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"One of us," Pamela retorted. "One of us."

"One of us," I joined in. It helped cut the tension.

The bodyguards were present right where we'd them last time. They ushered us up the stairs to a second floor sitting room that ate up half the floor. There were two men there - radiating that subtle assurance that a half-dozen killers were close by. The man standing was Iskender, the E&S emissary from Dad's funeral. I broke all decorum, strode to the man, locked arms, hugged him tight and patted him on the back.

"Thank the spirits you are here," I whispered, "all this lack of dick is making me a bit stir-crazy."*www.m0V@lwe(r)M.c0m*

"Ah... yes, it is good to see you again too," Iskender imparted as we broke our embrace. His boss, the guy on the sofa, shot me and my Kyrgyz buddy a sharp look. The Main Man was clearly Mongolian and must have thought blank, white walls exhibited too much empathy.

"Koumiss," the boss offered.

I sipped it from a simple, yet regal drinking mug that probably hit the kiln 200 years ago.

"Mare, or yak?" I inquired as I handed the cup around. Iskender came first, but it was clearly my intention that we all partake. It was more a matter of the host's pledge of sanctuary than me wanting to share the koumiss. It tasted like thin, lightly chilled, bitter beer with a vanilla-almond milk shake-chaser.

"Mare, of course. Please sit," he offered. He defined the suggestion by slipping off the sofa onto the layered carpet rug. He was semi-reclined, so we followed suit.

"We should pray for the protection of the spirits," was the suggestion that wasn't a suggestion. It was his itinerary.

He clapped his hands and from beyond a curtained partition came this really sensual Mongolian chick carrying a large brass bowl. She flicked her eyes at me and an instant connection was formed. She liked to bark like a dog under the full moon... okay, I'm not sure where that came from.

"Nice woman," I told the leader. "She looks like she has seen many winters."

Whoa! Where the fuck did that come from? I got a shocked reaction from Iskender.

The Leader looked pissed – if a flake of paint on the white wall indicated anger. The girl blushed like what I said was an incredible turn on.

"She is my daughter," the Leader pointed out. Way past swallowing my foot. My ankle was tasty.

"My name is Oyuun Tömörbaatar. My faithful Iskender, you know. This is my daughter T. Sarangerel. She is studying at NYU and is not entertaining marriage proposals at this time," he slapped down his boundaries.

Somehow 'I only want to sleep with her' didn't sound like the right response. Wait! Saying his 'daughter had many winters' was a marriage bargaining opening move. WTF!

"What I meant was that surely many men have died trying to come before you," I back-pedaled. More happy looks from the daughter. More paint peeling from the dad.

Pamela made sure more koumiss was going around. Getting drunk could hardly hurt at this juncture. Sarangeral placed the bowl between us. It was filled with clear, cold water undoubtedly collected from a mountain-fed glacier.

"Let us cleanse our hands in the water so that we may speak with clarity," O. Tömörbaatar said. We dipped our fingers and, for a second, I saw him. Not 'O', but HIM.

"It is good to finally meet you Ferko Ishara Cael Nyllas," the man said. My Spidey senses told me he was feeling less 'good' about this meeting every second. "How can your people and mine better get along?" 'Let me impregnate your daughter'... would probably get my skull split open.

"No time for that," I replied. "I know where HE is. The Seven Pillars have found a way to search the Weave and are closing in. You must act with haste." Whether it was disbelief, or old 'OT' schooled Ku Chun in the art of gambling, the older man gave no outward reaction.

"Where is he?" O. Tömörbaatar asked in a gentle tone.

"I can do you one better," I steeled myself for the unknown forces I was invoking. I put my hands on the bowl's lip and looked in. Several seconds later, he did as well. For a moment, nothing. It was like a ripple in reverse. The first earth tremor I barely noticed. The ripples grew and grew until I felt the whole row of townhouses would come crashing down*www.N0veIWorm.com*

Wind snapped the locks on the windows, flinging them wide open and tearing at the curtains like streamers in a hurricane. Then we saw HIM clearly. HE stopped driving this old, beat-up Peugeot and was pulling to the side of a desolate stretch of highway. HE could sense something yet couldn't pinpoint the source of his unease. We definitely got the impression this wasn't his first taste of this experience – the Seven Pillars.

He was young – maybe my age. He looked like an educated man turned vagabond/boundless traveler. HIS eyes... his eyes had a depth that were a microcosm of what I'd glimpsed in Ishara – Dot Ishara's unshielded glance when we first met. All lingering doubts vanished in my mind.

"I know that place," OT muttered, his eyes fixated on the only feature in the vacant expanse – a road sign... in Chinese. Yikes. "I know that place." The image faded.

