

# ~ Amazonia ~

Book 1

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed please find something else to read.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com).

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Jaden, my Florida buddy, Ken, and Annie - you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge. Special thanks to Kerry, she kept after me until the tale was done.

This is dedicated as always to the one woman who holds my heart. As in all things you are the reason for all the good in my life. I love you with all I am.

I would also like to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

## *The Beginning*

"Do you see her?"

"With all due respect, highness, unless she stops and waves into the camera you won't ever see her. It's what makes her so good in the forest arena of combat," answered Kip, captain of the royal guard assigned to the queen.

Sitting with Kip watching the monitors were Queen Audrey, her Consort, Boden, and Bear, the kingdom's most experienced trainer. The annual competition of elite warriors had begun two days prior and Princess Bebo was leading in points for most kills. Running second was Max, Bear's daughter and the princess' oldest friend.

The competition was for bragging rights among the eligible warriors and the last bit of fun for Bebo before she embarked on a diplomatic mission on behalf of her mother and Amazonia. Their nation had once again been called on and Audrey had answered willingly with the backing of her partner who was known throughout the realm as Bo.

"Ooh, she never saw it coming, did she?" Bo pointed to the screen as one of the young women

tried to wipe the blue paint off her forehead. The color of paint was Bebo's signature and the point counter in the upper right portion of the screen changed.

"That poor child, it'll take her a week to get that stuff out of her hair," said Audrey, slapping Bo when she laughed. "It's not funny, she could aim for the chest like everyone else. One would swear you gave birth to her she's so much like you."

"Don't kid yourself, love. Those recruits would be disappointed without the sprout's personal touch. It's become a badge of honor in this year's contest. If you have to be taken out, then blue's the in color." The tall royal leaned over and kissed her wife tenderly.

After twenty-five years together, Audrey found it impossible to resist Bo's soft side. Deep down she cheered every time that blue paint dyed someone else's hairline, but the queen felt she had to be more reserved than her warrior partner. Bebo was no different in competition and fierceness than Bo had been at the same age. Audrey could still remember how she felt the first time she had laid eyes on the Warrior of Argase. It was the same feeling she still got when those blue eyes looked her way.

A buzzer rang out signaling the end of the contest. With the kill of two more contestants, Bebo had just registered enough points to put the contest out of reach for the others. For the first time in two days, proud parents watched their daughter as she flipped out of one of the high branches to the fern covered ground below and into view.

"Congratulations, your highnesses," said Bear bowing to Audrey. She reserved the hard slap to the back for Bo. "She will make us proud for years to come."

"Thanks to you, old friend." The two clasped arms in the greeting of warriors. "Max has done your own house proud today," Bo told Bear before turning to hug her wife.

"If you puff your chest out anymore you won't be able to fit it through the door to give the victor her laurels," teased the queen. She had given birth to the princess, but Bebo was almost a carbon copy of her second mother. *Artemis, thank you for granting me that one request.*

"To tell you the truth, love, today is a day of great pride for me, and yet, a day of great regret."

With a wave of her hand the room emptied for Audrey. "Warrior mine, we knew from the beginning we couldn't keep her forever. My greatest regret was not being able to give you a house full of Bebos for you to spoil and gloat over." The petite blonde moved closer into the arms that had offered comfort and protection for years. With slow movements she ran her hands up Bo's chest until she was able to link her fingers behind her lover's neck. "I love you with all the passion I possess."

"Then I'm a lucky woman who has nothing to regret; and neither do you. Never think of having just one child as a failure, my queen. In Bebo you've given me the world, and now it's time for us to share her. She's the best of both of us, so it gives you the right to puff your chest out a little as well." The dark head lowered and Bo kissed her wife with all of the passion the queen had

spoken of. "I love you just as much, Adie. You complete the person that I am."

"Let's go find our winner, then we can speak of passion in a more appropriate place." The tease earned her another kiss, and that's how Bebo found them.

"I see," her voice did not part them. "I'm out protecting the family name and honor and you're in here making out. It's shameful I tell you." The princess was wiping away the camouflage paint with the towel one of the servants had handed her and enjoyed the love between her parents she had witnessed from the time she had memory. If there was one constant in her life, it was the love her parents had for each other.

"Get your own girl, then see if your opinion changes, sprout," said Bo while never taking her eyes off of Audrey's face. "Did you win? We've been too busy to notice."

"With more points than your first victory," boasted the princess.

"Did you now? I wanted to watch, but your mother's had other things in mind." She laughed when the queen blushed and slapped her backside.

"Can I have her exiled when I get the queen's mask?" Bebo asked Audrey when the queen wrapped her arms around her waist. "I can have a hut built for her in the Grazel Desert. You could take pity on her and visit her on weekends."

"You could, but think of all the trouble I'd get into with no one to look out for me." Standing on her toes, Audrey kissed her daughters' cheek. "Congratulations, baby, you did us both proud, but especially the prickly bear who lives with us." Audrey moved aside to let her girls embrace. "Not that she had any doubts in you at all."

By right of birth the queen's mask belonged to Audrey, but every so many generations a great warrior would claim the right to rule, but it had been years since one so strong led their tribe. When she joined with Bo, Audrey wanted to give her people a blend of what made them strong as individuals. Looking at the long bear hug the queen knew part of the mission was complete. Standing there embracing her wife was a child that was truly as much Boden's as she was hers. Bebo had a love of books and art like the queen did, but she was trained to be just as deadly as her second mother. Today was a day to celebrate the part of Bebo that Boden was responsible for.

Winning the yearly competition was no easy feat, especially when a royal competed. To be able to brag you brought down one of the ruling members was a prize for any serving recruit. Bebo's skill as a warrior had been learned a day at a time from the woman who now was being lifted off the ground by the young woman she affectionately called sprout.

"Put me down you overgrown cub," teased Bo. Now that her daughter topped her height by a couple of inches Bo loved using all the monikers she had come up with through the years. "Go get changed so you don't miss the helicopter back to the capital."

"Thanks, mom, but I'll ride back with my unit."

"The victor always rides back with the royal family," protested Bo.

"Only this time the winner already knows us, honey. The thrill of hearing your war stories is gone. Let her ride back with her friends if that's what she wants. There's no harm in it." Audrey shook her head when Bebo wasn't looking and gave Boden a beseeching look.

Bebo bent at the waist and bowed to her mother before moving to kiss the top of her head.

"Thanks, mama, I owe you one. I'll see you both tonight at the ceremony."

"Don't be late, it'll embarrass your mother."

The young woman turned and shook her head at Boden. "I know better mom, I'll be there don't worry." With quick movements, Bebo feigned left with her upper body as she took Boden down with her legs when she lunged to the right, pinning her mother with a move Boden herself had taught the princess. "Besides," she started as Bo tried to free herself from the hold. "Now that I won't be there to cramp your style on the way back, our queen can kiss it and make you feel better for being caught so easily. You're getting old, warrior," teased Bebo. A slight twist of her hand got a yelp of pain out of her teacher.

Just as quickly, Bebo let go and ran from the room before Bo could retaliate. Her mother's peals of laughter were the incentive to move faster despite how tired she was from the competition.

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The uniform consisted of soft brown leather pants and a tight vest. For this ceremony, her feet were left bare and her shoulder length hair had a few braids with beads and feathers woven in for adornment. The light armor covering her chest was embossed with the royal seal, the same seal both her mothers had engraved on the matching signet rings they wore. The royal guards assigned to her, helped Bebo finish dressing, excusing themselves when Emelda, the head priestess of Artemis' temple arrived.

"How does it feel to pass the one test you thought until now was the most important?" The old woman laughed, sitting even though the princess was still standing with her fists on her hips. "And with more points than your mother too, an accomplishment indeed."

"Can't you let me enjoy tonight without sarcasm?"

"Only if you promise to come by to see me before you leave."

Old gray eyes that had spent years reading books and scrolls of their history looked at this imposing young woman standing before her. It made her want to cry. Princess Bebo of Leon would go down in Amazonian history as one of their greatest rulers if the child found her path, a road of her own making and not one chosen by a parent or anyone else. Emelda just prayed to the gods she would live long enough to serve her as she had her mothers.

"I haven't decided to go yet, grandmother." Bebo used the term of affection everyone had bestowed on the old woman.

"A match of chobos with Boden in the morning to bring you back to earth a bit, and then come to see me. You'll need to hear what I have to say before you go." The comment was tossed casually out as if Bebo hadn't bothered to speak. It was always the same between them. Emelda talked to her as if she had a script of Bebo's thoughts and it aggravated the young woman to no end.

"If all it'll take to make you decide to go is getting the shit beat out of you with a pair of chobos, I volunteer," said Steph, one of Bebo's guards. They were about to begin and she didn't want her charge to be late so she pointed to the door.

"I'll do the mop up work," added Max. "Come on, Bebo, it'll be an adventure."

"For you maybe. You won't be the monkey on display everyone wants to knock off the tree branch because of who you are and what you're supposed to be. Let's move, we don't want to keep my mothers waiting." She helped Emelda up from her chair and escorted her to the door. As important as her part was tonight, Bebo knew the ceremony couldn't begin without Emelda.

The drums had started, and there were so many of them that they could be heard on almost every block of the capital. It was time for Amazonia to honor her traditions and her greatest assets - her warriors. Before the two thrones on the dais raised well above the crowd was the great fire, which burned to honor their patron goddess Artemis. Dancers moved in sync around the flames in traditional garb bringing the crowd to a frenzy as their steps picked up their pace along with the beat.

All sound and movement stopped when Emelda moved to a microphone set up on a lower stage. This was what Bebo and every other citizen looked forward to every year. To hear this story told by this woman made the princess pray to all their gods that Emelda lived to be three hundred. The only woman better at telling stories was her mother Audrey.

"Sisters, hark and hear me well. Tonight under a harvest moon we gather to honor a new warrior, one who will be added to the great scroll started hundreds of years ago. She has earned her right to be placed along side the great ones and tonight it will be so." The crowd erupted with noise because of whose name would be added to the scroll of honor. Bebo had been a favorite of the nation from her first breath and they had enjoyed watching her grow up.

"But first we must honor those who came before. Time to honor who we are by the telling of our history." Silence fell once again and everyone sat back anxious to get lost in Emelda's voice.

"In the beginning, we were outcasts and unwanted by the world as it was. Women who banded together to protect one another and build a place where we could thrive beholden to no one. We learned to plant to feed our families, to fight to protect our sisters, to toil to be better able to move our tribe forward and prosper, and lastly to choose our leaders well so all of this could be possible." She raised her arms and her voice grew stronger at the end, making the crowd break

into applause again.

"For centuries we were dedicated to our patron goddess Artemis and her sister Athena and we were rewarded with the island of Amazonia. It is a paradise we have enjoyed ever since, and we have built it into a thriving nation." A murmur of thanks to the two goddesses ran like wildfire through the audience.

"Under our first great queen, Selene, we vowed to serve one of four clans for our service, but only one queen. All of the queens and tribes of the Amazons came under Selene's rule to live in peace in this place. So it was then, and so it is now. Tonight we welcome the province of Selena and their regent Vivian," Emelda pointed to the red head sitting in the center of her clan. They all were wearing leather dyed a soft shade of green and none of them carried weapons. They were farmers and scientists; they had no interest or time for fighting. "We thank our sister and her people for their hard work and Vivian's leadership in our fields of agriculture and in our places of healing."

Next she pointed to an older woman dressed in a uniform very much like Bebo's. "We welcome our sisters from the Argase clan and their regent Leslie, blood sister of Consort Boden. Thank you, sister, for another great year of competition, and in continuing to train the next generation of warriors. Your tenure as the guardian of our sacred forest has done honor to our tribe." All of the serving recruits under Leslie removed their chobos and hit them together making the Consort smile at the racket.

The youngest regent sat with her clan facing the dais. Their leather was dyed a pale yellow and, like the women of Selena clan, wore weapons or armor. "Welcome our sisters from the northern province of Curasso and their regent Rena. The mines of copper and silver pave our way to a prosperous future and we thank you all for your tireless efforts."

Emelda turned to the last regent to be named and smiled. It was the largest contingency, simply because this ceremony took place in the capital, and they wore a shade lighter than Boden's blue leathers. "Princess Sean of the Leon clan, your sisters bid you and yours welcome. From the capital you drive our main areas of commerce and you welcome outsiders to our lands and beaches. You also serve our queen and her family well, and because you do, it brings honor to our tribe."

The blonde bowed slightly to the old woman then more deeply to the throne. Sean controlled the largest segment of the island, and a tremendous amount of power along with it, but Audrey never had cause to fear her. They were sisters by blood and devoted to each other.

"We come together tonight as Amazons to welcome a new champion into our fold," continued Emelda. The drums started slowly and softly again, and all the women rose to their feet. "We have known her since the time her mother carried her with love in her womb, but tonight she starts down the road to becoming the woman she is destined to be."

The roar that arose with the priestess' words shook the ground, rising an impossible notch higher when Bebo stepped into view flanked by Steph, Beth and Max. A sea of flashbulbs went off

when she started down the aisle toward her mothers, but no one outside those present and those whom lived on the island would ever see the photos. Keeping the secrecy of their ceremonies was an unwritten law no Amazon had ever broken, and what made the world crave information about them that much more.

Audrey looked at the young woman moving closer and tears filled her eyes. It seemed like only days before when another stunning warrior moved just as confidently toward the dais to receive her prize.

*"Pay attention, child, and close your mouth," admonished Queen Bekka, her consort Laine trying not to laugh as she stood beside her. "Not a word out of you, warrior mine," the reprimand made Laine lose her battle at trying to hide her humor and she turned her head slightly so Boden wouldn't think she was laughing at her.*

*"Come, dear, I would like to think you looked at me like that not so long ago. Hades, even on nights when the moon shines down just right, you grace me with the look of a young woman in love. Why should the gods not bless our own little one with the same pleasure? I know for me it has always been the greatest feeling in the world when your eyes turn my way and I see how you feel about me shining so clearly in their green depths."*

*The petite woman sent the woman standing with her the look of which she spoke, and it promised great things when the ceremony was done and they returned to the palace. "Now who is the romantic fool?" She loved Laine but it wasn't often that the tough warrior showed her softer side in public. As much as the queen wanted to play and see how far she could push her consort, there was a duty she had to perform. Before her stood not only the winner of that year's competition but also the woman who had captured her daughter's heart. "Warrior Boden, you have proven yourself in battle and to your tribe," Bekka felt she was wasting the words on the young woman whose eyes were so glued to her daughter. "What say you?"*

*The sword strapped to Boden's back came out of the scabbard and she laid it at the queen's feet. "To you I give my sword, my service and my life, Queen Bekka of Leon. Do with me as you will." As she said the words Boden dropped to her knees and lowered her head.*

*Bekka went to place the necklace of olive leaves around Boden's neck, but at the last moment, she stopped. The whispering that came from the crowd almost made Boden look up, stopping when she heard more than one sigh coming from the women watching. With a sigh of her own, Bekka handed the victor's wreath to her eldest daughter and waved her hand toward the future. She smiled when Laine's hands came to rest on her shoulders and a kiss was placed on her neck.*

*"You are still the romantic fool I fell for so many years ago. We make a good team in the arena of foolishness, my love," whispered Laine as she moved her lips to her wife's ear.*

*"Just tell me she's as honorable and loves our daughter as much as she seems to." She was happy for Audrey, but it was hard not to look at it as losing her little girl.*

*Audrey looked out at the watching faces and held the wreath of leaves high over her head. "I*

*declare Boden of Argase the winner of this year's competition."*

*The queen's consort clapped along with everyone else as she leaned over and whispered the answer to her wife's question in her ear. "More so, love. Bo will give Audrey the balance she needs. With her she will have what we share and hopefully, if the gods see fit, even more than that. I've spoken to her and it is easy to see how much she loves our daughter. The woman you see before you is not someone hungry for power and she will see that Audrey keeps hers. It's a good match, and she'll be a good champion."*

*The two royals joined in the applause when the warrior threw protocol to the wind and kissed the girl she loved. It was a memory Audrey would love retelling for years to come.*

"Where have you flown off to, love?" asked Bo.

"To a place where a very similar young warrior was walking toward my mothers and finished stealing every bit of my heart."

The dark head, now peppered in spots with white, bent and Bo whispered into her wife's ear. "She's a little older, but perhaps that same warrior can show you how good a kisser she still is later on tonight." From her position slightly below them Bekka rolled her eyes as Laine covered her mouth to hide her smile. Years had done little to dampen the ardor between the current queen and her wife. It was something Bekka and her partner loved to tease them about.

They bumped shoulders, but Audrey and her partner never took their eyes off the princess as she made her trek to them. "Trust me, honey, you've gotten better with age." Audrey stopped her teasing and watched as Bebo stopped before them. "Warrior Bebo, you have proven yourself in battle and your tribe. What say you?"

The sword the princess carried was a gift from Boden and a replica of the one she carried the first time she took this walk. "To you, my queen, I give my sword, my service, my love and life. Do with and command me as you see fit. This is my solemn vow to you, your consort and my sisters." The words were a little different than the ones Boden had used, but Audrey wasn't surprised. As much as Bebo loved her second mother, she always strived to be her own person.

"Thank you, warrior," said Audrey so just her family could hear. "Well said, love." She held the wreath high so the crowd could see it before repeating the words she'd first said for Boden. "I declare Princess Bebo of Leon the winner of this year's competition." With a kiss to the top of the dark head, the queen placed the wreath of leaves around her daughter's neck and laughed when mischievous blue eyes looked up at her.

"I asked your wife to recreate something for me, so I hope you don't mind, mama." With a quick tug she ripped a leaf from the wreath and tucked it over Boden's ear. Before Bebo finished her mothers were in a familiar embrace sharing a kiss that brought cheers from the crowd.

"I love you, my beautiful girl, and I'm so proud of you," Audrey told her daughter when Bo let her go and Bebo got a turn at hugging her. "Now is the beginning of your time, and I want you to



choose that for your life which will bring you the greatest joy. Whatever that might be, I hope she or it will make you as happy as you and your mom have made me."

"Thank you, mama. I can only hope to be so blessed."

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"Have you decided?" Bo moved and twirled the chobos in her hand with expert ease. There was nothing better than a good sparring match to sober you up after a good party. Her daughter made the first move and the fight was on. Gone were the days when Bo had to hold back when wielding the short clubs or any weapon against Bebo.

"I want to go, but I'm not sure I'm good enough to represent the nation for what's needed." She blocked a blow to her thigh and sent a swipe at her mother's head in retaliation.

"Doubt is not a word for warriors, Bebo. If you doubt a good outcome, the gods will make it so. Chance is what I want you to focus on."

"Chance?" They were both starting to breathe hard from the exertion, but Bebo knew her mother could go on for hours.

"If you never chance anything, then how can you know that you'll succeed at anything? Through chance, great leaders are made," Bo sped up the moves driving Bebo back toward the edge of a fountain in the courtyard where they were working out. "But the flip side to that is that chance also makes great fools."

Jumping up to the edge, Bebo used the height advantage to propel herself over Boden's head so she could go on the offensive. "Looking a fool is what I'm afraid of."

"That's something that doesn't worry me, sprout." A good strong down stoke knocked one of Bebo's weapons out of her hand.

The setback was no reason to surrender though. Bebo grabbed her mother's wrist with one hand while she used a disarming maneuver with the other to even the odds. Grunting to keep hold of the powerful limb, the young woman smiled. "Why is that?"

"I didn't raise a fool." Boden widened her stance and dropped her remaining chobo. "I raised someone I'd follow into Hades if she but ask it of me."

The words were more effective than any defensive move her mother could have used and Bebo bowed her head and gave Boden the match. "There's no one I'd rather have looking out for me."

"You do what's in your heart, sprout, and damn what the world thinks."

"And if what I decide is to do what's expected?"

"Then I'll be the one holding your mother during the days of crying that are coming when you leave." Boden grabbed Bebo by the back of the neck and pulled her forward into a hug. "But any excuse to hold the woman I love is welcomed, so don't worry about it."

Bebo laughed and held on to the solid body longer than usual. Later, during her shower she stood under the hot spray thinking of not having her mom to run to for advice in the coming months. The upcoming mission was something Boden had done for Audrey as her champion, but they'd had each other for the duration. Aside from Max, Steph and Beth, and a few other guards, she would be on her own.

In a pair of loose fitting cotton pants and t-shirt, Bebo walked to the temple, close to the palace. Along the street she greeted everyone who stopped and bowed in reverence to her title. She was beloved among the people, because like Audrey and Boden, Bebo never used her station to make others feel bad about their own.

When she entered the sacred place, she and her guards removed their shoes and walked to the altar. From her knees Bebo looked up at the large statue of their patron goddess. The likeness, carved from the trunk of a tree that once grew in their forest, had been in their tribe since the year they had settled on the island. Along with the national archives, it was one of the people's most treasured possessions.

Emelda watched as the dark head lowered and Bebo's hands went up in a position of prayer. The head priestess had been present the day the princess had been born and remembered how the queen had sobbed when they had placed the baby in her arms. They were not tears of despair or sadness, but tears of complete joy at getting everything she had hoped for. Audrey was a kind and giving person, and when she met and fell in love with Boden, she wanted to gift her with a child, but not just any child. She wanted Boden to help her raise a piece of both of them.

