged. Pamela and I were gearing up. Ajax and his buddies were going to be coming for me any second now. Alkonyka gave me one more worried look before she vanished into the secret basement. "Don't be late," was the last thing Selena said before going down into the darkness. Pamela made sure the trap door was covered up.

(Lust and Bullets)

"We've used Butch and Sundance." Pamela checked her L42 Enfield Sniper Rifle. It was the weapon Pamela had trained with and used for longer than I'd been alive - old yet very effective even today.

"Heat?" I offered up. "You can be De Niro and I can be Kilmer."

"Nice. Michael Mann really had a way of killing people," Pamela grinned, then pumped her eyebrows. "Too bad I end up dead in this one."

"We'll avoid airports - you should be safe," I joked. Three explosions rocked the building, shooting glass throughout the place. Fortunately, Pamela and I were hiding behind the bar.

"Let's go," she whispered over the din. Charging out the front door seemed pretty suicidal to me, but Pamela's copious battle lore was something I had the utmost faith in. I respected her judgment and followed along. There was a method to her madness. Two 40 mm grenades had taken out the two cars parked in front. A third launched grenade had blown open the door.

The petrol in the cars equated to flaming wreckage and a huge smoke screen. It was broad daylight - no night vision goggles. The flames made IR useless and the smoke temporarily obscured regular vision. The machineguns going off around us scared the crap out of me. It was my old buddy, suppression fire: they weren't shooting directly at us.

Metaphysically, Ishara was dueling with Ares. There was a low stone wall, a little over a meter high, that separated an adjacent field from the inn's gravel parking lot. Right as we got to our side of it, three of Ajax's boys came up on the other. Pamela and I remained perfectly still, crouching tightly against our shelter.

Two knelt and fired several bursts from their H&K HK416 (Wow! Germany's newest killing machine - they looked slick) into the closest open windows while the third one fired a grenade in. Again, we remained perfectly still. We were about two meters from those three. The drab color of our hastily donned dusters, the congested air and our stillness combined to save us from their notice.

The second after that grenade went off, the three vaulted the wall and rushed the building. From the cacophony of the battle, they were storming the building from several directions at once.

"Quick, go find that guy with the machinegun," Pamela whispered over a feral grin. How was I going to do that?

The old fashioned way - I leapt over the wall and ran away from all the flames, explosions and the continuous widespread fusillade of assault weapons fire. I was partially bent over as I ran. I'm still a big guy though. The machine gunner was in a shallow dip in the meadow 30 meters away, on the edge of the woods.

He saw me, shifted his MG4 (fuck Ajax and his crew for having the best Bang-Bangs) minutely and unleashed hell my way. In hindsight, the 1st round flattened against my duster as it impacted my upper left thigh. Round #2 hit the duster again, coming below my vest, but hitting my belt (every bit of leather helps).

The #3 5.56 mm slug hit my vest due south of my belly button (FUCK!), #4 landed a few centimeters up and to the right, taking in both the duster and my ballistic vest. The #5 round clipped my lower side of my right ribcage. The resulting force sent me spinning back and to my right.

Honestly, as I landed hard on my back (no rolling with the blow this time), I thought a midget mule team had kicked me in the guts. Apparently, I made a convincing mortally wounded human being. He stopped shooting and Pamela got pissed.

I learned a few things at that moment: you do NOT get used to being shot; you can NEVER appreciate the value of good body armour enough; you can never understand the true value of a sniper until your life is totally in their hands; and DAMN, Pamela was exceptional. Pamela put a bullet through his nasal cavity in that split second between him exposing himself with his muzzle flashes and deciding to put a few more bullets into my prone form.

Pain dictated that I lie where I was. Survival instincts overrode that. I went to my side, pushed up and resumed my crouched stance. Then I was running once more until I could throw myself beside his corpse. I was stunningly calm. Machineguns... snipers... I had to cover Pamela's run across the meadow. I didn't stay by the dead gunner.

I grabbed his weapon, some spare ammo and quick-stepped it to the wood line. I rapidly assessed the best spot that could provide cover from each flank. That was where I went down, cradled the device and started shooting at any muzzle flash I could see. The moment I opened fire, Pamela began her own sprint.

Unlike my mad dash, Pamela took evasive maneuvers - serpentine - which worked out well when one sniper figured out she wasn't one of them. He/she had two shots at her before she dove past me. Her mien was one of intense... emptiness? She gave me a quick pat-down to make sure I wasn't gushing blood, took a deep breath and then smirked.

"Come on, Dummy!" she laughed. "We still have a shot at a sequel."

"Shot - sequel - you are a laugh riot," I wheezed as I stood, abandoned the MG4 and joined her as we both ran deeper into the woods. A few shots zinged past us before Ajax's crew realized we were in full-on fight mode. They weren't going to waste the bullets.

This was the point where archaic and modern warfare diverged. In the olden (pre-Pamela - o!) days, when your enemy broke and ran, it was relatively easy to run them down and slaughter them in their panic. If a few men tried to stem the tide, they would be quickly overwhelmed.

After the invention of rapid-fire rifles, that changed. Suddenly, headlong pursuit could be incredibly costly. All it took was a small, resolute band to find some sort of hard cover and they could buy minutes, or even hours, for their retreating brethren. Sure, if you were willing to pay the butcher's bill, you could storm their position.

But you had to understand, each defender could fire and work the bolt action in under three seconds. You reloaded your magazine with a prepared clip - maybe five seconds. Ten men could put 150 bullets down range per minute as long as their ammo held out. Sending men into that kind of firepower was murder, very few troops could sustain their attack under those conditions.

Ajax's resurrected Mycenaean's were tough enough to do it. Ajax's problem was their finite number. Despite catching Ajax off guard with Pamela's mad plan, his ungodly skills and a great deal of my pain, we had only managed to kill one so far. The great unknowns were terrain (we didn't know where we were,) and my luck.

"Where we were, and my luck." Pamela snorted. "Did you pack your jet ski?"

"I left it in the car. You said it was so '1990's' I parted back. A few more footsteps and..."

"We heard dogs barking. Ajax had some poches; how wonderful. His men weren't rushing after us. They didn't have to. Pamela and I were running at a river. Undoubtedly, he had stationed small teams to the north and south of us along the river so we couldn't slip by. Had Ajax realized how much the cosmos loves me, he would have come charging in. We heard a boat.

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