Our meeting venue was intact. Whatever I felt transpire, I had shared with O. Tömörbaatar alone.

"You have work to do," I stated as I cleared my throat. "I will leave you to it." I stood.

"What do you wish for this gift?" OT reached out and touched my sleeve.

"When the time comes, maybe you can help us," I replied.

"A man who asks for nothing can expect anything," OT smiled for the first time. "Go." I did not take a fear-free breath until the cars started up and we pulled away. He'd let us live. Even with that priceless piece of magical insight, he'd let us live.

"I'm still stunned we got out alive," I sighed. "I wasn't really sure he'd take the news as well as he did."

No one said anything for a minute.

"Why would he have killed us?" Delliah inquired. "You, I understand. I don't know what you communicated to that young lady, but the old guy wasn't happy about it. He was going to kill us over that?"

Pause.

"What did the rest of you see and hear?" I looked around the cabin. Pamela appeared worried.

"I didn't know you spoke Chagatai," Miyako smiled at me. "You are full of surprise. I only caught a word, or two, and none of it made sense."

"MRI," I groaned.

"Magnetoencephalography," Pamela said in the same breath. "Mine is better, Boyo."

"What is going on?" Rachel upped her alertness level.

"We need to take Cael to a hospital that has a Magnetoencephalography device," Pamela insisted.

"He's spontaneously speaking languages he didn't know moments earlier..." Maddox put things together first. The rest nodded at her assessment. "We'll need to have his records from Havenstone sent over as a baseline." Poor Virginia – the absurdity of my life was sucking her in.

"I'll call Katrina," Rachel informed us.

I was a mental case once more. At least my input was still being solicited.

"How many guns do you have on you?" Pamela zinged me.

The answer was obvious – two. My Glock and my back-up. That didn't seem right.

"Ah... two?" I responded.*W(w)w.n0(v)eIW0rM.c0M*

"Yeah, something is happening to your muscle memory as well," Pamela shook her head.

"What exactly does that mean, and what's wrong with Cael's brain?" Delliah studied the group.

"It means he could spontaneously pull out his gun and start shooting us?" Pamela confessed her uncertainty. "I don't know. We'd better figure out which impulses are his guiding light right now before that happens."

"I don't even know how to begin reporting this," Maddox muttered.

"Cheer up. Our Cael is still currently in charge. Did you appreciate how he lured in that young Mongolian girl? That's classic Cael," Pamela comforted the crowd.

I was saved from a straightjacket because I was a 'Playa'.

(Meadowlands Medical Center in far off New Jersey)

I'm not political. For me, that means I am completely and utterly dedicated to whatever doctrine that the cutest political campaigner in front of me endorses. Fifteen minutes on the internet and you can fake it like a pro. Be careful to be with the winning team when the results come in. Nothing makes a political chick go wild like sneaking into the candidate's office and screwing her on the newly elected/re-elected figure's desk.

Let her scream out her idol's name. Odds are neither of you will be welcomed back afterwards anyway. Why politics now? Javiera called some people. I had a sneaking suspicion that someone I knew and trusted got in touch with my 'Aunts' as well. All I knew for sure was the Hospital's Administrator's phone began ringing off the hook and I'd become the hospital's number one priority.

The hospital staff was visibly irritated with the clout raining down on their heads for about an hour. Once they digested my Havenstone records, all of that changed. Holy 'Published in The New England Journal of Medicine', someone had drilled a micro-surgical hole in my skull in the middle of a wrestling match with no resulting cerebral scarring. THEN this unknown device shot into my skull with pinpoint accuracy and pumped a ghastly amount of energy into my cerebrum.

They were fascinated. They were so fascinated I heard two medical technicians mutter about where the Zombie Survival Guide could be found. They triple checked my vital signs – again. I was still as much alive as when I checked myself in. There was a rumor that a fire ax disappeared from a stairwell close by, but not one confessed to the deed.

I was speaking in languages I had no reason to know? They were surprised I could contain my mouth drool. It was somewhat disheartening to hear three seasoned physicians discuss what probable scenarios could explain me still being in a non-vegetative state... or alive for that matter. Some poor nurse had to ask.

"Do you feel an unnatural... interest in human brains?" she whispered when she though no one was close by.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I whispered back. "I always respect a woman's intelligence. Sex is a cerebral passion. What's the point if you can't communicate with your

partner?"*WwW.n0veCŴ.(r)M.(c)0m*

Pamela slapped me upside my head. That disturbed just about everybody else in the vicinity and my mentor was promptly exiled from the room. I was curious about what havoc she was perpetrating on this establishment. My condition had gotten her past all the heavy security and I knew without seeing that someone high ranking had misplaced their ID badge.