There kneeling in Artemis' temple was Audrey's wish. Bebo was tall and built like a fighter. Her body was lean and had just enough musculature to be extremely attractive. The eyes were the same sky blue of Boden's but her mouth and nose were more like Audrey's as was the texture of the thick black hair. Boden's hair was dark and slightly curly, but her mate's locks were on the other end of the color spectrum. The sun streaked blonde showed traces of red in certain lights in the straight tresses, so Bebo was, in a way, a compromise along those lines as well. The dark hair came from one mother but the thick strands showed no traces of Boden's curls.

A perfect blend of light and dark thought Emelda, just like her mothers and some of their ancient queens and their consorts. More importantly, the next generation would be blessed with a love story to continue where Audrey and Boden would leave off. The priestess had seen it in her visions and it was time to set the game in motion.

"Why does she look so sad, mistress?" asked Emery, Emelda's apprentice.

"The princess is conflicted about the future, Em, so we will do our best to ease her mind. Take her silent shadows for a walk so I can talk to her."

"Are you packed?"

Bebo put her hands down and cracked open an eye. With Emelda's arrival, meditation time was over. "According to you and my mother, all I need to bring is my wits."

"And your sharp tongue won't hurt either. Come and walk with me, highness, I wish to tell you a story."

The temple was surrounded by one of the most beautiful gardens found in the world. Every citizen pledged time here throughout the year to keep it in pristine condition. Beyond the flowered and manicured trails was the aqua water of the Aegean. It was along the white beach that the old woman wanted to walk.

"This is a story told for generations because it is worth the telling," she began. "The Amazons had lived in secrecy for awhile, feeding the rumors and myths that surrounded their existence, when the mask was claimed by someone very different from those who had worn it before. A bard who used words rather than her fists, and who tried to reach out to the world she lived in rather than hide in the trees. Beside her, throughout her life, stood a warrior who loved her and kept her whole so that her message could have an opportunity to grow in the hearts of the women she led. They both died with the tribe after a long and prosperous rule, but for years the bard would leave the leadership of everyday life to others while she and the warrior wandered the countryside fighting for the greater good."

"Grandmother, I've heard this a million times already," whined Bebo. A slap to the back of her head kept her from doing it again.

"The warrior, with time, came to believe in the ways of peace and chose only to lift her sword to defend the defenseless, or at the command of her wife. It is from her that our tradition of going when called comes, though history has been rather inaccurate when giving credit. But no matter, that's why the bard is so important to the story. She is just as important as the deeds of her warrior. The world may not have acknowledged her endeavors, but it doesn't mean they won't be remembered. "

"Because she keeps the warrior alive...through her stories," Bebo looked down the beach and then at Emelda's face. "I never thought of it that way."

"You never had to, sweetheart. Your mother was born the teacher and bard. It was her destiny to claim the mask and to keep our history alive through her words. She's a shining beacon of light who has moved her people forward in her time, but only because she was brave enough to claim that which was hers."

"The warrior who stands at her side."

"Precisely. Your mother understood the balance the first two created and what they brought to those who followed. Like our ancestors your mother is no dictator, but someone who speaks her mind and is confident to do so because she has your other mother's strength at her disposal. In

you she has tried to forge the two parts together, but still you have much of Consort Boden's blood running through your veins. You need to leave so you may find your light. The one who'll sing your praises and keep your story alive for your children's children."

The pair stopped at a cove of rock by the water and sat on the sand. "Have you a vision for me then?"

"In history you will find your mate, highness. She's fair like your mother, and like her, finds comfort in words. When you find her though, you'll also find that there is a fork in the road to your ultimate decision."

"What do you mean?"

"Visions are just that, highness, a glimpse of the future, not an exact map. You'll know what the goddess wants you to know when the time comes. There is one thing though," warned Emelda.

"She belongs to someone else? Or perhaps she won't be able to stand me?"

A white brow went up at the princess' comment. "That's right. I guess the goddess didn't wish to make your journey too easy. Only through proving yourself worthy of her, will you manage to turn her heart to your own."

Bebo interrupted her before the priestess could go on. "Prove myself how?" She scooped up a handful of sand and watched it run through her fingers.

"Do you want me to be honest, or perhaps you want to go and find out for yourself."

"Wisdom tells me to wait..."

"But your instinct tells you otherwise?"

The tall princess threw her head back and laughed. "Are my instincts wrong then?"

"Can I tell you something first?"

"Grandmother, there'll never be a time in our existence that you'll have need to ask me that. You may ask or tell me anything whenever you please."

"I saw you as you slipped out of your mother's womb, just as I witnessed her own birth years before. But with you, Bebo, with you, I wept because I was born too early."

The young woman brushed her hands of sand and took hold of Emelda's. "Why would you do that?"

"I cried for the life some other woman would have at your side. Call it a jealous whim of an old woman, but what I would have given to be the one your eyes would fall upon on the day

Aphrodite would make your heart melt."

The smile that had made more than one female in the realm sigh appeared for Emelda. "I would have been damned lucky if it were so."

"You're a charmer like your mother, the gods bless you for humoring an old woman. Now listen." She rested her head on Bebo's shoulder and squeezed her hands. "In your battle you will find two roads. The first is the one you'll take if you think this young woman worthy. But in your case, the choice will be as easy as taking on the whole of the US Army alone. What I mean is that when the time comes, you think that no matter what your choice is it will lead to happiness. One will be easier than the other to make, but that is where the problem will lie."

"I hate to ask again, but what's that mean? You're being as clear as fog here."

"What I mean is that only one path holds true happiness. The other only holds contentment, but comfort is not passion."

Thinking on everything Emelda had said so far, something else stuck out in Bebo's mind. "I thought I had to prove myself worthy of her? Which is it?"

"This is your heart, so what you think of her is just as important as what she thinks of you. Any partnership, especially for the two who will one day rule, is forged on mutual love as well as respect. What this trip will show you is the road to love starts and ends here in Amazonia. Perhaps if we are all lucky you'll return to us that which has been missing for far too long."

"And the other path?"

"The other will have to wait until you return to us. Its path leads to Grazel and its sand dunes. If you return alone, to the desert you go to find your own vision."

Bebo kept her counsel and asked no more questions making Emelda proud of her for not wanting too much information. "Thank you, grandmother."

"One last thing." The priestess released one of Bebo's hands so she could cup her face. "No matter the outcome with this woman, I see great things coming from your journey. Your skills will surpass Boden's and your reign will be chronicled as one of the best in our history."

The dark head lowered in respect to the priestess' observation. "Thank you for saying so. It is a humbling experience to even have the chance to lead my people."

They walked back to the temple in silence where they found the royal guards waiting at the gate with Emery. In a gesture of affection, Bebo brushed her lips against Emelda's softly. "Goodbye, my friend. I'll write to you as often as I can while I'm away."

With one hand on Bebo's forehead and the other over her heart, Emelda's lips moved in silent prayer. "Hurry home and good luck. Remember, Bebo, this is your time to shine."

The walk back toward the palace was more relaxed and the two holy women watched as the princess never looked back. "Will she be gone long?" asked Emery.

"Long enough. She will return to us changed by both battle and love. Let us begin to pray that it's the first path that I spoke to her of that rises to meet her."

"And if it doesn't?"

The hum of bees in the garden and the sound of waves in the background prevailed for a long while making Emery think there was no answer forthcoming. "Then she will return to us still, but will find happiness only in her responsibilities. Her heart though, will find solace in nothing because her true mate will never be replaced."

Emery couldn't help but let tears fall. "That sounds so sad."

"That is at times the will of the gods, child. Our job has always been to follow and not question them. You'll find with age that you can give of yourself and love unconditionally but it doesn't guarantee you the same in return. Sometimes the greatest pain can be done by those who are supposed to love us the most."

"What a shame," said Emery with a sigh.

"What a shame indeed."

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Boden walked her sister Leslie to the war room in the palace; each lost in her own thoughts as they moved down the corridors. The world was a different place after the terrorist attacks of the previous years, and the two soldiers knew things would only get worse before they got better. It was their expertise in small unit warfare that had precipitated the call from the United States government. For the greater good, Audrey would send their best warrior, with just a bit of a heavy heart, to train an elite unit of soldiers until they could master the Amazonian techniques.

Sitting at the conference table were the queen, Bebo's royal guard, and the princess. They all wore their dress uniforms, and the young women stood when Boden and Leslie stepped into the room. The four soldiers placed a fist over their chest in salute to their commanding officers after turning and bowing to the queen.

"Sit, please," said Leslie. She walked to Audrey and kissed her hand before sitting across from the young women. "The situation as we know it now isn't one of combat, only training. The president has growing problems in Iraq from the first war there, and Iran and some of the other surrounding countries are heating up with the conflict. The recent competition has proven to your mother and I, Bebo, that you are the best person for the job. Granted desert terrain is different from the sacred forest, but you all have trained in Grazel as well. For the coming months you'll work with General Patrick Paddio and his unit of special operations forces."

Boden pulled out a file and placed eleven pictures on the table. "This is the general and his unit of soldiers. Remember you'll work with them but you take orders from no one outside Amazonian authority. From my own experience they'll push you if you give them the opportunity. Do not under any circumstances give them the opportunity."

"What my sister means, Bebo, is that there'll be one in these faces," Leslie pointed to the pictures on the table, "Who'll try to show his or her fellow soldiers that we as a people are overrated. A woman who lives on an island of only women is somehow a freak who needs to be taught a lesson. Soldiers having to take orders from you will be a different breed of people than those you have encountered on your travel thus far. The Cobra Special Ops Unit is one of their best, and so are the egos that come along with that, I would imagine."

"There is one other thing, love," interrupted the queen.

"I don't know if I could stand it, this sounds so good so far," teased Bebo.

"With you, are going quite a few treasures from the archives. The national gallery in Washington asked for an exhibition and I granted Erica permission to put together a good cross section of things to show the world the wonders of our lives and history. Just enough to keep them guessing, but I would like you to see that our generosity is being treated with respect. If one piece comes back full of sticky fingers I may never hear the end of it."

"As you wish, mama."

"It'll be in Washington for awhile then travel south with you to New Orleans later when you move to the field part of your training." The queen stood to let Boden finish her section of Bebo's briefing, prompting everyone to their feet until she left the room.

The meeting lasted four hours and when it was done, Bebo had an idea of how long this would take. Maneuvers of combat indoors until the unit got the basics of them down and then to the swamps of Louisiana to put the ideas into motion. The forests of the swamps were different than she and the guards were used to, but it was similar to some hotspots around the world into which the American forces could be called. From the easy part, considering there were places to hide in trees, to the desert section of their training would take at least four months if the unit learned fast.

In the time of Consort Laine's service, the states were at war in the jungles and her advice during training and combat weren't heeded. One of Boden's saddest days was standing at the wall of the Vietnam memorial with her mother-in-law and seeing the overwhelming number of names lost in that conflict. The one thing Boden prayed for more than anything was that nothing of the same sort haunted Bebo's memories for years to come.

"Do you have any questions?" asked Bo of her daughter.

"What, I'm not allowed to call you once I board the plane?"

"You call me whenever you want, I just need to know if you have any questions now."

"If you go over this again my eyes will gloss over, mom, I think we got it." Bebo stood and stretched. "Let's go find mama before she thinks you're in here telling me where all the good bars are."

"You mean you don't want to know?" asked Leslie.

"Some things are better researched on your own, my dear aunt. All those investments in computers my mother made years ago are good for more than one thing, and the Internet is a wondrous place." The others laughed at Bebo's teasing.

"And this is no time to share with your mother all the talks we've had on this subject over the years," warned Bo. "You have fun, but remember, you're there representing your queen. Not to mention my wife, and I have a feeling if you go over there and leave a wake of broken hearts, I'll be to blame some how."

They retired to a private dining area to share a last meal together as a family before Bebo left the next morning. There was much story telling and laughing as they ate and drank some of the wine bottled on the island the year of Bebo's birth. One by one their friends went to bed until only Bebo and Audrey were left.

"Mama, can I ask you something before I go?"

"If it's where to go to find women, sweetheart, ask your mother. She never left me alone when we went to fulfill my duty, but those guards of hers had stories that could curl even our hair."

Bebo laughed and relaxed back into the pillows they were lying on. "I think I have that one covered but thanks for the advice. What I want to know is how did you know mom was the one who held your heart?"

"Of all the questions you could ask me that's the hardest and easiest to answer." Audrey pulled on Bebo's sleeve to get the young woman to put her head in her lap. "The year I turned nineteen, my mother Laine took me with her on a trip to the forest to visit with the regent of the area at the time. The competition for the year was just over and the next class of recruits were starting their training. While your grandmother Laine met with the trainers I sat under one of the great trees reading a scroll. Not an hour had passed when an arrow came from somewhere above me and embedded itself just above my head."

"Did mom ever forgive Bear that infraction?"

"That's never discussed when I'm around, but I think bad weather is not Bear's friend after the broken arm your mother treated her to that afternoon. But that's not why I'm telling you this story," Audrey pulled gently on a lock of Bebo's hair. "When I looked up from my book and saw her standing there with a bow strapped to her back I almost fainted just from the overwhelming sight of her."



"Was it then?"

"Maybe this isn't something you want to hear, but no, it wasn't then. Instant lust is a little different than falling in love at first sight. Like you, your mother was as impressive sight when dressed for combat, she still is to me. It was when she dropped to her knees and took hold of my hands to ask if I was all right, that's when it happened. Her voice wove itself into my brain and into my heart, and all I could do was listen and nod."

"Have you ever heard her tell this story?"

"No, she always tells me I'm the storyteller in the family."

"One night you should ask her to recount the day for you."

"I'll have to do that, but to answer your question, it was then that I started to fall in love with her, but with time I knew my instincts were right. Our patron goddess is Artemis, but I feel that her sister Aphrodite is also always looking out for us. The outside world may not understand us, but as long as we respect what a precious thing we have in our families, then it is more than we need to be happy. Why all the interest in love?"

"No reason, mama, maybe I just wanted you to tell me a story before I go." She felt another tug to her hair and Bebo knew she wasn't fooling her mother. "Emelda thinks I will find my mate on this trip. If I do, I want to know if there's something I'm supposed to look for that shows me she's the one."

"Only this will tell you," Audrey placed her hand over Bebo's heart. "If you're lucky other parts of your anatomy will soon follow and the picture will be complete."

"And the realm thinks mom's the crude one between the two of you," teased Bebo.

Audrey laughed and leaned down to place a kiss on her daughter's forehead. "I hope that Emelda is right. I can only imagine Bo with a grandchild to spoil. It's a wonder you ever learned how to walk, she carried you around everywhere."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, mama. The vision wasn't clear and it might not happen at all."

"This face," Audrey pinched the cheeks between her hands together, "Will get the girl to be curious. When you spend time with her, she will be lost just as I was in the eyes of a warrior. That is if she's a smart woman."

"Thank you, mama. Mom may officially be your champion but you have always been mine."

"And you remain my greatest treasure. Have fun and you come back to me in one piece. Do you promise?"



It must have taken the craftsman who made it a lifetime to complete it the statue had so much detail. The subject was a warrior dressed in full regalia as if heading out to war. On her face was a mask of stone feathers, much like the feathers braided into her hair. Into her boots were tucked what looked to be knives, on her back was strapped a sword and in her hand was a bow and the frozen figure was in the process of nocking an arrow.

"How scared the enemy facing hundreds of these women must have been when they got their first look. My father told me that in small fights, the Amazons have never been beaten they know the art of war so well."

"Yeah well, she's never met the unit he commands now, baby," said the masculine voice behind her.

Hearing Captain Titus Walker, Stan touched his fingers to his head and bid Annie good night. The cocky military man wasn't his favorite person and the construction worker was having a hard time picturing the sweet young woman he worked with married to him eventually. "Good night, Miss Annie, I'll see you in the morning. I'm anxious to hear you tell me about all this stuff during the tour tomorrow."

"Thanks for all the help, Stan, and please call me just Annie. We've sweat together too much putting all these exhibits together for you to still be so formal with me." She gave the older man a quick hug before giving Titus her attention. "How did you get in here?"

"I've been gone for three weeks, and all you can ask me is how I got in here?" He held his arms out and she met him half way, making him close the gap. "Miss me?"

"Just a little bit. How did it go?" asked Annie after she'd kissed him hello.

"We were in and out, and that's all I can tell you. Your father said he might give me command of the unit the next time out though. He was impressed with my thinking in the field as he calls it."

Annie laughed and pulled on the belt around his coat. "Don't be all impressed with that, honey, he's been telling Reggie and I that for years just when we make it back in one piece from a date." She took his hand and started for her office. "Can you come over tonight, or do you have some debriefing to go to?"

"Actually I'm free and ready to take you out to dinner."

"Sorry, but I have a lot of work to do tonight to get ready for tomorrow. The exhibit is opening and I'm first up in the docent role in the morning."

He opened the door and grabbed her coat off the rack and held it open for her. "We're going out to dinner, Annie, I've already decided. It's not like we ever get to see each other, so we have to take advantage of the situation when we can. Besides when we get married and start moving with my job, you won't have to worry about getting ready for anything except getting pregnant. The

general says he wants a grandson since your mother only knew how to make girls."

She wanted to argue, but Titus had just gotten home and if dinner was quick she could finish her reading. Dinner turned out not to be quick when a lot of his unit met them at the restaurant to relive their adventures through their little secret codes. He dropped her off after two and insisted on coming in, and Annie didn't argue again when he wanted to catch up on their physical relationship. After all the beer and stories it didn't take him long to fondle her a little and roll over and start snoring.

The alarm clock was set for five the next morning so she could make a dent in the last chapter of the booklet Queen Audrey had her librarians put together explaining the pieces they'd sent and their history. It was only two and a half hours of sleep but it beat getting none.

"Where are you going?" he said in a rough voice from the bed.

"To work, Titus. Try and get out of here before Reggie gets up. I'm not really in the mood to hear any lectures from my baby sister later if you're drinking milk out of the carton naked again."

"But it's still dark out," he complained, already heading back to sleep. "Come back to bed and I'll make it worth your while."

"Are you kidding, I'm still reeling from last night," she said as she picked up her coat and headed out to the living room to get her briefcase. To the man in her bed the comment sounded a little sarcastic.

"You and the crew did a wonderful job, Annie," said Carl Baxter the head curator as they walked the floor in the quiet of the early morning. "I'm hoping this goes well enough to be rewarded with a trip to the Amazonian archives in their capital. It's never been seen or entered by an outsider, but a man can dream. Queen Audrey, from my telephone conversations with her, seems to be genuinely interested in forging some lines of communications and sharing scholarly interests with people."

Not wanting to fool with it, Annie had pulled her hair into a bun at the base of her neck and it felt strange when she nodded her head. "That would be great. After all they can't blame people for getting the wrong idea of them, or writing inaccurate accounts of their lives if they don't want to share something as precious as books."

"Are you okay with all of this?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"It's just that I've overheard some of the comments you girls have made during the unpacking and I don't want any trouble if you decide to interject your personal biases into this. The gallery and key people in the government have worked too hard to get to this point only to be shot down by someone who has a problem with Amazonia as a whole." His tone stayed even with no reprimand in it, but it was a clear warning to her. "We've worked together long enough for you to

be honest with me."

"Mr. Baxter, I'd hope you know me well enough to know it doesn't matter how I feel about the Amazons as a people, I would never embarrass you or the gallery with any inappropriate comments."

They stopped at the statue of the warrior and they both fell silent to admire the workmanship once again. There was something about this fierce looking warrior that spoke to something in Annie's heart. It was like this unknown woman was not afraid of any outcome. She was unafraid of speaking out in defense of the life she wanted and the way she wanted to live it. Perhaps the tribe of women living on some far off island were happier than most if that's how they faced their days.

"Then you do have something about all this that's bothering you?" asked Baxter, being the first to break the silence.

"Trust me, sir, it's nothing I can't handle. I just don't see how they can be happy living in a society that excludes half the world's population. Not everyone living on Amazonia is gay; it can't be. Does that then mean they force women to live a life that doesn't make them happy? It doesn't make sense to me since they're supposed to stand for a place where women can be free to be whatever they choose." Annie stopped before she really got going and scared Baxter into a sweat. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to go on like that. If you don't mind I have a few things to finish up before we open up."

"If you really don't feel comfortable, Annie, just be honest with me and I'll assign you to something else. I just thought you'd be as excited about this as I am."

"Thank you for saying that, sir, but I'm sure I'll be fine."

She kicked her shoes off as soon as the door to her office closed and she looked through her bag for the booklet she'd brought home the night before against museum regulation. The booklet was not to leave the building and everyone signed a contract not to copy or share it in any form. Annie had ignored the directive since they would be sharing the booklets content during the tours they would be giving in the coming weeks. *Well it's not like I'm going to copy it and start selling it on Ebay.* That thought crossed her mind as she leaned back in her chair and propped her feet on the desk.

Whoever had written the information guide had written it in the form of an adventure story. It was like no history book she'd ever read and Annie found that it kept her interest as much as her Nancy Drew novels when she was in school. Each piece Audrey had sent as her ambassadors had a story to tell since they were, to the Amazons, real people, even the goddesses. The warriors commemorated in either wood or stone had lived and done something extraordinary to help further the cause of the Amazons.

It was the knocking on her door that made Annie jump up and knock the booklet from her lap. Her bun had come undone and the last chapter of the material was left unread when she fell

asleep despite the interest she had in what it had to say. She walked to the door hunched over from the pain in her back from the uncomfortable chair.

"I figured when your car was gone this morning you could use this," Terry held a large cup of coffee in her hand and she offered it to Annie. "I also stopped calling you at twelve when Reggie threatened to have me killed if I dialed y'all's number one more time and woke her up. Something about a big test today. And since your father is the head of some black ops group I decided to take heed of her threat." She pushed Annie back in her chair and pulled the hairbrush out of the top drawer. "Late night, honey?"

"You saw him here last night. Titus is about as easy to say no to as my father is. We didn't get in until two and then he wanted to have a little fun."

"TMI, honey. He's handsome as all get out, Annie, but you'd better start speaking up for yourself before you find yourself barefoot and pregnant in Guam or something. If that happens I'll be here all by myself and you're the one who talked me into this career in the first place."

Annie took a sip of her coffee and almost spit it out when Terry started whining. "Did you finish reading all this stuff?"

"You know something, Annie?" Terry brushed out the wavy blonde hair and started twisting it back into the bun her friend had picked that morning. "I couldn't put that thing down. Can you believe I turned down a date with Billy to finish it? Are you ready?"

"I wish I could say I was. You don't want to take the first shift do you?"

"I wish I could, but Mr. Baxter has me going over to the holding facility to accept shipment of the artwork heading over to the White House this afternoon. They're changing up some of the landscapes for a state dinner tonight."

"Shit, I forgot all about that."

"Care to share with the peasants?"

"My father wanted me and Reggie to go with him and my mother tonight. The dinner is for Princess Bebo and her royal guard."

Terry finished with her hair and twirled the chair around to see if her handiwork was all right. "That sounds like fun. You could ask her for a refresher course if you run into any snags today. Have fun and call me later."

Finishing her coffee, Annie tried to skim through the rest of the booklet as she picked up the phone and called her sister. "Reg?"

"Annie, you've got some nerve calling me this early. Your friends kept me up till all hours and I just got a treat when I headed into the kitchen to get coffee this morning. I'd love to talk to you but I'm busy packing all your stuff so I can put it out by the curb."

"Tell me at least that he was dressed when you walked in?"

"Trust me, there's nothing I'd like better than to tell you that, but sadly it ain't so. Now if all you called me for is to ask how your fiancé looks drinking juice alfresco in the morning light, I'll have to tell you all about it later. I have a test this morning and I'm running late since your Prince Valiant decided to take forever in the shower." Reggie pulled her mop of blonde hair into a ponytail and ran around her room picking up all the stuff she needed to bring with her.

"Wait, Reg, please don't hang up the phone, I need you to do me a favor." Annie was doing her own running as she stood hopping behind her desk trying to get her pumps back on.

"Make it fast, I really am running late and my morning hasn't exactly been peachy so far."

"I need you to run to the mall and find me something to wear tonight. You do remember about that dinner daddy told us about?"

"Shit!" The word was said just like Annie had uttered it just before.

"Yeah, thank God Terry just mentioned it in some other context or else the general would have had us spend the night in the brig. Could you go?"

Reggie grabbed her pack and keys and slammed the front door closed. "Fuck," she screamed when she saw Titus' car blocking her in.

"What?" Annie tried to get her attention.

"Your idiot blocked me in. Jesus, Annie, we're really going to have to set some ground rules for sleepovers." She pried open the door to her old jeep and started the motor.

"Reg, think about this before you do anything stupid." She knew it wouldn't do any good, but Annie was trying to avoid a fight later. Titus and her sister already hated each other and if what she thought was about to happen did, it would only make matters worse.

"Stupid is acting like you rule the world because you're licensed to carry a gun. You know there isn't some unwritten rule that you have to marry daddy incarnate just because that's what the general wants." She gunned the engine getting the front door to open again and it gave her a big feeling of pleasure to watch his face when she put the jeep into reverse and put her foot on the gas before he could make it down the steps of the brownstone she and her sister shared.

"Stop, you little idiot," Annie could hear Titus screaming in the background. His yells were drowned out by her sister's back bumper meeting the front of Titus' car. His Mustang, that Annie sometimes thought he loved more than he did her, left two huge rubber marks in their driveway when Reggie pushed it into the street.

"I'll see you tonight, Annie, have a great day," said Reggie with a laugh as she sped off before he

could make it to her door.

"Sure you'll have a great day; I on the other hand won't hear the end of this for a long time to come," Annie said to the telephone receiver like it would answer her. There was no time to think about that now.

She walked to the front of the museum to a group of eager faces from the all girls academy started under the Clinton administration in the capital's inner city. In her talks with Baxter, Audrey had asked that they invite the magnet school's entire population of students to come and see the exhibit. Seeing how excited they looked, Annie had to agree with the woman's logic. To behold what women could do with help from no one but themselves would only inspire these young minds for years to come.

"Welcome, everyone, to the National Gallery. My name is Annie Paddio and I'll be your docent today. Together we'll try and learn a little about the citizens of Amazonia, and if at anytime you have any questions please just let me know and I'll try my best to answer them."

They walked around the gallery and the girls from the third and fourth grades pressed in whenever Annie stopped and started talking about whatever object they faced. They listened to her and their eyes lit up when she spoke of the weapons included along with all the artwork on display. As much as she and Reggie detested guns of any kind, Annie was just as curious as the young girls to see some of the things in the glass cases in action.

It was when they reached the last objet d'art that Annie ran out of words. The story of the great warrior in the pose of an impending fight was in the section she had yet to read. She was ashamed to not be able to tell the woman's story because she hadn't read the text. Going against her nature to just be honest and say she didn't know, Annie tried a different approach thinking there was no harm in it.

"What's her name, Miss Annie?" asked a young woman toward the middle of the group.

She looked at the sea of bright faces and tried to find something to say. From the back wall an amused woman watched and held her hand up so that her companions would stop their whispering. Annie closed her eyes for a moment and picked out the strange name she'd seen in her reading and christened the statue with it.

"Her name was Bebo, and she was a great warrior of the Amazons," started the blonde. "In her boots you see she carries knives, on her back a sword and a bow with the quiver of arrows on her hip. Right after she dressed and gathered her weapons she was in a battle with a group of barbarians during which she was able to turn the tide and beat back the invaders. One look at the warrior dressed in the feathered mask and one bellow of her war cry sent them running back to where they lived never to return."

The clapping coming from the back stopped her streak of imagination, and Annie held her hand over her eyes to cut out the glare of the overhead spotlights. "Can I help you?"



"I was just wondering if you didn't like the story she came with so much that you decided to make up your own. My clapping is to commend you on a wonderful attempt. Though your story had merit, your facts had none." The voice held a hint of teasing, but it made Annie blush all the same. It had to be a teacher, but the question was; how did the woman know her account was a complete fabrication?

"I don't want to argue with you, but Bebo was a warrior and fought for the Amazons," Annie had yet to see who was calling her on her bluff.

"When exactly did Bebo die to have this wonderful statue made in her honor?" The woman purposely stayed in the spotlight to keep Annie off balance.

"No one knows the exact date of her death, but the Amazons thought her contributions important enough to make this tribute."

"Would you mind if I try and tell her story?" The voice moved closer and yet Annie hadn't seen her face.

"If you think you could do better, go right ahead."

The petite historian watched as the tall woman came into view and moved the velvet ropes aside. When she looked into the blue eyes, Annie wanted to go and sit with the girls to see what this woman had to say. She was dressed casually but something about her made her as imposing as the statue behind her. Annie could just imagine her dressed in leather and holding off a legion of men by herself with just a sword and a smile.

"Thank you, I don't believe I'm as good a storyteller as you, but I promise to do my best."

Bebo leaned on the base of the statue and looked at the young girls looking up at her. *This must be what mama feels like when she has time to head into the classroom.* Before Audrey took the mask from Bekka, she had been a kindergarten teacher. To be so bold wasn't in the princess' nature, but like Annie had felt about her, something about the petite blonde drew her from her hiding place at the back of the room. *If only just to see what color her eyes were* thought Bebo as she took a deep breath to start her story. The conservative suit and hairstyle did little to hide the beauty of the blonde who had up to that point been right on her facts.

"A long time ago on the island of Amazonia there lived a great warrior who found herself alone on a patrol at the edge of the great forest in the province of Argase. To the Amazons the forest of Argase is sacred because it is believed that it is where the goddess Artemis spends most of her time and feels the most at home in the earthly realm. If you choose the path of a warrior you learn to move within the trees as a method of fighting but it is also where a warrior feels most at peace. In this warrior's case," she pointed up to the statue, "From the top of a tree she looked out to the water to find warships sailing to the side of the island where the Grael desert is located. The hoard of barbarians," said Bebo before whispering to Annie. "At least you got that part right."

"What happened to her and what was her name?" the question came from one of the older girls in the audience.

"Her name was Larissa and if you'll give me a minute I'll share with you what happened to her." The princess stood and put a hand on the top of the statue's boot. "She watched to see where they would put down anchor, then set out at a run for most of the night to meet up with her unit and warn them. Before she did, our hero met up with some of the men who were there to take slaves and treasures back to their homelands."

"What happened? Did they kill her?" asked another little girl.

"Her first choice of weapon was the sais," answered Bebo putting her hand on the stone handles of the weapons that weren't coming out. "They aren't knives, but more like little swords that are just as deadly. With one in each hand she was able to take out four of the bad guys. Next she drew her sword and fought with five more."

For the first time in her life, Bebo felt what her mother had spoken of for so long, the pride for where she came from and what that meant. "As she headed back to the trees, her last chance to outrun them, one of the men was able to drive a spike through her leg. Even though she was bleeding profusely, she reached for the bow she'd left in the high branches and started making her way to the south. With her last act for her sisters, Larissa shot an arrow to the next guard post to warn them of the invasion. Her body fell to the forest floor forgotten by the men who had come to a land where they didn't belong, but to the Amazons, she will never be forgotten."

"Was she a great general then?" asked one of the teachers who had come with the children.

"No, Larissa was just, what in this country is called, a foot soldier. One of the many who make great armies, but she understood what some who serve do not. The sacrifice of the one can be the salvation of the many. To her sisters her story has been told for generations and a team of our best sculptors made this so that her tale will never be forgotten because for the many, she made the ultimate sacrifice. Larissa is visiting you now, but usually she watches over the entrance to the great archives in Amazonia. There every child who lives on the island visits her every year that they are in school. If you are lucky, one of our master story tellers is there the day you visit, and with their talents, you can feel the story come to life as you watch her as she takes her last shot to the trees beyond to warn of the oncoming invasion."

The guards with Bebo moved forward and removed the velvet ropes as the princess came to the end of her story with her hand on the right foot of the masterpiece. "When the story is done, the girls come and pay homage by rubbing her foot for good luck. If you like, I'd invite you to do the same. Perhaps some of Larissa's good fortune and bravery will stay with you after you leave here today." The girls in the front could see that the toe of the boot was worn smooth by the many little Amazons who must have rubbed it over the years. To actually be allowed to touch something so precious raised a din of young voices throughout the space.

"I don't think that's a good idea," whispered Annie as she tried to put herself between the little hands and the statue.

"What's your name lady?" asked the little girl standing on Bebo's feet to get her attention.

"My apologies, Miss..." Bebo bent at the waist and offered her hand.

"My name's Caroline."

"Miss Caroline, I am Bebo of Leon." Hearing the name made Annie move out of the way and let the children touch the statue. "And I want to thank you all on behalf of my mother, Queen Audrey, for coming today."

"Kill me now," whispered Annie to no one in particular.

"Don't worry, the penalty for not knowing stuff in Amazonia usually gets you more duty of some sort, but death isn't one of the options," teased Steph. "Well not yet anyway." The guard was still in shock at the passionate way Bebo had told Larissa's story. *Maybe she was paying attention all those times Queen Audrey told it.* "And please forgive our princess for interrupting you like that. But then again, if she hadn't, we all would've never known that she has inherited her mother's gift for storytelling. It's hard to imagine when she's running rings around us on the training fields that she has the ability to string words together so well."

"Are you all here to check up on me?" Annie watched as Bebo held up the children who couldn't reach and graciously accepted more than one kiss to the cheek from the braver girls in attendance.

"We just arrived this morning and Bebo was fulfilling a promise to her mother. I think maybe the queen is having a little separation anxiety having all this where she can't see it," Steph waved her hand around the room filled with pieces of their home. "Now I believe I'm the one being rude," she held out her hand. "I am Steph Pech of Amazonia, I serve as one of Bebo's royal guard."

"Annie Paddio, it's a pleasure to meet you," Annie accepted the woman's hand but her eyes never left the activity near the center of the room. "Is your boss the forgiving type?"

"She's more the pain in the ass type, but I think all the things we've seen in the city so far just from the car window have her excited enough to forgive any gaffs on your part. You did a wonderful job until the end."

"That she did, Steph. Perhaps our new friend didn't have time to finish the written text to give old Larissa her due," said Bebo when she moved closer. "Forgive my interruption of your lecture, dear lady, but my mother would've had my hide if you'd given me the credit for her contributions," she pointed to the statue behind them. "Audrey's many things, but a stickler for the facts tops the list. Though with someone so beautiful as yourself, I could be persuaded to listen to any story or yarn you wish to spin for me."

The compliment wrapped firmly in a flirtatious tone made Annie blush as well as nervous. In an old habit she lifted her hand and combed some stray hair back behind her ear. It was the motion

that made Bebo notice the ring. "I'm the one who's sorry, highness, I didn't have the opportunity to fully prepare and while it's no excuse, it's the only reason I tried to fly by the seat of my pants as it were. The children were lucky you were here. Your story was much better than mine."

"Nonsense, my mother has always applauded people with quick minds and wonderful imaginations. I hate to tell stories and run, but we have to get going. I just wanted to come by so I could call our queen and tell her that Larissa and the rest of the exhibit are in good hands." Bebo bowed her head a little before turning and making her way to the back entrance. They did have a meeting at the Pentagon to attend, but she wanted to get out of there before she gave into the urge to take the small curator into her arms and kiss her.

"Highness?"

The clear voice stopped Bebo before she could make it out. "Yes?"

"If you'd like, please stop by again when the children are here, or anytime you like. Hearing some of these stories from you would be invaluable."

"Just to the children?" Bebo wanted to laugh at the lost look on the blonde's face. "I'd love nothing better. Like I said, you were so delightful, I could listen to you for hours." The girl was taken but it didn't hurt anything to just play a little figured Bebo.

When she came in earlier and turned the corner with Baxter, Bebo had stopped and listened to the soft but strong voice describing what staffs were used for and why. She leaned against an alcove in the building and studied the blonde speaking so eloquently of her homeland and the traditions Audrey had included in the text. While she studied Annie, the guards studied the princess and smiled. Blue eyes devoured every move of delicate fingers as they brushed back strands of blonde hair that had escaped from the bun, and the way she bent to answer questions from short inquisitive listeners. With every move and every word, Emelda's vision resonated in Bebo's mind.

"Pretty girl," commented Max as they got into the car the army had sent for them.

"I hadn't noticed," said Bebo.

"Bebo, Larissa may shoot that last arrow in this direction for telling such lies," said Beth from the front seat. "You'd swear she was performing a striptease the way you couldn't take your eyes off her."

"I'm just an art lover," said Bebo with a smile.

"You're a lover all right, now clear your head of pretty things and put that tough warrior look on your face. It's time to scare the natives a bit," said Steph as they turned into the Pentagon.

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The room they were brought to had no windows and the walls consisted of cinder blocks painted a pale yellow. Seated around a large conference table were twelve soldiers dressed in the casual khaki uniform that was just a shirt and matching pants. In front of each person sat the black berets every branch of the army had adopted as their headwear. There were two generals seated at either end of the conference table but the attractive man with blond hair accented with white at the temples who was closest to the door had one more star on his lapels.

A man seated next to the commanding general called everyone to attention and as a unit they stood and saluted their visitors. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, but please stand at ease," said Bebo. They had stopped at the house her mother kept on embassy row and changed into their own military uniforms, dark blue pants and a shade lighter shirt.

"Welcome to Washington, Princess Bebo, I'm General Patrick Paddio," the man held out his hand and smiled. He didn't particularly care to participate in this exercise but sometimes the life of a soldier was to just follow orders. There was nothing a pack of lesbians living on an island and playing at war games could teach him or his unit, no matter what he'd told his girls in the past. Now was his opportunity to prove he and his men were better, as well as rid himself of the few women who'd managed to be assigned to him.

"Thank you, general, allow me to introduce my companions, Commanders Steph Pech, Max Blackard and Beth Carmouche. Once we start field training, we'll be joined by a few others of my mother's personal guard."

"We're looking forward to getting down to business and completing the training as soon as possible. I'm sure that once we begin you'll be able to report to your government and mine just how exceptional our training has been so far. I'll let my men introduce themselves," said the general ignoring the fact some of the people present were women.

"Captain David Norris, ma'am."

"Lieutenant Douglas Triggs," said the brunette standing next to him.

"Lieutenant Brian Turner, ma'am."

"Lieutenant Lacey Lecompte, ma'am. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Lieutenant Billy Wade, ma'am."

"Captain Titus Walker."

"Captain Michelle Redmond, ma'am. Welcome."

"General Junis Curtis, highness," said the man at the other end of the table with a slight bow to his head.

"Lieutenant Frances Burke, ma'am."

"Lieutenant Carey Sanders, ma'am."

The last man hadn't taken his eyes off Bebo from the time she stepped into the room and it took Carey bumping shoulders with him to open his mouth. "Forgive me," the blond stammered. "Captain Arthur Leon, highness. It's so good to see you here," he added with great emotion. "Finally."

It was to him that Bebo offered her hand next and she looked into his green eyes for a long time without letting go of him. To have the time to talk to him was worth making the trip since it had been over two years that she'd had the opportunity to see him at all. Finally she released him and turned to General Paddio.

"We're looking forward to the exchange of ideas and techniques. If you want, general, we can begin in the morning. From your comments I can see you're anxious to be done as soon as possible. I hope you and your people understand this venture will be done with as much hand-to-hand combat as you can stand. What I mean to say is we'll not be holding back and I hope you don't as well."

"Don't worry, highness, I'm sure we're more than capable of defending ourselves against any well placed slaps you can land. I command one of the most lethal black ops units in the army. Once this is done, I'm sure it'll be you and your soldiers who learn a few new moves."

A black brow arched and Bebo held back a laugh. "We'll try and keep up and keep the slapping down to a minimum then. I hope to see you all tonight."

Titus was one of the last to leave and he looked Bebo over from head to foot. When he had the opportunity in the morning, he was going to try and take the big Amazon down. Aside from the personal satisfaction it would give him to show them that women didn't have any place on the field of combat, it would earn him points with the old man. He winked and gave her a little smirk before donning his beret and following his fellow soldiers out the door. It was his way of trying to intimidate her.

"Something in your eye, Capt. Walker?" asked Bebo.

"No, ma'am, just trying to be friendly. I know you don't probably go for that sort of thing, but I can't wait to get you on the mat tomorrow. Like you said, I promise to not hold anything back. When we're done, you might find you liked it."

She held up her hand when Max opened her mouth to put him in his place. "You're right, you aren't my type, but I promise to give you a time on your back you won't soon forget."

Arthur laughed and thought if he closed his eyes, he could imagine Boden standing before him. He had been just as braggadocios once and like the trainer Bear, the broken arm it had earned him was good for telling him when it was going to rain. The little girl he'd watched grow up in pictures and during their frequent visits was like a pillar of power.

"Highness, if I didn't know any better I'd say you were flirting with our Titus," he teased.

"Please, Arthur, I think our relationship allows us to drop the formality of titles when it's just us," said Bebo. She moved closer and put her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "And trust me, flirting is the last thing on my mind."

"If you're anything like your mother Boden, and just looking at you that's more than obvious, Titus will be sporting a weather vane of his own when you're done. I tried to warn Patrick, but he bleeds army green and women aren't part of his world when it comes to teaching him anything."

"We'll discuss these people enough while I'm here, let's not waste time doing so now. How are you?"

"Good. I'm happy and thinking about retirement soon. The life of a soldier is one you can't keep forever. More importantly how's your mother?"

"She's good, looking forward to your next visit to Leon. I think mama sometimes regrets that the Amazons don't have room for princes in the realm. She feels like she missed out on a special relationship when you came to live here."

He nodded and tried to choke back his emotions. Bekka and Laine had spent a lot of time with him, but the visits were never enough time. The relationship he had with his sisters was just as special to him and he had served Audrey and Boden with pride when they had called on him not long after their joining. Before him stood the one person who made him regret the distance between their worlds. Audrey had carried Bebo, but her existence was owed to Boden and Art. If he were to leave his mark in her life, it would come in the next few months.

"My sister tells me otherwise, and she insists on calling me Prince Art whenever it's just the two of us." He hugged her again as if to convince himself she was really there with him. "I hear congratulations are in order. Boden must still be walking on clouds that you won the annual competition."

"Mom's like the trees of Argase, they grow older but they seldom change much. Thank the gods she found someone who thinks she's just perfect the way she is, but yes, she's as proud as any parent could be."

"You're smart, kid. You waited until you were taller and faster than she is before you started teasing her."

"I inherited her skill for fighting, but I got the smarts from the Leon side of the family, and I should thank you since you had a lot to do with that part. Are you free for the afternoon? You can come back to the house with us and we can spend the time catching up."

"I'd love nothing better."

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The president wasn't in attendance but top officials who worked for him at the Pentagon stood around the room in tuxedos drinking champagne. Secretary of Defense Moines watched the door as he spoke to Patrick Paddio and his wife Doris. It didn't really matter to him that the general wasn't happy with Bebo being there, he was just thrilled Audrey was willing to work with them. If he played it right, there would be soldiers from Amazonia along on some of the more covert operations in years to come.

For the welcome dinner, the White House staff had chosen one of the small dining rooms, but the space was one of the more ornate the stately home possessed. The food was a blend of some American favorites along with a selection of appetizers that would remind Bebo and her party of home.

"Will it be some sort of international incident if one of my guys breaks her nose or something?" asked Patrick.

"Not that you'd encourage that kind of behavior I'm sure," answered Philip Moines before finishing his whiskey. He detested champagne almost as much as he did stupidity. For the first time since the couple walked up to talk to him, Phil took his eyes off the door and looked at the soldier. "If she and her fellow soldiers could so easily be beaten, general, we wouldn't be here. What you and your unit have to understand is that the wars of today and the future will in no way resemble what we're used to. Princess Bebo holds one of the important keys, as will those who come after her, for us to continue our winning ways. Just for added incentive, how about a little wager?"

"What kind of wager?"

"A friendly bet, if you will. Five hundred bucks says she ends up sending someone to the infirmary before you lay a hand on her. I promised her mother we wanted the princess to give you her all without fear of reprisal. That means the fights will be for real." The Secretary held his hand out knowing Patrick wouldn't back down from the dare.

"Easiest money I've ever made," said the general with a laugh. Earlier he had seen the fire in Titus' eyes when the Amazons had walked into that meeting. He had a feeling the boy wouldn't let him down.

"We'll just have to wait and see as they say. I know we're early but you and Doris should mingle. This could be a good opportunity to talk some of us bureaucrats out of some funds for your operations. After all, you do have other responsibilities besides the Cobra Unit."

Patrick gave the Secretary a smile then escorted his wife to a corner. "Where are the girls?"

"Annie was running late, but Regina promised they'd be here as soon as they could. Don't worry, dear," the still attractive blonde put her hand on his arm. "They won't let you down or embarrass you by being fashionably late."



"She should've come with Titus," the general said referring to his eldest child. "She keeps putting him off and he might just move on. That would be a pity, the boy's a good soldier."

"That isn't always what a girl is looking for, General Paddio."

"Annie knows what's important, Doris. Our job is to set Regina on the right path."

Doris shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Not tonight, you promised."

Outside two cars pulled under the portico slowly. The two women in the sedan wondered who was in the limo behind them. It had been a rushed job to get what they called presentable, but the two blondes looked vastly different from their everyday personas. One of the attendants opened Annie's door and took her hand to help her out of the car. He welcomed her as she smoothed down the dark green, off the shoulder full-length gown she'd chosen. From the passenger side, Reggie went through the same ritual with her maroon strapless dress. Each had forgone wearing a coat figuring they wouldn't be outside for very long.

When they reached the door, Annie was surprised to find Bebo standing there with her hand on the knob. The attendant whose job it was to open the door just stood back looking amused. The princess opened the door and bowed for them to go in.

"Ladies, I'm glad I was on time to provide such a pleasant service," said Bebo without looking up.

Reggie laughed along with the three women standing behind the chivalrous stranger. They were all wearing dark blue coats with an insignia embossed over the left breast, the difference, the younger blonde noticed, was that the woman at the door had a few other things written under hers. Another big difference was that the woman at the door had a sword in her other hand.

"Thank you, highness," said Annie, giving the now visibly smiling woman a slight bow of her own.

"It was the least I could do since I had to run off this morning without properly introducing myself. As my mother Boden would say, 'I was raised better than that.' I'm just glad to see I'll have the opportunity to deliver that apology sooner than I thought."

"Highness?" Reggie mouthed the word when they stepped in and had turned their backs on the woman outside. "Oh my God, she's gorgeous." She didn't say anything when Annie gave her a look before facing the door and watched as the coats came off.

"I didn't have the chance to give you my own apology. As a student of history I should never have attempted to make up my own just because I didn't do my homework." She wanted to go on but the sight of Bebo standing there with the dark blue uniform that made her eyes seem brighter just knocked the wind out of her lungs.

The blue wool jacket was held closed by silver buttons with her mother's royal crest embossed on them, whereas those the guards wore signaled their positions as Bebo's personal guardians. On each shoulder a thin silver bar for each year they had completed in warrior training gleamed, and on the front was a symbol for every weapon they had mastered. The white shirts underneath were pressed with a stiff starch and the shoes peeking out of the blue matching trousers were black and shiny enough for the sisters to apply lipstick if they chose to use them as mirrors.

"How about if we pretend this morning never happened?" offered Bebo as she passed the sword to Steph to free up her hands. "I am Bebo of Leon, miss, and I'm glad to make your acquaintance." Bebo offered Annie her hand with a smile.

"Highness, this is my sister, Regina Paddio and I'm Annie."

Bebo shook hands with both of them and turned to retrieve the gift she'd brought. "Could we walk with you? It looks like we're headed to the same place," said the princess.

"We'd love to," Reggie jumped in and took Bebo's arm. "This might not turn out to be a boring evening after all."

"I'm glad one of us is confident then," joked Bebo. "Shall we, Lady Paddio?"

"We shall, highness." Reggie pulled the princess in before Annie could say anything. The Amazon went willingly when she noticed for the second time that day the diamond ring on Annie's left finger. It wasn't their custom to give rings for the purposes of betrothal promises, but she still knew what one meant.

After being announced, Bebo gave Philip the sword Boden had sent him as a gift. When the consort had accompanied Audrey to Washington to provide training and advice, she had met a young man assigned to one of the under Secretaries and they had become friends. Philip graciously accepted the gift and the meaning behind it. It was Bo's way of asking him to look after her child. The only surprise of the evening came when they sat for dinner and Bebo noticed who sat next to Annie and held her hand for most of the night.

*Engaged to an asshole, and straight. The gods do have a sense of humor,* thought Bebo as she sat back in her chair and sipped her wine. If Emelda was right and this was her destiny it made her tired just thinking about it. There were just certain things in a person's heart and mind that no amount of charm and affection could change. Her luck would run better if it were Regina. At least that blonde was willing to talk to her and looked a little miffed that she wasn't invited to sit at the head table with her parents.

Bebo spent the evening talking with mostly Philip and Arthur. Every so often she would look toward Annie and more than once found the young woman looking back at her. Her date was so busy talking to his buddies he never took note of the more than one blush that had colored Annie's cheeks.

As soon as the servants came to clear away the dessert dishes Bebo folded her napkin and placed

it on the table. "Philip, thank you for a lovely evening. We really do appreciate the hospitality."

"Are you leaving us so soon, highness?" asked Philip when she offered him her hand and bid him good night.

"I'd like to take the opportunity to take a walk in your beautiful city before it gets too late. Don't worry, Mr. Moines, I promise not to get into any trouble or stay out too late," she said with a wink.

"It's amazing you know, how much you look like your mother."

"And to my other mother's bad fortune I act like Boden all too often. Before my time here is done, I'd like to have lunch or dinner with you so you can tell me about the time you spent with her. I feel like I've known you for years my mothers speak so highly of you."

"That would be great. I'll have my assistant set something up."

They walked out together and separated in the foyer. With a wave of his hand, Moines sent an escort to tag along with the princess without asking her. The men would follow far enough behind to give her privacy, but close enough to keep anything from happening to her.

"Excuse me, Titus, I have to go to the ladies room," said Annie, prying her hand out of his. She used the excuse to be able to talk to Bebo before she left, not knowing when she would have the opportunity again. Without too much thought, she walked out the door and followed the little entourage headed towards the mall.

Bebo walked at a slow pace toward the Lincoln Memorial seeming to be oblivious to the cold wind blowing in their direction. At the steps, the royal guard stayed behind as the princess proceeded up at the same unhurried pace. When she stood in the middle of the Greek temple styled structure, she just stared at the sad looking man sitting in the great chair.

"What do you suppose people think about when they come here and look at him?" The question went unanswered so Bebo turned and lifted an eyebrow to get the woman to say something. Without another word she took off her coat and wrapped it around the shivering Annie.

The gesture warmed the blonde almost as much as the material, still cozy from Bebo's body heat. "How did you know it was me?"

"I heard your teeth chattering from the moment we left."

The historian laughed and looked up at Lincoln to find a good answer to Bebo's question. "I wish I could say they saw something deep, and perhaps some of them do, but for most it's a place to take pictures. What do you see when you look at him?"

"I see another form of the statue I told the story of today, with only one variation aside from the obvious."

It was Annie's turn to lift a brow to go on, only Bebo had turned back to study the president and didn't see her. "Well?"

"Your Abraham Lincoln was a brave warrior in his own way, but unlike Larissa, he sacrificed the many for just the one."

"I've read a lot about him and none of the texts portrayed him as an egotistical man," she replied a little indignantly. Under the coat she ran her hands up and down her arms trying to get warm.

"Miss Paddio, I think you misunderstood me. It's sometimes easy to sacrifice yourself for the greater good of your people, but think of how difficult it is for a leader to sacrifice the sons, husbands and fathers of so many to preserve the whole of his country. To go to bed each night and realize your orders and actions have sent so many to their deaths in your name and for the cause you think is the most just. President Lincoln sent thousands of his countrymen to their deaths to preserve the United States, that's what I meant. It had nothing to do with him as a man; but then again it had everything to do with what made him a man. He was very deserving to have such a place built in his honor, even if only to take pictures as you say."

"For someone here to further the cause of war, you're an eloquent speaker, highness."

Bebo laughed and it echoed through the empty chamber. "And for a student of history, you are a cynic, Miss Paddio."

"Touché, highness," said Annie bowing her head.

"Now that we've finished our verbal sparring, I'm hoping, and I believe we're done with apologies - to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"You left without saying goodbye."

"You've walked all this way in the cold dressed like that to tell me I displayed bad manners because I didn't tell you goodbye?" Annie smiled instinctively knowing that Bebo was kidding. "Can I be totally honest with you?"

"I'd like that. After all it's just you and me here," Annie turned her head to the Doric columns. "The same can't be said for out there."

"A woman with the sense and courage to voice what's oblivious to everyone else, how refreshing." Bebo took a step closer and lowered her voice. "The truth is I'll begin sparring with Capt. Walker soon enough, there was no reason to ruin a good dinner and start tonight. That's why I left without saying goodnight. I try to pick my fights carefully, Miss Paddio. I meant no slight by doing so."

"A woman with the courage to voice the truth of the obvious to everyone else, how refreshing. Army personnel have certain feelings about how the world should treat the women in their lives."

I've heard it's started wars over the course of human history, petty jealousies that can turn into major skirmishes. What I've found is that usually people form their own opinions of a situation and it never resembles anything close to the truth..."

Bebo put her hand up and stopped her before she could utter the title of respect again. "Like you said, Annie, it's just you and me here. Just Annie and Bebo." The princess pointed from the blonde to herself.

"Okay. These fights you choose, are they only the ones you think you can win?"

"My mother told me recently I must have the courage to take chances, for it's the only way to know if you could succeed at something. She was trying to bash my head in with a small stick at the time, but I was only trying to return the favor. What I'm trying to say I guess is that, I was raised to think I'd win all the fights I choose to fight or not fight. When I choose not to fight it's because I'm using judgment, not hiding behind fear. It is the most important trait in a good leader."

"Good answer, it's a shame more of the world's leaders don't think along the same lines."

"Now that we've gotten all that bullshit behind us, why are you really here?"

The curator laughed and wondered if all of Amazonia's royalty was this charming as well as blunt. "I wanted to talk to you before you disappear to play war games. That's the best answer I can give you I guess. You could have called me on my little story today, and yet you didn't. It just made me curious about you, and tonight hasn't helped any."

"What, I have something stuck in my teeth or something?"

A small hand made its way out of the warm coat and slapped Bebo in the arm. "No, I just pegged you for the escape to a bar type. This is the last place I figured you'd come."

"You think I'm spoiled and shallow? Then I should've given you Hades for telling that story today."

Annie's small evening bag started ringing and she put up a finger to keep Bebo from going on. "Hey." She listened to the person on the other end as Bebo wandered over to the wall with the Gettysburg address to give her some privacy. "Actually I'm at the Lincoln Memorial so can you come and pick me up? No, I wasn't dragged out by my hair." Her voice stopped and the small laugh from the end of the building made Annie smile. "Thanks, sis, I owe you another one."

"So the world finds a way in after all. It was nice talking to you, Annie, and if you like, I'll walk you to the street."

"I'd like it better if you agree to have lunch with me and tell me some more stories. You don't have to, but I thought it might be nice."

Bebo pulled the coat open just a little and the blonde mistook the action for her wanting it back. "No keep it before you catch something in this weather." The tall woman just wanted to find the hand she'd seen earlier. When she did, Bebo leaned over it and kissed the fingers gently. "I would love nothing better than to see you again."

Annie pulled back in a panic. "I'm not...it's only lunch."

"I'm not going to attack you, calm down. I could say it's just an old Amazon custom when accepting an invitation, the kissing of a woman's hand."

"It is?"

"I said I could've said that, not that it's true."

"Then why did you do it?" Annie felt a small dose of her courage come back when Bebo moved further away from her.

"Because I wanted to. I don't consider myself shallow, but spoiled, there you've got me pegged." Bebo put about four feet between them and started toward the stairs. "Please keep the coat and I'll send one of my guards with you to the street. I'm thinking it'll make you more comfortable if it's not me, and me more comfortable that you're not alone. Good night, Miss Paddio."

"What happened to Annie?"

"The world awaits us out there, my lady." Bebo stopped at the top step and smiled at her. "I see that it provides the gulf between us that makes you the most comfortable, and it will always be there to separate us I'm afraid. I thought we were done with apologies, but I was wrong. I'm sorry for my actions in there, I really didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It will never happen again."

Annie looked on as Bebo took the steps down at a rate that looked unsafe, her heart torn between anger and sadness. She was angry at herself for acting the way she did and making the princess think she was some prude, and sad that she believed what Bebo had said last. Anyone who spoke with such conviction actually had some and Bebo's honor wouldn't allow anything to happen between them again.

She turned to the statue in the building. "What are my chances here, Abe?" Trying to stay warm, Annie pulled the coat around her tighter, catching the slight aroma of what she assumed was Bebo's perfume. It smelled like the clean scent of rain after a summer shower. "Well, old buddy, you don't have to be that honest about it." The fingers of the hand the princess had kissed were still tingling making Annie feel light despite what had just happened.

**[Continued in Chapter 2](#)**

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## ~ Amazonia ~

Book 1  
by Ali Vali

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1.](#)

### *The Middle*

All of the guards were sitting at the table having breakfast when Bebo stepped into the room. They all dropped their forks in unison when they took in the outfit the princess had decided to wear for their first day with the Cobra Unit. It wasn't like anything they had seen her in before.

"Problem?" asked Bebo when she heard the clatter.

Steph was the first one to question if Bebo had lost her mind. "Not a problem, but I've just never seen you in pink before, and so tight. Have you gone insane or something?"

"Insanity isn't something that runs in my family, no." The plate in her hand made one of the servants run over and offer to take over. "It's all right, Denise, I don't mind getting it myself." When Bebo was done, the china service was full and she took her place at the head of the table.

"Then are you trying to pick up someone at the training today? It's the only explanation for the outfit," said Max.

"One of the luckiest things about being born an Amazon princess is the things you learn from the best teachers along the way. In my training, two of the best warriors my mother Audrey has serving her told me the same thing on two different occasions. When your opponent expects something, sometimes it's best to give it to them."

"You lost me," added Beth.

"When I spoke to the general yesterday he said his men could more than handle any slaps we were lucky enough to land. To me, that tells me that he's expecting to be wasting his time humoring some girlie woman who's afraid of breaking a nail. I dressed this morning to give him what he expects."

"Slaps? What the hell?" Steph looked like she was ready to skin someone alive with her butter knife.

"We're going in there today and give him what he wants. That means all our training will be done without clenching our fists. Not once. Do you all understand me?"

Beth looked miserable. "Not even if they're aggravating as hell?"

"I didn't say we couldn't bruise them up a little, just do it with an open hand. In fact, if anyone walks out of there today without a fresh set of fingerprints on some part of their anatomy I'll see it as a personal failure." She bit into a strawberry with an evil glint in her eye that made the others laugh. A challenge to Bebo was like waving red meat in front of a hungry bear.

"How bruised?" asked Max.

"Enough so that it makes an impression. The second lesson will come when we take to the field, but a good ass kicking will do for now."

"That should be easy enough," said Beth.

"Don't take them too lightly. They are after all good enough to make it to this level, and for the most part, they seem to be people I could see myself fighting beside. It's just the couple of bad apples we need to pick apart. But as in all things in life, the good must suffer for the bad."

The facility they would be using for the weeks to come was just outside the capital and the contingent from Amazonia had to go through three check points before they were led to the buildings the Cobra Unit utilized as their command post.

When they stepped into the gym, the whispering among the Americans had gotten to a level that Bebo and her companions could hear the comments without straining too much. To add to the hot pink tight t-shirt and white shorts Bebo had chosen, the girls had put her hair up in a ponytail and clipped a feather to it. If the team had been smart they would have looked past the clothes and concentrated more on the body they highlighted. Most of the men were, but their study had nothing to do with wanting Bebo to teach them any fighting moves.

"General Paddio, how are you this morning?" Bebo held her hand out and smiled.

The older man ran his eyes from her head down to her feet before shaking her hand. Philip Moines would pay for this if it was the last thing he did while serving in the military. "Let's get this over with so we can go back to the business of defending our nation." He was so annoyed that he skipped any type of salutation.

"How about we just go a few rounds without any type of set format and just feel each other out? That way you can see what we have to offer and we can see where you and your men are in different levels of hand to hand combat."

"In that outfit, highness, it's more than easy to see what you have to offer," Patrick added without any type of humor. "How do you want to do this?"



"Pick anyone and let's get to it," offered Bebo. She pulled her arms back then over her head to stretch getting Patrick's soldiers to line up to get a go at her when he motioned them to the mats.

*Why am I not surprised?* Bebo kicked off her shoes before stepping on the thick blue surface and never lost eye contact with Titus. He was wearing an Army t-shirt and matching gray shorts and the color washed out his features in the most unattractive way. A cruel smile was on his face, and if she didn't know better, she'd have to guess he'd found out about Annie's little adventure the night before. Being left at a party so that your date could seek someone else out didn't exactly do things for your manhood she imagined. It was time for the big man to teach her a lesson.

"Capt. Walker." There was really nothing else she wanted to say to the man whom she could see from his demeanor hated her.

"Bebo, is it?" He curled his fists and started bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Come and get some."

"I addressed you by your title, Captain, and I expect and demand the same respect in return."

There was no need for posturing. Bebo moved forward, ducked under the blow he sent toward her head and jumped over the kick he sent out to follow up. Not hitting anything sent him off balance and that was her first opportunity to land a blow. The open handed slap to the forehead made his eyes sting long enough for her to follow up with the other hand to just below his ear. It made his head ring, but the placement of the slap saved him a busted eardrum.

"Give up?" she taunted. He pulled back long enough to reorient himself, and then he moved forward again. "Didn't think so."

Titus pulled from his training and waited for an opening to return the favor of his burning skin. The big bitch had only slapped him but the blows had left him feeling like his skin was red-hot. With quickness he didn't think possible she flipped back and away from his next few attempts and just as quickly retaliated with a flurry of slaps to his face. The last one she landed split his lip. Stopping to put his fingers up to his mouth, Titus never saw the last hit. Bebo put her weight behind it and the slap, leaving a perfect set of fingers across his face in the form of a bruise just as she'd planned.

She turned to the other soldiers before putting up her hand and giving out a birdcall to the women with whom she'd arrived. The three guards fanned out, already having chosen their targets. Not one hit they landed was made with a closed fist. It took thirty minutes, but when they were done the blue mats were full of gray clothed figures.

For the duration of the demonstration, Arthur stood next to his commanding officer and Junis and watched Bebo in action. In the movies, special forces units always kicked ass and took no prisoners, but in reality their specialty was stealth and covert operations behind enemy lines. It was rare they were sent into situations where they needed to fight hand to hand without weapons. They were in peak physical condition, but that was just part of the equation as far as covering great distances carrying nearly a hundred pounds of equipment. Without intelligence and guts,

there would be no special ops, but that didn't mean they couldn't learn to become better fighters in Arthur's opinion.

"Good day, general," said Bebo as she made her way to the door. "I hate to waste time, but I figure we'll start fresh again in the morning." She turned and looked at the older man wondering what was going through his mind.

"That sounds good." He looked from the mats to the unscathed woman highlighted in the sunlight streaming in from the high windows and answered slowly.

"Perhaps tomorrow, we can all start with a fresh mindset. What do you say?"

"That maybe there is something you can teach us after all." He held out his hand first and walked to where she was standing.

"We may come from different countries, sir, but we are fighting on the same side. My mother and your leaders are after the same thing. A world free of what she likes to call bad guys doing bad things. If we didn't think we could help you, I would have been the first one to say so and let you go about your business."

"Fair enough, highness. I'll see you in the morning." He frowned when he turned to watch Titus rise first, his lip swollen and still bleeding. The quick trip to the infirmary to put in stitches would give Moines bragging rights for months to come. "Get cleaned up and spend the rest of the day studying the maps they sent from Louisiana. One humiliation in this exercise is enough," barked Patrick.

"I did try to warn you," said Arthur as they started back toward the offices. "I was Titus once upon a time and I came away with just a broken arm, so it could've been worse. These are the types of people they send in when you want nothing left alive down to the cockroaches, and you never see them coming."

"Sometimes it takes a live demonstration, I guess. I'm sure you'll keep me informed of any other surprises our visitors might have."

"Actually, this morning kind of surprised me as well. I've never seen someone beat the shit out of so many people by just slapping them around. What we need to start praying for is that she and her pals don't show up carrying chobos or fighting staffs. They'll put all of us in intensive care."

Patrick opened the door of the administration building and waved Art in before him. "Why do I think you could keep up with these women?"

"I learned, general, and I never wanted to stop learning, and that's all I'm going to tell you. What we both know though, is that's something I don't have to tell you." The blond just headed for his office and didn't say anything else. With a quick wave over his shoulder, he closed the door and picked up the phone. When the person he called answered, it didn't take him long before he was laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face.

The general stood in the hall lost in thought before heading up a floor to his offices. "This is just the first day, the rest favor me you'll see. I don't need any lectures on my life and how I live it, Captain."

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When they made it back into the city, the skies had clouded over and there was a light freezing mist falling as they got out of the Hummer the Army had loaned them. A hot shower was already running in Bebo's room and she was more than grateful to strip out of the revealing outfit she'd worn for her little lesson.

Dressed in a pair of jeans and a leather jacket, she stopped in the den where her three friends were watching a movie after finishing their own showers. "I'm going out for a little walk," said Bebo. They all started to get up and find their shoes until she put up her hand. "I think I can survive on my own on a walk. Sit tight and I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Our duty..." started Max.

"Is to stay and finish your movie. I promise I won't tell if you all don't. It's just a walk, and I'd venture to say, at the risk of my ego, that no one is going to recognize me."

Armed with a large umbrella, Bebo walked toward the capital buildings. She was interested in visiting all of the structures erected to embody American government, but today she was more interested in a building that had become Audrey's favorite from the first time she'd visited the city. As a small child, the princess remembered spending time in the great halls holding her mother's hand and listening to the queen's soft voice tell her about what they were seeing.

Her jeans felt damp by the time she reached her destination and Bebo stood across the street to admire the massive building. The weather diminished the beauty of the fountain in front. Seeing the water jets under a brilliant sun was something else to add to her list of things to see. The sculptures crafted by Roland Hinton Perry depicted Poseidon and his court in his watery realm. A similar scene carved in marble decorated a fountain at the water's edge in Leon, only the one done by Amazon artisans was a lot older. The princess thought this one was just as beautiful though, and for a moment the mental comparison brought on the melancholic sadness of homesickness.

The stoic figure sighing made Annie wonder what made her look so sad. Coming out of the train station after dropping off Mr. Baxter for a business trip, the blonde thought she was seeing things when she looked toward the far side of the street.

"Terry?" juggling her purse, umbrella and phone, Annie started walking toward her target.

"Yes?" The red head answered, dragging out the word and leaning back in her chair to hear the favor that was forthcoming.

"Could you fill in for me at one? Something came up and I won't be back...I think."

"You think? If something's come up, shouldn't you know?"

The light indicated she could walk across the first street she needed to get over, but Annie still wouldn't beat Bebo into the building. "If you cut me some slack here, I promise to tell you all about it when I see you."

"Take your time, and I'll hold you to that, don't worry."

The traffic was horrible and Annie had a time trying to get across the second street separating her from her quarry without the security of the pedestrian light. Tempting death by traffic wasn't something she often did, but she didn't want to lose Bebo in the maze of corridors if she got too far ahead of her. As she ran across the second street, she slid on the slippery sidewalk and began to fall. Annie thought she'd miss the princess because she'd have to take a cab home to change horribly wet clothing once she hit the ground. At the last second, a solid arm shot out and held her still against an equally solid feeling body making her forget the umbrella flying down the sidewalk.

"Careful, Miss Paddio, I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

There had been few times in Annie's life she could remember thinking that just the sound of someone's voice could make her shiver. The few times she'd been in Bebo's company though, she'd done nothing but. Her voice was low and mellifluous, the kind of sound that wrapped around your brain and addicted you to wanting to hear more. With the combination of that and the smell of leather that surrounded her, Annie felt faint.

"I'm sorry," the blonde stammered, not really knowing what to say.

"Whatever for? I should give you a hard time for taking the chance of running across the street in the middle of all that traffic, but I'm sure you had your reasons. Are you all right now?"

A blush ran up her face so fast Annie could feel herself getting red at the teasing tone whispering in her ear. After her behavior the night before when Bebo kissed her hand, she was acting like a damsel in distress staying in the warm embrace. As slowly as she could, she righted herself and turned around to face her savior. Perhaps, after looking into the blue eyes, all the storybooks with that theme weren't all fantasy, and being rescued every so often was something she could grow to like.

"I just saw you and didn't want you to get away from me." The blush got so hot with the choice of words that Annie thought she could have dried her clothes without too much trouble.

"There was no reason to run and no chance of that happening, I was standing here waiting for you." Bebo arched a brow and her lips turned up in a smile ever so slowly. "Not that I was expecting you, but the gods do bless us with pleasant surprises when we least expect them. And I noticed you too when you stepped out."

"You did?" the question sounded unsure. "I mean, are you going in?" Annie pointed toward the building in an effort to fight the urge to scrub her face with the same hand.

"I thought it might be a nice way to spend a rainy afternoon."

They stood facing each other under Bebo's umbrella, neither of them moving, comfortable in their silence until Annie snapped first. "I know you probably can't talk about it, but aren't you supposed to be working with my father and his special unit today?"

"We did a little slap and tickle this morning then decided to call it a day. It's me who should apologize now for the condition you'll find Titus in when you get home. Kissing might be a problem for a couple of days."

Both of Annie's brows climbed into her hairline as her imagination took off at what Bebo meant. Their fight over the phone the night before came back to her and she hoped he hadn't done anything stupid to try and get back at the Amazon. When she never returned he was furious, and when she explained where she'd gone, he had just hung up.

"Titus is a big boy, I'm sure he'll be fine. If you'd like I'll go in and show you around. I'm not as knowledgeable about the building as the people who work here but I try and visit whenever I'm in the area and have time."

"My mother has tried to duplicate some of the facets of the National Library of Congress in Amazonia during her years on the throne. We've always had a national archive of scrolls and other written works and collections, but mom loved the grandeur of some of what she saw here. Some of her additions have made a beautiful place all that more spectacular."

They left their raingear with the guard and accepted visitors' passes that would allow them to walk around without a guide. For several minutes they walked side by side, with Bebo leaving a comfortable amount of space between them, and looked at the current exhibits and the items for which the Library was known. In the Great Hall, Bebo stood in the center on the large brass inlay of the sun and looked up at the stained glass.

Annie almost felt as if she were intruding on Bebo's thoughts when she spoke. Her need for words had been a constant line of teasing from her father who thanked the heavens she hadn't wanted to pursue a military career. In his opinion the enemy would have captured her in the first five minutes of her arriving on assignment because of her inability to stay quiet.

"I don't know if you noticed in the Vestibule, but there are eight statues dedicated to the goddess Minerva," her voice had taken on the hushed tones of a librarian.

"When this building was constructed, your people did a wonderful job of incorporating many aspects of learning. The compass," Bebo pointed to the floor where she was standing, with the four cardinal points of the compass inlaid in the floor along with the sun. She pointed to another set of inlays. "The signs of the zodiac. "It's as if they understood you must incorporate both the

heavens and the works of man to make a place like this truly a place dedicated to knowledge. And to answer your question, yes I noticed. My mother pointed them out to me the first time I was here. Though, since I'm more Greek than Roman, Miss Paddio, I prefer to say the statues are of Athena."

"This is fun," said Annie, laughing a little like a schoolgirl with a crush. She looked from side to side. Other than the tour that had already gone through, they were alone. "Last night you said it was just you and me, so it could be Bebo and Annie. Do you think we are alone enough again?"

"Last night you also almost jumped into old Abe's lap when I made a move you weren't expecting, so you tell me. I don't often try to make the same mistake twice. If you'd feel more comfortable we can try and catch up with one of the tours."

"No, I meant what I just said. This is fun because you're interested in this stuff enough to learn about it and want to discuss it with me. Last night was my mistake not yours. I really do like your company so I'm hoping one mistake doesn't mean I won't get to spend time with you."

"Two," said Bebo with a straight face.

"What?"

"Two mistakes. You're forgetting Larissa," said Bebo when she saw the look of confusion on Annie's brow. "But then we decided that neither of those things were intentional mistakes, so we could just move on."

They continued on down the corridors and under the vaulted ceilings where the names of great scholars, men of law and writers were embossed on medallions. When they arrived at the stairs that led to the viewing room for visitors to look into the library, they stopped and admired the mosaic of Athena that took up a huge portion of the wall. In white robes, the goddess was shown in a pose of serenity with her owl. Included in the colorful work were a globe, a sword and a scroll.

"Back when this building was just a dream, my people very seldom left the island if it wasn't necessary. But for this," Bebo waved her arm to encompass their surroundings, "Queen Eris sent a contingent of artists to create this gift for your new nation." The princess and citizen of Amazonia had bowed before the goddess before deciding to share her story.

"That isn't in any of the literature I've read."

"It wasn't given to garner gratitude from your people, it was given to add something to a place dedicated to learning. Athena is the goddess of war, but she is also the goddess of education and science. It is because of her and her sister Artemis, the whole of Amazonia has prospered for so long, or so the priestesses tell us."

Annie heard a bit of something added to Bebo's tone, but they didn't know each other well enough to know what it was. "You don't believe in the gods?"

"I believe we're here and must rely on ourselves to make the right choices, but then I also believe there are greater forces who guide our fates. I've never seen a god, but if they do exist, how humorous must they find our mundane lives?"

"Now who's the cynic?"

The rich deep laugh echoed through the space and Bebo's eyes came to life. "I never said I wasn't, but I find I'm more of an observer than a cynic. There are certain things I find amusing that prove to me there are gods and they find humor in the strangest of places."

"What do you mean?"

"The halls we walked down, the ones with all the names," said Bebo pointing toward the ceiling. Annie nodded then looked back in that direction. "When they were placed on the ceilings to show the best in every field, your founding fathers only thought to add men; poets, authors, scientists, etcetera - all brilliant in their time, but still all men. Did you know there is but one woman's name stamped up there?"

Annie looked puzzle and tried to recall if she'd ever read anything that mentioned that fact. "There is? Huh, you learn something new everyday. Who is it?"

"Sappho."

"You're kidding me? Why in the world would they have done that?" Annie looked up warily as though the name would fall on her head. "Not that there's anything wrong with her writing."

Bebo smirked. "Of course not, I'm just sure you have no reservations with the most famous lesbian writer of her time and for generations after her death being placed in a place you hold so dear." Annie recognized the tone this time for what it was, sarcasm.

"I'm not homophobic."

"I didn't say you were."

"I'm not," insisted Annie.

"I refuse to get into a circular argument with you. So back to what I was saying. When the names were picked, the men responsible for their choice saw it on the list and thought it was a famous writer, which she was, only they thought she came with the most crucial element to get you on the ceiling - a penis. If you think hard on that one though, I would be willing to bet you giving Titus a free shot at my head with a big stick that she had more than one and in a variety of colors."

Annie couldn't help herself and started laughing. She laughed until her sides hurt and she was leaning on Bebo to hold her up. Picturing men in powdered wigs pouring over a list of names

and placing a check mark next to the famous poet's name was the funniest thing she could have imagined.

"So, Annie, her name up there as the only woman representative of her time makes me believe the gods do exist and they have one Hades of a sense of humor."

"In all the time I've been in here that's the best story I've ever heard. Have you had lunch?" Not moving away from Bebo, Annie laid both her hands on the tall woman's chest and looked up at her as she asked the question. Being so close to her made Annie feel warm, but it had nothing to do with temperature. It was like her skin wanted to feel Bebo as if it had a last found what it missed.

"That would mean you'd have to sit at a table with me," Bebo leaned in and got closer to the little blonde to gauge her reaction. "We might even end up in close quarters."

"I'm sure you're more than capable of protecting yourself if I decide to get fresh with you," joked Annie. "Do you have a preference? What I mean is, would you like to join me? I should start with that."

"I'd love nothing better." Bebo paused. "I'd like to try a little place my driver told me about." They walked out and hailed a cab to a small Japanese restaurant in Georgetown. "You do like sushi, don't you?"

"Bait? I'm just wild about it," answered Annie, trying hard not to turn green.

"We'll have yours rolled in tempura and deep fried. Trust me, you'll love this."

It was the most intimate, nonsexual afternoon Annie had ever spent in her life. Bebo was persuasive enough to get her to try a couple of the different items on the menu and she found she really did like the bits of stuff wrapped in sticky rice and seaweed once she gave it a chance. She had no qualms whenever she leaned in and allowed the tall reclining princess to feed her with the black lacquered chopsticks. She relaxed on the cushions she was sitting on and wiggled her toes glad to see there weren't any runs in her stockings.

Two hours later Annie still wasn't tired of looking at the princess when they sat during moments of silence, or when listening to Bebo tell amusing stories of her childhood. During her life as an Army brat, Annie had come to love the privilege of exploring new places when her father was transferred, but felt she had missed out on having lots of friends because they did move so much. Listening to Bebo talk about her home and her friends was nice and it gave her a different perspective. She was also basking in the attention Bebo seemed to lavish without thought or effort, as if it was something she was comfortable doing with Annie. In her experience it was she who'd had to give the attention feeling that she owed it to Titus.

"You're really different from my father," said Annie. Her head was resting on her open palm as she ignored etiquette and leaned her elbow on the table.



"If I weren't, different I mean, they wouldn't let me be princess." The joke caused the blonde to snort and it pleased Bebo to no end. She'd found Annie beautiful from the moment she'd first seen her, but this relaxed happy woman before her was stunning.

The sake they'd consumed made Annie feel warm under the gaze of the blue eyes. "I suppose not, but that's not what I meant."

"And what did you mean, my dear Annie?"

"My mom has always loved art and the theater... stuff like that you know, but my father just always thought it was a waste of time. His job and his responsibilities were always more important than looking at anything in a museum or gallery. For the longest time I tried to understand both sides of their arguments, but I just finally felt like she was losing out on so much not being able to enjoy what she loved with him. Since he wasn't interested, she just went alone so she never shared that part of herself with him, even though she tried to show enthusiasm for his job and duties."

*If you never chance anything, then how do you know you'll be good at anything?* Boden's words rang in her daughter's head and Bebo decided to take a chance. She reached across the small table and took the hand that rested on Annie's thigh. "And what does that have to do with me?"

"You seem to have been able to balance both worlds quite nicely. I don't know all the details, I know you're considered a warrior but you also enjoy the more boring arena of books. Or at least all the soldiers in my life think they're boring." She didn't flinch and didn't pull away, but Annie's heart did race as she noticed the texture of Bebo's hand.

Slowly Annie placed their hands on the table and rubbed hers along Bebo's palm to get the larger one to open. A clear polished nail ran down the length of the long fingers before Annie got back to the palm and used all of her fingertips.

Bebo's hands weren't hard looking, but they weren't soft either. On certain sections there were well-defined calluses that the blonde guessed came from some sort of repetitive motion while holding something. When she finished with the first, green eyes looked up at the woman studying her and Annie held out her hand so Bebo would take it. When the princess gave her other hand over willingly, Annie treated it to the same unhurried study.

"Where did these come from?" She pressed down gently on one of the rough spots causing the fingers to close a bit. For the briefest of moments she had an overwhelming need to kiss the palm under her fingers.

"Years of training with different pieces of equipment." It was Bebo's turn to take Annie's hand in hers and lay the palm bare for study. "The chobos cause you to blister here after hours of holding them." She pointed to the right spot on the soft hands and ran her finger along the length of Annie's palm just under the base of her fingers. Bebo was watching the journey of her finger so closely that she missed the goose bumps popping up on Annie's arm caused by her actions. "The sword along here," she ran her finger just a little lower and closer to the thumb than she had

before. "They of course are weapons that aren't as useful in the art of war today, but they make you respect the warriors of old. Every young recruit who picks a life of military service, learns from the simplest of weapons to the most complicated of today's society. That is our way."

"And your knowledge of other things, where did that come from?"

"I'll one day, the gods willing, rule my people for the next generation. To do so effectively I have to know when to pick up my sword, but more importantly, when not to." Bebo squeezed Annie's fingers once before letting the delicate hand go and retreating back to her side of the table only to have Annie chase it with her own not wanting to let go. "If you need something more specific, it was my mother Audrey. Listening to her tell stories all my life, made me want to read and see the world the way she sees it."

"Will you tell me about her?" Though she wasn't conscious of her actions, Annie's thumb rubbed across Bebo's knuckles in a small circle.

"If I were to do an adequate job, we'd be here all night, and I'm sure there are people in your life who wouldn't appreciate that." Bebo poured them some more wine and handed Annie her cup to try and put some distance between them. The petite blonde may not have been aware of her thumb's movements, but she was driving Bebo mad with her gentle caresses. "The short version is my mother is a bard, a storyteller who has a doctorate in history, and a degree in education. When she and my second mother Boden first joined, she worked as a kindergarten teacher during the school year and a volunteer in the archives when the session was over. She likes to get back in the classroom when she has the opportunity, but now her life is fairly consumed with her responsibilities as queen. She and my mom are another two reasons I believe in the gods."

"That sounds like a statement you're expected to say," teased Annie.

"You'd think, but I say it because in my heart I believe it. I learned two different ways to live from two different women who complete what the other is missing in their lives."

"And what are you missing in your life?"

Bebo fished her wallet out of the pocket of her jacket and extracted some bills. "At this moment in time, not a thing."

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"What's going on with you?" Reggie stopped in front of a selection of staves. The museum had been closed for over an hour and Annie had promised her a private tour. "Annie, I'm talking to you."

Her fingers felt like Bebo had left her mark on them. The memory of having the warm digits capturing hers was fresh and her hand was still tingling even though they'd separated hours before. She was standing there looking at her palms in a daze until Reggie bumped shoulders with her startling Annie into jumping.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, I'm just tired." Annie put her hands behind her back and took a deep breath. "What do you think so far?"

The younger, taller blonde knew her sister enough to recognize a change of subject when she heard one. "I think they're a fascinating people, and after looking at all this it just raises that many more questions in my head. It's like they raised a society of women who excel in so many different fields when you think about it. The arts, economics and even the military, all without the influence of men."

"I wouldn't go that far, Gloria Steinem. They've survived sure, but I don't think it's fair to say it's without the influence of men. The world influences all things as a whole, and the Amazons are no different. I'm sure your professors have warned you about adding your own sentiments or prejudices to history. The more interesting study would be what lasting emotional problems their children suffer by not being able to have contact with their fathers or any other male figures."

The staff Reggie was looking at had small palm looking trees carved into the ends and it made her wonder why someone would have taken the time to decorate a weapon. She laughed thinking what her father would do if she stenciled roses on the butt of his rifle when he wasn't looking.

"You've spent time with Princess Bebo, so you tell me. Does she seem lacking in anything emotional or otherwise?"

"It was just a couple of minutes of small talk and a lunch, Reg. That hardly qualifies as a case study on social behavior."

*Ding, ding, ding - we have a winner, folks.* "When did you have lunch with her?"

"It wasn't anything special." She could feel her ears getting hot at the lie. *It was special and you know it!* The voice in her head screamed making Annie all that more uneasy. "I just happened to run into her today and we ended up having lunch."

"You're right, it doesn't sound like anything special," Reggie never took her eyes off the case of weapons she'd been taking notes on. "I was thinking of calling her and asking her out."

"I don't know about that, sis. You know how daddy is about appearances. If someone sees you, he isn't going to like it, especially knowing why Bebo is here."

"You had lunch with her today, Annie," Reggie faced her and closed her notebook. "Didn't that concern you?"

"I know you though. Asking her out wouldn't be about lunch, would it?"

This was an old argument between them and no number of rounds was going to declare a clear

winner. "I'm not you, Annie, and I think I'm old enough for you and daddy to stop trying to make me into something I'm not. You may not want to live your own life, but don't expect me to give up mine to make the general happy." Her hands shook with anger as she stuffed her things back into her bag.

"I'm sorry."

Reggie looked up at her with fire in her green eyes. "Save it, okay. If you were sorry we wouldn't be having this discussion....again." She started for the exit and stopped when she heard Annie right behind her, the heels of her pumps echoing in the vast room. "I know the way so don't bother."

"Please, Reggie, I didn't mean it. You know I hate it when we fight, and you have to know I love you just the way you are."

Reggie's shoulders slumped making her book bag slide down her arm. "I know you love me, but not just like I am. It's not something I hold against you because I know you think you're helping me, but it's frustrating as hell sometimes." Reggie took the time to put her coat on and center herself before she left. She was still angry but the extra time would put Annie's mind at ease thinking things were calm.

"I'll see you at home later?" Annie ventured.

"Sure. Be careful, the weather's getting horrible out there." Reggie went and kissed her sister's cheek before leaving.

The wrecked mustang was parked in the driveway when Reggie got home so she left the jeep on the street. If he was in some state of undress when she walked in, it was going to put his back bumper in jeopardy. The fact he had a key at all to let himself in whenever he pleased had been a major point of disagreement between the two sisters as well.

"Annie?" Titus called out from the den when the door closed.

"She's still at work, G.I. Joe, you should know that by now. So why are you here?" He moved the bag of ice away from his mouth to give her some flip answer then thought it wasn't worth it. "What in the hell happened to you?" Reggie finally looked up at him after going through the mail she'd found on the table. It was all for her so she suspected Annie's was already opened and examined somewhere in the house. That practice had resulted in a lengthy discussion as well, but if her sister didn't want to speak up about it, Reggie didn't feel it was her business anymore.

"Nothing." The bag had to come away for him to answer and glare at his tormentor. He wanted to throw the television remote at her when a large smile spread across her face after getting a good look at his.

"Sure. I'm guessing you just tripped and fell on your own hand." The outline of four fingers was vividly visible and his lip was swollen on the side the stitches were placed. From where she

stood, Reggie could tell there were more than a couple. "Do you need anything?"

"Just leave me alone."

"I'll be happy to. What I meant was, do you want something to drink or an aspirin or something? That looks like it hurts." She pointed to her own lip.

"Just go away and leave me alone," he mumbled from behind the bag of ice. The shot to deaden the area had started to wear off and it hurt to talk. He was glad Reggie gave up and just walked away.

He was just as happy when Annie came home and didn't ask any questions. She only kissed his forehead and offered to make him some soup so he wouldn't have to chew anything. A show on Nazi tank commanders had just started on the History Channel when the doorbell rang.

"Stay put, sweetheart, I'll get it," said Annie. She was wiping her hands on a towel as she came out of the kitchen.

Seeing Titus' face when she'd arrived had made her curious, but knowing his pride and his temper, Annie had left it alone. Having one person she loved mad at her was enough for one day, so she'd changed into a pair of sweatpants, an old t-shirt and pulled her hair into a ponytail. Not thinking, she opened the door and came face to face with Bebo.

The urge to slam the door shut was making Annie grip the knob so hard her fingers were white. She could see the stylish navy blue suit under the long coat and it made her feel like a shrew because of her state of dress. "Highness, what a surprise. How did you know I lived here? Why are you here? Did you need something?" The rambling went on and she was powerless to stop it, but nothing Annie said resembled a greeting.

The lack of manners wasn't lost on Bebo but she just smiled and hesitated not sure if another question was coming. If it were she figured Annie had a good set of lungs not to come up for air for such a long stretch. "Good evening, Miss Paddio, I'm so sorry to have disturbed you, I didn't realize you resided here."

"What the fuck do you want?" Titus pressed himself to Annie's back and yelled as best he could with the cut on his lip.

"I was invited, but perhaps I got the directions wrong." Bebo stepped a foot back and made a show of looking at the house numbers. The real reason was in case Titus made a move. Preparing for the possibility the tall woman moved the flowers she'd brought with her to her non-dominate hand.

"You're in the right place, highness. Try to ignore the two clueless ones at the door and come in." Reggie was standing on the bottom step with her hands on her hips. The black dress she wore drew three sets of eyes to her, but she was only interested in one person's opinion. From Bebo's face, she guessed her choice was more than acceptable.

"For you, Miss Paddio," Bebo walked to her and handed Reggie the flowers she'd brought.

"Thank you, and please call me Reggie." She accepted the bouquet of white roses and held them up to her nose. "Let me take care of these and get my coat."

"Take your time, we're not in a hurry. I'm sure your sister and future brother-in-law will be happy to keep me company." A blue eye closed in a wink making Reggie laugh. Any nervousness over calling Bebo dissipated with the tease.

"Do you want to stay and have dinner with us?" offered Annie when Reggie disappeared into the kitchen for a vase. The action of doing so was something she'd always wanted to do, but had yet to experience since no one had ever given her flowers. "I made plenty."

"As much as I'd love to stay, as would your sister I'm sure, I promised to take her out for the evening. I'd hate to disappoint." Bebo moved back to the foyer feeling like she didn't belong. Their lunch had been wonderful but now Annie looked like she was about to jump out of her skin she was so tense. "It's nice of you to ask, but I'm sure you'd like to spend the evening enjoying Titus' company. I really didn't mean to intrude on your privacy. Reggie didn't tell me you lived here as well when she called."

"And that's supposed to make a difference, asshole? Neither of these women are available to you so why don't you just go." Titus ignored the pain in his face and tried to intimidate her by moving closer to her. He had seen how Bebo had retreated and figured she wasn't so tough when she didn't have her little troupe of backups.

"Titus, stand at ease and shut the hell up," ordered Reggie from the door of the kitchen. "One more outburst like that and I'll have daddy on the phone," she threatened.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Reggie. The Captain just had a bad day is all." Bebo smiled at him and held her hand out to Reggie. "A good slap to the face will do that to anyone."

The reference told the sisters how Titus had received his injuries, making Annie grimace after she remembered the princess' earlier comment about any future kissing on her and Titus' part. If Bebo's clue wasn't enough, his turning red when she spoke confirmed it. "I'm ready to go again if you want, bitch."

"Titus, stop it," it was Annie who spoke up this time. "I know you're in pain, but it's no reason to be rude."

"As fun as this has been, we have an eight o'clock reservation at Bis. If you're ready, Reggie." Bebo opened the door and waited for the blonde to step out before following her. "Good night," she said to the two just as she closed the door.

"That fucking slut," said Titus as he stared at the door.

"Drop it." Annie didn't add anything as she went to check on dinner.

He followed her into the kitchen and folded his arms over his chest. "What in the hell is that supposed to mean, drop it?"

"I mean you are going to have to accept Regina is my sister." She held up one finger and tried to hold her temper in check. Another finger went up as she went on. "She lives here with me and is free to see and go out with anyone she damn well pleases. She isn't your responsibility, so you had no right to talk to Princess Bebo that way." Annie hadn't noticed but she was screaming as she finished. There was a headache forming over her left eye and she couldn't figure out who she was madder at - Titus for acting like an ass or Reggie for calling Bebo and asking her out.

"Why are you yelling at me?"

He was right. Why was she yelling at him? How Annie felt was inappropriate considering what she had just said. Reggie was free to call whomever she chose, the most important reason being, she was free. "I said drop it, Titus, and I meant it. Go back and watch television and let me finish in here."

Not listening, Titus moved closer to her and tried to pull her into a kiss, ignoring his injury. She pulled away from him and put her hands up. "You've got to be fucking kidding me! Look what she did to me today, Annie. I'm just supposed to ignore that and act like I'm as enthralled with her as you and your idiot sister?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere. I want you to go." She turned off the burner and moved the pot of chicken noodle soup she'd made.

"I don't want to go."

"I didn't ask what you wanted, I asked you to go. I'm tired from the other night and I don't want to spend the night fighting with you about someone who isn't important in the scheme of things. Just go home and we'll get together tomorrow." She walked out and ran up the stairs, slamming the door to her room behind her.

"What in the fuck just happened here?" Titus asked the refrigerator like it was going to answer him.

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"Would you like to come in?" asked Reggie when they got back.

"I would love to, but perhaps another time. There's a unit of soldiers who would like nothing better than to kick my butt in the morning so I'm afraid I have to go and get some sleep." Bebo walked Reggie to her door and stepped back. "Thank you for the company, Reggie. It's nice to make a friend when I'm so far away from most of mine."

"I'd love to do it again if you'd be willing."

"Now that I know where you live and how delightful it will be to come over..." Bebo started in a teasing voice. "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist. It was fun, so I'll call you and we can repeat the experience real soon." She bowed over the small hand she'd picked up from Reggie's side and kissed it. "Good night."

From her upstairs window, Annie watched the tender scene and her tears started all over again. It was insane for her to be jealous but she couldn't help herself. The lunch and all their conversations now felt tainted somehow because Bebo had taken her sister to dinner. She didn't begrudge Reggie her happiness but Annie just wished she'd picked someone else to be happy with. There was a soft tap at her door a moment later and Annie chose to ignore it. She didn't have the strength to have one more emotion charged conversation that night.

On the street, Bebo waved off the driver and started off on foot. If she was going back to Embassy Row it was going to be a long walk from Arlington where she and Reggie lived. Quietly she put her shoes and coat on, and slipped out of the house. She followed Bebo to a Metro stop a couple of blocks away and wondered where she was going as she disappeared down the escalator.

A few stops later, Bebo got off and started off on another leisurely walk in the direction of the Jefferson Memorial. Once again Annie found her standing in the rotunda of the building staring up at the well-lit statue. This time though, she wanted to be the first who spoke.

"What do you see when you look at him?" She didn't have to speak loudly. They were the only two people in the space.

Bebo stood there in silence as if lost in thought. She had known Annie was behind her from the time she'd heard the front door click softly closed as she walked down the quiet street. What she didn't know was why Annie was out at all. After she'd left with Reggie, she'd figured Titus would have tried to reclaim what he thought belonged to him in the most physical of ways.

There was only one way to find out, Bebo thought so she began talking. "A remarkable individual and leader. From what I've read of him, President Jefferson was a man well ahead of his time. His writing helped form your nation and his words ring just as true now as they did when he penned them. That kind of foresight is rare in any era of history. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' Eloquent words from an eloquent man."

"You memorized that? Why?"

Bebo turned and faced her questioner. "Why not?" She closed her hands into fists at her side to try and stem the flow of her anger but this woman was starting to get under her skin and not in a good way. "All in all, I don't consider myself a complicated person, but you're a completely different story aren't you? I'm trying my best to try and figure you out, Miss Paddio, but I'm



afraid I'm still not any closer to an answer than when we first met." She put her hand up to stop the request to use her first name. "I realize now it's Miss Paddio. For me it will always be no matter where we are and how many people are around us. You have a perception of who I am and what I'm supposed to be, and nothing I'm ever going to do or say to you will change that, will it? Is it such a shock that I would admire a great leader because he was a man? Is that why you asked that?"

"Bebo, please..." Annie held both her hands in front of her and moved closer.

"Please what? Talk to you and try to prove to you how smart I am, or how good a trained monkey my mothers brought me up to be? Or is it that I should try and make you smile when it's just the two of us, but when there's another person within twenty feet of us watching, pretend that I don't know you? I don't have that much time here, and even if I did, I wouldn't lower myself to those types of games. You mistake me for someone who wants something from you, and all I wanted was to be is your friend. Your sister understands that, why can't you?"

*Wanted to be your friend*, the statement made Annie think the door was closed on that possibility. "Why did you take her out to dinner tonight?" The question sounded as petty as it was but the blonde couldn't help herself.

"I don't owe you an explanation, but if you really want to know, it was because she thought I might enjoy a night out and someone to talk with. It's a simple explanation but it's the truth. Why, did Capt. Walker convince you that all us Amazon lesbian freaks are after one thing? That is after you convinced him that you agree with his outlook on the world? Because, believe me, mentioning we had seen each other earlier would have sent you into a panic, am I right?"

"No, I'm not like that and no, I sent him home after the two of you left. I just thought after this afternoon that you would..." there was no real way to finish the statement and Annie's voice died away.

"Stay away from all the Paddio women except you?" Bebo finished for her. "I take my earlier assessment of you back, Miss Paddio. You aren't a cynic you're an egotist." She moved fast and took Annie by the elbow and started walking. At the first street, Bebo waved down a taxi and opened the back door for Annie. She barked the address at the driver and motioned for the blonde to get in. "You won't ever have cause to look so stricken when you find yourself in my company and Titus is standing behind you. If the time we shared this afternoon was wrong and you felt you were just doing a bit of charity work, then I'm sorry I misunderstood. I thought you wanted to be there. My mistake and as I said before, I try seldom to make the same one twice. Goodnight."

The car door closing didn't give Annie a chance to answer and she turned around to see Bebo standing on the street corner watching her go. From the front seat the driver looked at her in the rearview mirror. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Three days ago that was an easy question to answer, now I'm not so sure."

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Dressed in sweatpants and t-shirts with no insignia or markings on them, Bebo and the girls arrived back at the gym the next morning for training. The soldiers standing at ease in a single file across from them were all sporting bruises but none of them looked as bad as Titus and all of them looked wary every time Bebo took a step toward them.

After a few hours they had learned the moves the Amazons had concentrated on and were ready for some sparring matches. Bebo and her guards broke them into small groups and gave suggestions as the Americans tried the techniques on each other. They had all decided on dropping titles while they worked together so they wouldn't have to waste effort worrying about protocol.

"Stop trying to use brute force over your opponent, Brian." The lieutenant was a big man from Georgia and Bebo had purposely pitted him against Lt. Carey Sanders, the smallest of the three women who served on Patrick's squad. The smallish brunette had understood the concept they were trying to teach them better than most of the others.

"I'm holding back since I don't want to hurt her."

"Then try it your way on me and let's see if it works," challenged Bebo. "I top her by a foot at least so give it your best shot."

Four lunges resulted in four trips to the mat in short order, but instead of getting mad the big man started laughing. "I'll be goddamned. My daddy would kick my ass if he saw me now," he said from his back looking up at her. "You win, Bebo, I'll pay better attention from here on out."

She held her hand out in an offer to help him up and it was taken without hesitation. The exchange only ratcheted Titus' anger up another notch. "I know you all have another meeting you have to get to so we'll pick up again in the morning," said Bebo. "Thank you all for your attention."

Bebo changed when she got home but not to go out. Her choice of outfit was the usual attire she wore in Amazonia to workout with Bo. She descended the stairs and headed to the back of the house. When the Amazons had built it, the architects had designed a space to help the residents feel at home. Under the glass structure that stood three stories high was a garden as lush as the forests of Argase. From the trees to the grass on the ground, they had imported and planted everything to make it look as homelike as possible. In the clearing at the center her opponent stood waiting for her arrival.

She bowed to show her respect then moved her staff to a defensive position. A shot of adrenaline mixed with a bit of fear shot up the man's spine but he returned her smile. It reminded him of Boden's right before she used your head for target practice.

"Try and remember I'm a little rusty," said Arthur as he moved in a circle around her trying to find an opening. "You kill me and it'll upset your mama."

"True, but then she loves me even if I'm not perfect."

"Are you telling me you don't believe my sister doesn't think you're perfect?" He moved in and the sound of wood hitting wood filled the space. Fighting with the weapon was hard enough, but against someone like Bebo it was almost impossible to keep the staff in his hands.

"And disagree with the smartest woman I know? Never." Their hits increased in speed but she took it easy on him so the session wouldn't end too soon.

He laughed at her comeback and it was enough of a distraction for Bebo to knock the staff out of his hand. His bare chest was slick with sweat but Art wasn't ready to quit. "Chobos?"

"I wonder if he knows she's unbeaten on the island with those?" asked Steph from her lounge chair by the pool. She and the others were far enough away so as not to be able to hear what Bebo and Art were saying, but close enough to observe the action.

"I think Art just wants to take a run around the trees. It's a shame he was born a man, he would've made a good Amazon," said Max. Her mom had told her both she and Boden had taught him to climb trees and walk the branches when they were children.

At the front of the house Denise opened the door to a depressed looking Annie. "May I be of service, Miss?"

"I'd like to see Princess Bebo if I could."

The housekeeper's first instinct was to say no, but the sadness the young woman wore like a cloak made her step back to allow her to come in. She was going against Bebo's wishes not to be disturbed, but Denise had a feeling this lapse would be forgiven.

"Right this way," Denise headed for the atrium praying Arthur had knocked most of the fight out of her ruler. "She's just getting in a little exercise so you might have to wait."

Nothing in Annie's experience could have prepared her for the first sight of Bebo in the surroundings where she felt the most at home. Like an adventure novel come to life, she watched the strong body dressed in what looked to be a loincloth of leather with a matching short top. Bebo was barefoot and balanced on a tree branch as a man in a similar outfit at the bottom came after her with two short sticks. How they were able to stay on the tree limb was amazing to Annie.

As Arthur advanced, Bebo tucked a little and jumped up to the next branch shoving her weapons into a long thin sheath at her side. Once she was out of his reach the chase was on and their observers were treated to a show of acrobatics as the two moved with speed and agility around the enclosed space. Twin sets of laughter eased Annie's anxiety a little, but she feared one misstep and the results could be tragic. She watched with her fingers pressed to her lips, scared that a scream would slip out and make one of them fall.

The three guards kept their eye on Arthur to make sure he didn't kill himself trying to catch Bebo. It was Beth who first noticed the two women near the back entrance to the house. She nudged Steph who in turn nudged Max.

"I'd trade my best rifle for Titus to show up now and see the look on that girl's face. Bebo would have an excuse to pop him again from his reaction I'm sure." Max made the other two laugh and sat up to see what was going to happen when Bebo saw the woman who was waiting for her.

"Max, Bear will never forgive you if all her years of training drop like a rock out of those trees, and you know that's going to happen if she looks down. You remember what happened in the museum that first day. And I won't even get into what Boden would do to you," warned Steph.

"You know how to get her down just as well as I do," said Max with a smile. "All right already." She cupped her hands around her mouth and sent a shrill birdcall in Bebo's direction.

Not slowing down the princess looked back toward the pool. The faces were so smug she bled off some speed wondering what was amusing them so much. All together her friends pointed to the back of the house. In hindsight the luckiest thing that could have happened was Bebo was as high up as she was. One look at Annie and it threw her balance off enough to knock her off the branch.

Annie screamed as she watched Bebo fall, stopping when two big hands grabbed a branch half way down. She forgot about the guy who'd been on the princess' heels but just as quickly he landed with his feet on either side of Bebo's hands.

"You okay, sprout?"

"I'm fine but you won't be if you tell my mother I fell out of a tree," she told him with a laugh as she looked up at him. She swung gently to get a better grip so she could plan her next move.

"Was it the girl or me that made you lose concentration?" When he smiled it reminded Bebo of Audrey. Their eyes and the way the skin crinkled around them were identical. "Must be serious if it was the girl."

"Just surprised me is all. The last time we talked it didn't end well so I didn't plan on seeing her again." The people on the ground were starting to get amused. The two were obviously having a heart to heart; it just looked funny to see one of them hanging by her fingers.

"Is that Paddio's kid?"

"Yep."

"Want me to go down and keep her entertained while you get yourself together?" He reached down with one hand and offered her an easy way up. "I think you've scared her enough for one day."

She accepted and tried to help so he wouldn't lose his balance. "It isn't like that." Their eyes met when she was back beside him and he arched a fair brow over one of his. "It isn't," she repeated when he added a smile.

"I'm not laughing at you, sprout. I just now figured out why Titus looks the way he does. You do what's best for you and don't let anyone stand in your way. That's all your mothers and I have ever wanted for you." He patted her shoulder and was surprised when she pulled him into a hug.

"Thanks, dad." It was her hand that kept him suspended this time from falling to the ground. "Sorry, I should've asked first."

"You don't need to ask, I just never thought you would see me in that way."

"Arthur, I'm not an idiot, I do realize how it is I came into being and the part you played in that. I came here because my mother asked it of me, but I also came to spend time with you. Mom was the one who had me assigned to the Cobra Unit for this exercise."

"Boden?"

"Yes," she pulled him as easily as he had when she was in need of help. "The Consort Boden is as smart a woman as her wife, and I think it had a little to do with owing you one for everything you did. I know she'd never tell you that to your face, but that's what I think."

"She doesn't owe me a thing. I was glad to do it. And has the person who can tell Audrey no to anything been born yet?"

"Come on, they probably think we've gone insane or something."

They moved down opposite sides of the tree trunk until they felt the grass under their feet. When they were safely down, Arthur bowed to Bebo and thanked her for the session. Annie kept looking at him like she recognized him but couldn't place him.

Not to make her feel any more uncomfortable by having to explain her presence, he chose not to introduce himself. "Ms. Paddio, it was nice seeing you again." He followed the rest of the group back into the house to grab a shower and change. For the rare afternoon off to spend with Bebo, Arthur had promised to fill in that evening and finish some paperwork at the base.

Now alone, Annie and Bebo just stared at each other and felt at a loss for words. Denise tried her best to help by bringing out a platter of finger foods and a bottle of wine. "Highness, I thought you and your guest might enjoy a snack out here."

"Thank you, Denise, but I don't know if Miss Paddio can stay."

"I can stay, thank you." Annie looked up at her and tried to convey with her eyes the sincerity of her statement. The night before had been hell after Bebo had put her in a cab and sent her away.

"Unless you don't want me to."

Another girl came out and laid a blanket down in the clearing. Bebo mentally shook her head at the staff's more than obvious attempt to create a certain mood. "Denise, thank you. I'll take it from here." She motioned to the blonde to take a seat as best she could in the skirt she wore, having to help when Annie couldn't manage without losing a bit of dignity.

"Thank you."

"I think gratitude can be as overworked as apologies." A hurt look at her words further saddened Annie's demeanor. "What I mean is, there's no need to thank me for just talking to you. Miss Paddio, if we're going to be friends then we need to sweep the eggshells out of the room. If I have to be so formal all the time think of all the great arguments we'll miss."

"An apology was going to be my next item of discussion," said Annie trying her best to smile. "Last night...well I'm not sure what last night was but I was wrong to question you about Reggie. You're free to have dinner with whomever you please just like my sister is." She closed the distance between them by reaching over and putting her hand over Bebo's. "What I couldn't stand is having you believe I think ill of you, or worse having you not want to see me."

"Why are you here?" Bebo didn't look at her; instead she kept her eyes on their hands.

"I wanted to see you to tell you that I don't want to lose out on being your friend. If you give me a second chance, I promise to do better."

The slow sweep of Bebo's eyes from Annie's legs up to her face felt like a caress to the young woman, but she didn't look away even though it felt like the blue eyes would burn her. "What do you want from me?"

"Can I be honest?"

Bebo laughed as her own question came back to haunt her. "I'd love nothing better."

"I really don't know, but I do know I'll regret it for the rest of my life if I don't hang around and find out. The best answer I can give you is to say I want to start with spending time with you and talking about whatever interests you." She pulled on the warm fingers and felt immensely better since Bebo hadn't sent her away. "The rest we'll figure out together with time."

"That's a good answer," Bebo left the statement hanging for a moment before adding the name. What was meant to be a joke made the blonde start to question if the answer had not been good enough and Bebo was just trying to let her down easy. The possibility made her start crying again at having messed up so badly. "What's wrong, Annie?"

"You don't want to at least try?"

"I do want you to stay, but only if you stop crying. Unless I stink so much from all that running

around that it's making your eyes water," joked Bebo. She turned their hands so that she was holding both of Annie's. "Time is the best thing for us I think. Enough of it and I'm sure we'll eventually get this right. How about you eat some of this stuff and have a glass of my mom's good wine while I run up and take a shower?"

"You're fine. Don't go on my account."

"I'll be right back, I promise, and I'll even send in one of the gardeners to keep you company."

"Why?" The blonde didn't remember mentioning she liked to garden.

"I just thought you'd be interested in the room." Bebo laughed when Annie looked past her and seemed to notice their surroundings for the first time.

"Oh my God, I walked in and just noticed you," she said without thinking. "How'd I miss all this?"

"It's the leather, or so my mother tells me," joked Bebo. The delightful blush returned to Annie's cheeks making her look like an innocent girl. "I'm sorry, I can't seem to resist sometimes. If you don't want me to leave, or mind how I look then I'll stick around and keep you company. I like you. You make me think about things in a new and different light so spending time with you is something I'd really enjoy."

"If you're offering, I'm willing to take as much of your time as you're willing to give."

"Then it's my guess we'll be spending more than enough time together for you to get sick of my company." Bebo let go of her hands and turned to the tray Denise had brought out. "How about a glass of wine?"

"I'd love one."

It was interesting for Annie to watch Bebo work the opener into the bottle. The muscles in her forearms flexing attractively then the muscles in her abdomen as she pulled the cork out. There had been a few times in high school and college when she was in various locker rooms after class that she tried covertly to study the beauty of the female form when certain women caught her eye. Bebo wasn't built like anyone she'd ever seen. In the leather outfit she looked as if she'd stepped out of the pages of one of Annie's history books ready to answer questions about living in a distant past.

In silence, they sipped the wine and enjoyed some of the tidbits Denise had provided. Now that she knew they would be all right, Annie took the opportunity to study the room. The layout of the garden with full-grown trees was like a surreal sight considering where they were. Even the parks in Washington D.C. weren't this nice, and she found that by keeping her eyes on the surrounding scenery, she could keep from staring at Bebo.

"It was added a few years after the house was completed," said Bebo, her voice as soothing as

the birds flying free around the space.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The gardens, they were added a few years after the house was finished. As beautiful as this place is, there is no comparison to the forest this place was modeled after. Argase is where I believe the soul of the Amazons lie. You can feel the spirit of our ancestors in the branches as you move through them."

"I was watching you earlier, the way you move up there is amazing."

"It's not hard when you've been doing it since you have memory of being alive." Bebo paused, gathering her thoughts so they could clear something important between them. Something that if not rectified would keep them from ever becoming good friends much less anything else.

"Annie, the biggest disappointed I have about you is that you preformed notions of who we are, didn't you? I mean, I have no proof, but I'm right aren't I?"

Annie tapped her nail on the crystal glass in her hand and thought briefly about lying. How Bebo would know that she couldn't begin to guess, but her perception was right. The talk she'd had with Mr. Baxter right before the opening came to mind. "People have a tendency to do that when they don't understand things and there's no way to learn the truth. They make their own truths. It's human nature and I'm no different. It's just to me there's no way for me to comprehend how so many women would feel fulfilled living just with women. That isn't the natural order of things, I mean you've obviously needed men to keep the population growing. Aren't there some women who don't want to live life as a true Amazon? What if you hadn't been born liking women in a sexual way? You'd still have to join and have children with someone you don't feel comfortable having a normal relationship with just to fulfill your duty as the next queen."

"I am here because I want to be. I serve my mother not because it's my duty to do so, but because I'm honored to do her bidding. The thing about normal societies," Bebo made air quotes with her fingers, "is that they're quick to judge that which they don't understand. It's human nature to question, but don't act shocked when you discover the story you made up is wrong."

The answer was given in an even tone so Annie wasn't scared of being tossed out. "What is the answer then?"

Bebo set her glass down and reclined onto the blanket. The pose put her body on display for Annie and the blonde suddenly felt hot. "The answer is simple. To live on the island of Amazonia you have to want to be there. Every year there are some women who want to live the life they are destined to live. A life that includes a husband and children and everything else that will bring them happiness. For those who stay, some choose a life of service to the queen or perhaps the goddess. They do not need anyone to make them feel complete, their vocations fill that void. And for the rest, they're like my mothers. They want a life where they are free to meet, court and join with the woman who is the other half of their soul. Someone who fulfills in them the fundamentals of being happy, whole, and gives them a place to belong."



"That sounds beautiful."

The blue eyes closed and a smile relaxed Bebo's features as she lay on her back and rested her head on her hands. "It is. Loving someone shouldn't come with the condemnation of society, Annie. Love in any form should be celebrated for the wonderful thing it is. I attend joining ceremonies quite regularly at home, but I've been to more than enough weddings as well. When I see someone look at another person like they hold the secrets to the sun rising in the morning, it makes me long for it in my own life. I just happen to know that when that day comes it will be a woman I'll be looking at." She turned her head a little and looked up at Annie. "Does that make me a bad person, or you uncomfortable?"

"I don't think you could do anything to make me feel that you're a bad person."

"Then just ask me from now on instead of coming to your own conclusions. In the end, my friend, we both want the same things. I would one day like to find someone like you found Titus. There are many things written and sung about love, but my definition of it comes from a balcony and soft music."

"I don't understand the analogy."

"Back home in the palace, there's a balcony that overlooks the water. Some nights from my room I sit in the window of my room and watch my mothers dance together on that same balcony and you can see it in every twirl and every look. They are so in love even after years of being together and they celebrate that feeling whenever they can. That's how I was raised and that's what I hope to emulate one day." She sat up and looked to the flowers behind Annie's head. "My mother Boden once told me that she sees the whole of her world trapped in the green of my mother's eyes. In her smile lie the answers to happiness, and in her arms the hope of what the afterlife will be it's such a wondrous thing. As for my mother Audrey, she isn't much different whenever they're in a room together."

"How can you talk like an angel and then be able to fight like the demon I just saw?"

"Does it help that I never raise a weapon to conquer only to defend?"

It was like a need that Annie had and she just went with it. She reached across and put her hand on Bebo's arm just to have some contact with her. "At this point I don't think I'd care one way or the other."

"Careful, Annie, you might change my mind on who you really are, then where will that leave us, huh?"

"In the most interesting place I might ever find myself." The laugh Bebo let out made Annie want to think of something else to hear it again. The sound made her feel more alive than she ever had.

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That night, Annie arrived to a dark and quiet house. The solitude helped her remember the details of her time with Bebo. What must it be like to feel what she described so vividly in her parents? It sounded like the queen and her wife had found eternal happiness in each other, and their positions and wealth had nothing to do with why that was. The blonde wished for just one dance on a balcony far away with someone who made her feel just half that good.

"Hey, Annie, what are you doing sitting in the dark?" Reggie stood in the foyer taking off her coat and gloves, surprised to find her sister home so early. "Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I just took the afternoon off to get some stuff done." She looked at the shining eyes looking at her and the big smile and thought perhaps her sister had already found what Bebo was talking about. "How'd last night go?"

"I know you said you spent some time with her, but have you figured out how great Bebo is? Last night was one of the best dates I've ever been on." Reggie plopped down on the sofa next to Annie and grabbed her hand.

"I thought it was just dinner," she said as causally as possible.

"The flowers, the place she picked, the way she didn't mind me looking at those baby blues all night - it was a date all right." The linked hands were pulled up to Reggie's chest in an old habit Annie recognized as wanting reassurance. "Do you think she'll call?"

"I'm sure she will." Annie understood the fascination of what her sister had said about looking into the blue eyes since she had given in to the lure herself the whole time she and Bebo were together that afternoon. Before she could continue, the front door opened again and Titus walked in.

"This was fun while it lasted." With a big pull, Reggie got Annie to lean closer so she could kiss her forehead. "I'll be up in my room doing some work if you need me." She walked passed Titus without saying a word and picked up her bag. The bruise on his face had gotten darker over night making it easier to see the outline of Bebo's fingers.

He was in uniform and his hands were behind his back. "Hi, baby, I got you something."

Annie thought flowers and it brightened her up to think he was trying to make up for the night before. He brought his hands forward with a flourish and gave her an alarm clock. "Uh, thank you." She wanted to laugh but her gut and the look on his face told her this wasn't a joke.

"It let's you personalize a message for you to wake up to instead of the beeping yours does." A bugle call filled the living room followed by Titus' booming voice. "Wake up, soldier, and give me some."

As quickly as she could, Annie snatched it out of his hand and shut it off. As if to prove something to herself she stood up and moved into his arms. Just as slowly she slid her hands up

his chest until she was cupping his face. She held his head in place and looked into his eyes.

"What?" In all their time together, Annie had never studied him so closely.

"Nothing." And it was an honest answer. She saw nothing of what Bebo had described and it scared her. After all their time together there should've been something.

Titus pushed passed the weak resistance and kissed her. If she wasn't totally there he never noticed, and she wasn't totally there. A part of Annie's spirit had flown off to somewhere with soft music and where two strong arms were holding her close. She tried to shut out the images fearing she'd never get there and the broken heart it would cause would leave her empty.

Her numbness was interpreted as compliance and Titus swept her off her feet and started for her bedroom. He never moved away from her lips as he walked to the stairs. Neither of them had seen Reggie come down after getting off the phone. When the knock on the door came, the happy looking couple was half way up and Titus stopped to see who it was. If it was the general he was wondering what the penalty would be for dropping Annie.

Not thinking anything of it, Reggie opened the door and welcomed Bebo in. "I'm glad you called but I don't think Annie can make it." The last part she said with a roll of her eyes.

Annie had no other way to describe Bebo's look but intense. Their position left nothing to the imagination as to where she and Titus were going and what they were going to do when they got there. Like the night before, it felt to the blonde that a door of possibilities between them had closed just as quickly as it took Bebo to shake her head and turn her attention to Reggie.

"Then it'll just be the two of us if you're up for it."

"You bet, just let me go up and get my stuff. Come in, I won't be long."

Saying no like she wanted to would require having to come up with an explanation Bebo wasn't ready to give so she just stepped in and tried to ignore the seemingly frozen couple on the steps. No matter what promises they'd made or implied that afternoon, the princess knew she never wanted to set foot in this house again. Nothing could have made clearer the harder path Emelda had spoken of than looking at Annie in his arms.

"Please don't let me keep you." With effort, Bebo looked at Annie and smiled. "Goodbye, Annie, could you let Reggie know I'll be waiting outside?" She didn't see Annie bury her face in Titus' neck at the word goodbye. Bebo had always been upfront with her and always said what she meant.

Annie's mistake was not going after her.

**[Continued in Chapter 3](#)**

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## ~ Amazonia ~

Book 1  
by Ali Vali

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1.](#)

### *The Interlude*

A second plane arrived from Amazonia two weeks later carrying the rest of the team needed for the second part of their training in the Louisiana swamps. Since the day Bebo had gone to take the Paddio sisters to dinner and ended up going out only with Reggie, something had changed. The Amazons would work long hours teaching the Cobra Unit to be better fighters, then Bebo would lock herself away in the house and do additional drills with either Arthur or the other guards.

Although the trio of royal guards was exhausted by their constant sparring session the training did not have the same effect on the princess. While they retired in the late evenings, Bebo spent her time pacing the house and gardens. A few times they had found her asleep on the grass as if she had spent hours gazing at the stars that could be seen through the glass roof. Whatever was wrong, and all three had their suspicions, they were sure it wasn't being rectified by taking calls or visitors. Outside of the soldiers she and her people trained with everyday, Bebo hadn't gone out or spoken to anyone, including her parents.

Bear and Rita arrived an hour before dinner glad the long trip was finally over. Neither asked questions when they sat at the dining room table and the head seat remained vacant. The older woman looked questioningly at her daughter and got only a slight shake of her head in answer.

While everyone was still at dinner, Mara, one of the house servants, had just started up the stairs to turn down beds when the phone rang. She picked up the receiver at the top of the steps and, recognizing the voice, once again felt sorry for the caller. The young woman was persistent even though she had to know by now the princess' return call would not be forthcoming.

"Amazonian Embassy."

"Hello, I hate to bother you again, but I was wondering if Princess Bebo was available?"

"No, miss, but I'd be happy to take a message."

"I've already left several, but thank you for offering." Annie drove slowly past the large home

knowing that stopping for long periods of time would not be a wise move. Just sitting outside one of the embassies was a quick way to get hauled in by the District's police. She pressed her cell phone to her chin wanting more than anything to start crying.

The door closing behind Bebo that night had been a catalyst of sorts that had changed Annie's outlook on the future. Sadly it seemed to be affecting all the others in her life as well. Reggie had become sullen when Bebo disappeared into a world where none of them could reach her. And Titus blamed the Amazon for changing the order of his life. Annie wasn't acting like a woman getting ready to be his wife and it was pissing him off.

"I'm not giving up so easily, highness," she whispered to the empty car. If she couldn't get through to the object of her every waking thought, Annie knew there was one more chance, and the princess would have no choice but to attend.

As tea was poured after dinner, Bear invited Max out for a walk. The weather had been trying to shrug off its winter cold, but the warmer days had been erratic and the nights had remained brisk enough to require a coat. Max watched her mother rub her arm through the heavy garment in a familiar gesture. The old break had healed perfectly, but was still sensitive to cold damp air.

"Where is she?" Bear asked, then as if reconsidering put her hands up stopping Max from answering. "If she's out drinking and picking up women, I don't want to know. If that's what she's doing just lie and tell me you don't know, because then I won't have to lie to Audrey when I call her with an update tomorrow. She's been gone a month and hasn't picked up the phone once."

The observation was a gentle reprimand to Max for the same thing. "It's complicated, mom, but it's not drinking and womanizing so you're safe. In a way I wish she were, then it'd be easier to deal with." They had walked six blocks by the time Max finished her story, at least what details she was sure about.

"You weren't with her that night?" Bear was starting to get angry with the number of infractions the three guards had accumulated since their assignment had begun. "Max, what would you have told your queen if something had happened to her only child? You were sent here with her for a reason, and it wasn't to enjoy some time off."

"Bebo can take care of herself and you know it," said Max. "This isn't Amazonia where everyone recognizes her face because it's printed on the twenty draga bill. For the first time, it was easy to see she felt free to just wander and look like everyone else. There wasn't a room or country full of people bowing and scraping at her every step." Max was just as forceful and she was more than willing to defend her motives. "I'm responsible for her safety, but I'm also her friend. She'll be in a position of service for the rest of her life, so what's wrong with a few months of just being Bebo?"

"Calm down, cub. I'll deny it if you ever tell anyone, but I did the same thing for Audrey and Bo when it was our turn to come here. Tell me more about this girl."

That discussion ate up another three blocks and Bear was listening so intently she scarcely

noticed the buildings they were passing. "Don't look so mad, she's engaged to someone else and didn't make Bebo any promises. You could see it though. The first day in the museum, Bebo was lost in her voice and in the way she moved. But it was later, when they really talked that she saw how special Annie is. The tragedy is the timing. If they had met sooner, who knows?"

"The fates are not always our friend." The duo turned around and started back for the house. Bear wanted to wait until morning to talk to the princess. If there were any chance things could work out with the girl, Bear thought, she would do everything in her power to make it happen. If not, it was time to get back to what they had been asked to do.

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In the morning Bebo requested a meeting with Bear in the study. After another sleepless night, she was ready for a change of scenery. The tall future ruler was standing at a large window at the side of the room when her teacher walked in. Bear could tell she had dropped some pounds but Bebo still looked solid and strong.

"Good morning, highness." She bowed her head out of respect and Bebo saw it in the reflection of the glass.

"You're looking well, old friend. How are my mothers and things at home?"

"Both your parents are well, but they miss hearing your voice," she said trying not to sound chastising. "And the training grounds haven't been the same without you."

Still looking out of the window Bebo let out a hollow laugh. "I'm glad someone misses me, I'm sure the same wouldn't be said by the Cobra soldiers. They're probably counting the days until we leave and praying they never lay eyes on us again. I wanted to meet with you before we left this morning to ask you to take over and give me an assessment of how well you think everyone is doing. They've done exceedingly well with the weapons we introduced so in my opinion, it's time to move into the field." The white cable knit sweater she was wearing gave Bebo a rugged clean look Bear noticed when the young woman finally turned around to face her. "I value your judgment, Bear, so if you think we're ready to move out, then we'll go to phase two."

"You'll have my answer by tonight, and speaking of tonight..."

With a tired hand, Bebo waved off any other reminders. "Don't worry, I didn't forget. I'll be there. The exhibit will be in New Orleans for the next month and I'm sure mama's counting down the days until it returns to its rightful spot. We'll give it a proper send off before they pack it up for travel."

Secretary Moines and Mr. Baxter were hosting a reception for some of Washington's elite to see the National Galleries' exhibit while it was still in town. All of the members of both the House and Senate Security Councils were coming, anxious to make headway with the next generation of Amazonia's ruling class.

For Bebo it was just an obligation to fulfill on behalf of her mother but she was going to make it as quickly as possible. The others in attendance that night were the members of Patrick's unit. She wanted to avoid another look into Annie's intimate life with Titus if she could.

"Until tonight then."

"Thank you, Bear, and feel free to be honest. I think some of them still question why they must learn something they see as primitive, but for the most part they are dedicated and brave men and women. If you think they're not ready, we'll keep at it."

The broad back was presented to her again but Bear saw the way Bebo sighed as she looked out at the frozen ground. "Do you want to talk about it? I have time before we have to head out."

"You have been my teacher and confidant as long as I can remember, but there are some things better left unsaid on my part. Not because I don't trust you, but because I really don't want you to think me a fool."

"I would never belittle any of your feelings or troubles, Bebo, you have to know that."

"It's not you I'm worried about, Bear, it's me. I think of myself as a fool for over reading a situation and nothing had changed from the first time I studied it. That sounds confusing I know, but perhaps if you give me until we get to warmer climates I'll feel more talkative and more clear headed." Bebo never turned around, but lifted her hand in farewell signaling the talk at an end.

When the door closed behind Bear, Bebo lowered her hand and pressed it to one of the windowpanes and studied her fingers as the sunlight outlined them. On her walk the night before she had cursed Emelda for her vision. She just wanted her life back the way it was before she met Reggie with her sweet, always present smile, and her sister Annie with her shining eyes that haunted Bebo every time she closed hers.

One path had proven to be easy. Reggie, the Amazon was sure with very little coaxing on her part, would be willing to pursue a relationship. During the two nights they had shared time over a meal, Bebo found her to be smart and engaging. She was beautiful in a natural and untouched way, but for all that Reggie was, something was still missing. Reggie wasn't the other path; the one Bebo knew in her heart was the one she was meant to walk. That path Bebo was discovering was all uphill, impassible and that was someone else's road to walk.

That first morning in the museum the princess had blindly entered an emotional trap of her own making and lost her heart. Now she felt the cruel irony of the situation. Growing up listening to her mother spin tales of falling in love and finding the other half of your soul had never seemed real to her only daughter. Not that she didn't think that each of her parents weren't the perfect mate for the other, but Bebo had always believed she could control when and if she would fall in love. What a joke that was now. She had listened to Annie speak so eloquently about the items her mother had put in the exhibit and the most overwhelming feeling came over her. It wasn't love poems or sonnets that had turned her head but a young woman who spoke with the same passion as her mother for the history of a noble race of women.

There hadn't been time for Bebo to stop and question why. It just simply was. Without knowing her name or anything about her, the princess' heart overpowered her brain and said 'this was the one,' as if finding what had been missing in Bebo all along. She may not have wanted to admit it, but the part of her that believed all those fairytales her mother told was the part that realized this was her path.

"Only thing is, the road's closed." She laughed at the lame attempt at a joke and ran her fingers through her hair as if trying to buy time. Tonight was the last night she was planning on spending in the house since she knew the Cobras were ready, she really didn't need Bear to tell her that, but there was something she wanted to do before departing. Something she wanted to do alone feeling she didn't need an audience to see her at her weakest.

She hugged the back wall and stayed well out of sight. The last class to tour the Amazon treasures from the girls' academy was following their docent around like puppies. They had made it through most of the exhibit and had stopped in front of Larissa's statue.

"I sing of a brave warrior and good sister..." started Annie. She told the story with a combination of Audrey's writing and what she remembered of Bebo's words. From the time the exhibit had started and she realized who had written the text, she had decided to use the queen's unique insight of the Amazon's history. "It was her last act, but her bravery allowed the Amazons to live on and defend their land."

When she was done, Annie moved the barricades aside and allowed the girls to come up and touch the stone foot like Bebo had allowed the first day. The museum turned a blind eye whenever one of the curators allowed the visitors to come up because they only did it with the school-aged children.

"Thank you all for coming and I hope you learned something from these brave people. Their queen allowed all these things to travel so far away from home to show you that if you set your mind to it, you can be anything you want to be. Don't you let anyone tell you otherwise." The blonde folded her hands together behind her back and smiled as the kids headed for the exit, then thought she saw some movement toward the back of the room. A quick scan revealed nothing and Annie just thought it was the crew preparing the place ready for the evening's reception.

Hidden within the shadows, Bebo studied the historian as if trying to memorize everything about her. The memories would have to last a lifetime since after that night Bebo never planned to see Annie again. There would be no reason to; their paths would never have reason to cross once the princess left the capital.

When Annie turned to head for her office, Bebo headed for the door intent on walking back to the house. Walking helped to sooth her mind, and had from the time she was a small child. Taking long walks with Audrey had made her realize what the world had to offer from a simple flower to the most complex architecture. The queen had always told her they were the descendants of a wandering bard who found the best stories because she wasn't in a hurry to get to a specific destination.



She looked at the front of the beautiful building and felt a real physical ache in the chest. "I may not understand your choices or why I feel this way about you, Annie, but I hope you're happy and your life is filled with the greatest wonders the fates could bestow upon you."

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The uniform was laid out on the bed when Bebo got out of the shower. The dress blues had been pressed and the metals and insignia had been polished until they gleamed in the subdued lighting of her bedroom. She had one more night of pomp and circumstance before she could return to more familiar territory and to what she knew best.

She had put on the shirt and pants and was slipping on the boots when there was a knock on the door. Signaling it was all right to come in, Bebo turned to see Bear standing in the doorway with a chest full of medals. They had returned late, meaning most likely that the trainer had put everyone at the base through the roughest tests she could think of to be able to give Bebo her best impression.

"They'll be ready to move by the end of the week. General Paddio tells me that in the field is where his soldiers really excel so the second phase won't take as long in his opinion." The second bit of information was said with a huge smile making Bebo wonder what the two old soldiers had been willing to put up on the friendly wager the boast must have prompted.

"Then I hope they brought plenty of paint remover. They know the rules. Once they kill one of us the game is over." Bebo accepted help with her jacket enjoying the sound of Bear's laugh.

"Then the game should last a good long time since we decided to play without rules. Anything goes sounded good to him, so much so he jumped at the chance."

"Poor man, doesn't he know what lives in a swamp. Finding something slithering through your undies isn't the most pleasant way to wake up or keep your position a secret when you start screaming."

Bear brushed imaginary lint from Bebo's back as the princess buttoned the coat. "Precisely, and you and I know that, but he'll figure it out soon enough. Are you ready, highness?"

"Sure, let's go show a little pride in our heritage and dispel a few myths."

"Or make some new ones," joked Bear.

The place was full of people milling around moving from one piece to the next, some leaning over and reading the small plaques put up to give a brief description of what they were looking at. The women and men not in some type of military uniform were wearing tuxedos and formal attire and seemed to know each other as if they always traveled in the same circles. For the most part, the crowd was concentrated in the front rooms of the exhibit leaving the back for perusal after the official welcoming ceremony was over.

Annie found the person she was looking for standing in a familiar pose before the large statue of Larissa. Bebo had a glass of champagne in her hand and she looked amazing in the dark blue uniform.

"How are you, Miss Paddio?"

"How did you know it was me?" Annie stood back and hoped Bebo was in a mood to talk to her now.

"You're the only one the guards would have let through. We're leaving soon and I wanted to have a moment alone with you to tell you goodbye. I wanted to thank you for the time we spent together and the way you treated all these artifacts with respect. If there's ever an opportunity, I'd like for you to meet my mother. I'm sure she'd enjoy sitting down with you and discussing your take on all that you learned in the past month." Bebo turned around but didn't move any closer.

"Why haven't you wanted to see me or called me back?"

"Please don't ask me that." Bebo felt a lump form in her throat and she wanted to just walk away. She had promised herself to be professional and distant so as not to get hurt, and this woman had the ability to hurt her with little effort.

The string quartet had started in the other room and the soft music filtered back to them. Annie moved closer, the sway of her hips making her dress look all that more flattering. She had swept her hair up off her neck and the look was making Bebo sweat. "I'm asking and I'm not leaving until I get an answer." She reached for Bebo's glass and set it on the floor close to the statue.

"I find that I'm capable of many things, but I can't find the strength to fight what I'm feeling, but it's a losing cause. Only an idiot would fight a battle that can't be won." The answer was softly spoken, but Annie was encouraged by the way Bebo seemed to not be able to look away from her.

"That sounds good, but it really doesn't answer my question," said Annie as she reached for one of Bebo's hands. Seeing the royal again, she realized if something was going to happen between them, it would be her that would have to make the first move.

"My answer may scare you, so that's the best I'm willing to give."

The fingers were chilled from the glass Bebo had been holding, but Annie didn't mind. With the slowness of a woman sure of what she wanted, she slid her palm across Bebo's and threaded their fingers together. "You want to know what I think?"

"Does it matter what my answer is?"

"No, because I'm going to tell you no matter what. You came here and met someone who seemed to dislike, or at least question everything about what you stood for and where you came from

because she didn't understand. Even though you tried to make her see otherwise, she continued with the life she thought would make other people happy, never once trying to stop and think too hard on what would make her happy. You taught me a valuable lesson, Bebo."

"What?" The tall woman stopped and cleared her throat when the one word question came out as almost a squawk.

"That you shouldn't live a lie no matter how much others want you to do so. And, you can come to see something differently when you meet the right person to show you the way. I may not have understood how an island full of women could find fulfillment in just women, but then I met you and I could totally see what the secret was. You just need to find the right woman." She moved closer until their bodies were as close as they could get without touching. "I missed you and I've been waiting to tell you this since the night you came over."

"Forgive me, but you and Titus seemed to be on the way to hanging the 'do not disturb' sign up when I got there. I'm sure you don't need my interference or presence in your life to be happy." Bebo wanted to back up and get a safe distance between them, but Annie smelled so good her feet were frozen in place.

"I don't want to talk about Titus." She held up her hand and showed the naked finger. The engagement ring was gone. "I've already settled things with Titus, and I want to do the same with you. Tell me you don't care anything about me and I'll walk out of here and leave you to your thoughts." She looked up with the fire of a woman fed up with waiting. "Tell me," Annie demanded.

"I can't."

They both tried to think of a word to describe the feeling when their bodies moved the final inch and came together. Had they voice it, the first thought to come to mind would have been the same - home.

"What are you doing to me, Annie? I don't want to be a sideshow while you try to figure out your feelings for Titus. You did after all accept his ring and make promises to him for the future." Involuntarily, Bebo's hands went to Annie's hair and released it from the clip she'd put in to hold it up. It felt like silk running through her fingers.

"I want to make you open your eyes and see me before you leave. Because I have a feeling that once you're gone I'll never see you again if I don't say anything. My heart just found you and I refuse to let you go so easily."

Tears ran down Bebo's face and she wasn't embarrassed to let Annie see the show of what others considered a weakness. "Not see you? Are you mad? I don't see anything but you no matter how hard I try to forget you, but think about what you're saying. I won't let go so easily if the world tries to convince you this isn't the best choice for you. If you chose me, I'll do everything in my power to keep you by my side."

"Do you promise?" Annie looked up without moving out of the strong embrace. It wasn't a balcony but it would have to do and she wanted Bebo to see how right this was. "Dance with me?"

There under the shadow of Larissa's likeness they shared their first dance. Annie melted into her and felt like the fairy princess in some far off land who had been swept away by her brave warrior. But it wasn't enough; she wanted to get closer to Bebo and show her that what she was feeling was real. She looked up at the damp blue eyes and asked for the final missing piece.

Annie didn't need to ask with words, Bebo could see what she wanted since she wanted the same thing. For the petite blonde, it was as if her body had come alive for the first time as the princess lowered her head and pressed her lips to Annie's. There was no turning back now as the most sensual of feelings ran from Annie's lips throughout her body.

Her pale, slightly powdered cheeks blushed when Annie moaned into Bebo's mouth. It wasn't her usual response to being kissed but she couldn't have held it in if she'd tried. It embarrassed her enough to bury her face in Bebo's neck as if trying to hide how she was feeling.

"Don't," said Bebo, so close to her Annie could feel her lips moving against her ear. She could feel the heat of the young woman's blush and could only guess what was wrong. "I want to always hear and see how good you feel."

"I want to leave now and tell you just how good I feel without a building full of people breathing down my neck. They're just waiting to steal you away from me." Her hands locked around Bebo's back trying to prevent the inevitable. "Is it wrong to want all the things you talked to me about that day in your garden?"

"What would be wrong is to not want them, Annie. A woman like you deserves the royal treatment when it comes to everything life has to offer."

A carefree laugh bubbled up from her gut and Annie enjoyed the ability to find humor in anything after the two weeks of hell she'd endured. "It's a good thing I caught the eye of a princess then, huh?"

"You've done more than that, Lady Paddio." Bebo took hold of one of Annie's hands so she could bring the fingers up to her lips to deliver a kiss. "How about we attend to my guests first then go for a walk alone?"

"I'd love to, highness."

They were about to enjoy their second kiss when someone cleared their throat before they turned the corner. "A thousand pardons, highness," said Bear as she bowed. "Miss Paddio," she lowered her head again. "I'm Bear Blackard, part of Queen Audrey's military forces. I don't mean to intrude, but Secretary Moines needs to have a word with you, Princess Bebo. He said it was rather urgent."

"Send him back, Captain. This is as private as it's going to get in here tonight." During the short exchange Bebo never let go of Annie's hand, but now it was time to put pleasure aside and concentrate on duty. "Bear, could I ask you to escort Miss Paddio wherever she wishes to go."

"Miss Paddio wishes to stay," Annie smiled up at her and pressed her free hand to Bebo's mouth to stop the protest. "But I know I can't. Don't forget about our walk."

"I'm looking forward to it. We have so many monuments left to talk about."

One of the guards escorted Philip back and just as quickly returned to her post. He looked tired but still good in his tuxedo. "I see you inherited Bo's love of big parties. The reception held in their honor years ago comes to mind. A million people wanted to meet the great Amazon warrior of legend and she's strolling through the rose garden."

"And mama?"

"Laughing her head off at her consort when she clipped a bloom and put it between her teeth. Good times but that's not why I'm here."

"What's wrong, Philip?"

"We have a situation brewing in Conger, so there's going to be a change in our schedule. I want to finish the training we started but I've got no choice except to pull the Cobras and send them in. Trust between us isn't an issue, Bebo, but that's all I can tell you now." He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it affectionately. "You wouldn't want to tag along, would you?"

"You know we can't do that, but thanks for asking. Especially since you should've pulled your agent out of Africa about two months ago. The rebels have been on the move steadily for three and have left nothing but destruction in their path. Ethnic cleansing is never a pretty thing and definitely something you don't want to get caught on the wrong side of."

He hesitated and thought of asking a question then just laughed. There was no way she would divulge her sources any quicker than he would his. "I take it your agent is already basking on the beaches at home? Our intelligence reports said nothing of Amazonian personnel in the area."

"Philip, they're torturing people trying to find foreigners the rebels believe helped keep Kimbu and his men in power. Of course we evacuated our people. As for your agents not finding them, our people were there after different information than yours." She stooped down and retrieved her glass. "I'm almost sorry we weren't able to finish with the Cobras. The best way in and out of there is through the jungle. Be sure to warn Patrick about the creepy crawlies. I was planning on surprising his troops with some down in Louisiana, but nothing like he'll find in Conger. That area is ripe with green mambas and it's getting close to mating season."

"Is there anything you don't know?"

"When the Cubs will finally win a pennant. Aside from that, the rest can be found in some report or another. You just have to like to read."

"Will you stick around for awhile until they get back? The spooks tell me this shouldn't take more than two weeks." He walked around her and got close to the statue.

Her hand shot out and encircled his wrists before he touched the worn boot. "Ah ah; she's a woman only kinda gal. As for sticking around, I'll be happy to. It's seems I've found something to keep me here after all."

The Defense Secretary looked in the direction toward which Annie had been escorted. "I'll just bet." Philip shook his head and almost felt sorry for Titus. The soldier's salvation would be that the Army didn't deliver Dear John letters in the middle of the jungle. Though he already looked so despondent that perhaps Annie had broken the news to him. "Keep in touch and I'll keep you informed as to their progress."

"Could I speak to Patrick before they deploy, or would that be inappropriate?"

"It depends. Is it personal or business? He really needs to have his head in the game if he wants to carry it back out of the bush on his shoulders." He pressed his hands together as if in prayer and tilted his head a little to the side. "I'm not saying anything against you, Bebo, but I gather that the general isn't aware that his little girl has had a sudden change of heart. Could you wait until he gets back to enlighten him?"

"I have some gifts for him and his men that might prove useful, especially if silence is important on their mission."

The Cobras assembled in the room in a wide circle around Bebo. Once the meeting was over they would return to the base for their packs and weapons. Air transport was already being fueled.

"We're not done but I thought these might come in handy if you run into any bad guys and you want to conserve ammo." She handed Patrick a green leather sheath that would strap to his leg. From inside she pulled the modern version of the Amazon chobos so she could review their features with him and his unit. "The handles are specially treated so they won't slip in any weather and the ends are lightly weighted for maximum damage. Don't let their total weight fool you." She handed them over and his eyebrows went up.

"They don't weigh anything," he said as he took hold of them.

"They're a light weight metal so they won't add to the burden you'll already have to carry, but these are designed to inflict maximum damage with even a light hearted hit." Bear removed hers from the dark blue sheath that was part of her uniform. She swung and stopped just before Patrick's throat with one hand and his heart with the other.

"If you're close enough to your opponent swing the weapon just like Bear is demonstrating. The

blow to the throat will make screaming impossible, and the one to the chest will drive the ribs into the heart. Death is almost instantaneous if done correctly," explained Bebo. "If not, it doesn't take long for them to drown in their own blood from the throat wound." She motioned for her guards to hand out the gifts. "We'll be waiting for you to get back. I'm confident you'll be successful, considering you're the best soldiers the United States has on the payroll, but we wish you all the best of luck for a quick and safe return."

"Thank you, Bebo." Patrick shook her hand before calling his men to attention. In a show of respect they saluted their teachers before leaving.

Arthur waited until the room had cleared before saying anything. He was sure this would be his last mission in the field since he had long been considering retirement. The only reason he'd postponed taking a desk job was when he'd heard who'd be doing their training.

Bebo put her hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Keep your head down and your eyes open, you hear me? I want you around for a long time to come."

"Don't worry, sprout, I got the spirits of hundreds of warriors looking out for me, or so my mama used to tell me. Tell your parents hi for me and I'll see you in a couple of weeks, I promise." He pulled her into a hug and didn't let go right away. "I love you, Bebo."

"I love you too, dad. Please be careful." Bebo kissed his forehead before releasing him.

She walked him to Larissa's statue before he left. Arthur put his hand on the boot first. "The acts of the one," he said.

"For the good of the many." Bebo finished for him covering his hand with hers. "May the goddess speed your return."

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"Why is my father leaving?" demanded Annie when she was allowed back in.

"I'm sorry, Annie. Hopefully there'll come a time when there'll be no secrets between us, but at this point in time, I can't tell you. Philip didn't go into enough detail anyway for me to give you a proper answer."

"Please just tell me he isn't going into the field?" She stood with her hands on her hips then just as quickly moved them as if trying to hold herself. "He isn't in any condition to do that."

Bebo moved closer and held Annie against her chest. "Steph, could you bring the car around? Max, if you would please call Philip. Let him know we'll be making a trip out to the base this evening." Two fingers under Annie's jaw encouraged her to look up. "I can't tell you where's he's going and I don't understand why you think he shouldn't go, but I can take you to see him before he leaves."

"You don't know the Army, Bebo, they won't let us near him."

"Warriors have to be reminded from time to time what it is they're fighting for. If you want to see him, I'll get you there."

Reggie and Doris alternated from looking out the window of the limo to the couple sitting in the seat facing them. Annie was sitting plastered to Bebo's side with a death grip on her hand. Although her family knew Annie was upset, they could sense something else had changed. She looked at peace sitting next the tall imposing woman.

"Is this why you weren't interested?" Reggie asked of Bebo in a tone that conveyed a bit of hurt and anger. "Or why you never called me back?"

"Regina, apologize right now," said Doris.

"It's all right, Mrs. Paddio, I owe her an explanation." Bebo gave Reggie her full attention and searched for the right words. "There's nothing I can say that'll make you not be angry with me, but I want you to know it had nothing to do with you. You're a bright and beautiful woman, Reggie, but we're destined only to be friends. I'm sorry and I'll understand if you don't even want that, but for the sake of the future I hope we can - be friends I mean," rambled Bebo.

The youngest of the Paddio sisters held her ire for a moment more, then realized the new developments meant no more Titus. It also meant Annie would truly be happy if she just allowed herself to be. "Now her," she pointed a finger at Bebo, "I wouldn't mind watching drinking juice out of the carton in the morning light." With their mother in the car there was no way she was going to elaborate any further.

"Drinking out of the carton? Wouldn't that be rude?" asked Bebo.

The two sisters dissolved into giggles leaving the two other passengers at a loss. "Don't worry about it, highness. Once you've been around her more, you'll start to understand Reg's idea of humor." Annie wiped her eyes with her free hand praying Bebo would forget the conversation all together.

From her seat, Doris watched the interaction between her children and the handsome royal. There was something about Bebo that made her want to smile and spend hours talking to her. It was as if the young woman called to something in her that she'd tried to bury and forget. With each passing minute in her company she could see why her daughters were powerless to fight the pull of Bebo's charm.

"Are you enjoying your time away from Amazonia, highness?"

"Immensely, Mrs. Paddio. Your capital is one of my favorite places to visit. You are a young nation compared to many, but you value many of the same things we do."

"I see Queen Audrey and Boden have done a wonderful job with you."



The mention of her mothers so causally was reason to investigate further in Bebo's mind but they had arrived at their destination. To avoid missing the general, the car proceeded to the hangar where the last of the equipment was being loaded onto a transport plane.

"Wait here and I'll go get him," said Bebo.

When Bebo found him Patrick was just short of being rude and handing her the gift she'd given them just hours before back. He wasn't thrilled with her being there and he really wasn't thrilled she'd brought his family along, but Patrick climbed into the back of the car with his wife and daughters. After Titus refused to pack Bebo's gift, the old soldier asked why and the captain had spoken freely. What Annie had done was both an embarrassment and a disappointment to him, but he thought this might be a good time to set things back on course before it was too late.

"So your being here with her means he was telling me the truth, wasn't he?" Annie didn't lower her head to avoid her father's glare. It was so like him, not a greeting or any kind of acknowledgement that he was happy to see any of them.

"I didn't come here to fight with you, daddy, but if you're talking about Titus, then yes, he was telling you the truth. I gave him his ring back."

"Think about this before it's too late, girl, and he isn't willing to forgive you. I talked to him and he's willing to forget and act like the last couple of weeks never happened. You can go on with your plans if you apologize."

The reality of how her life had gotten so out of her control smacked Annie across the face with his words just as effectively as if he'd raised his hand to her. She had never wanted to disappoint her father so she'd been what he considered a good soldier and done what she thought would make him proud of her. She wondered now when she had last taken inventory of what made her truly happy aside from her job?

"I think you love Titus more than I do, and have since the day he first showed an interest in me. Do you want me to live out a lie just so you can be happy? The reason you like him so much is because Titus is just like you. The problem is though, I'm not mom." It hurt her to admit her feelings in front to her mother, but she knew she couldn't survive a life of one-sided sacrifice the way Doris had done.

"Don't you dare belittle your mother like that, young lady," Patrick warned. "She at least realized what was important and what was good for her. I don't have time for this now, but we'll settle this when I get home. Better yet, I fully expect you to settle it before I get back. No daughter of mine is going to drag my name through the dirt on a whim of fancy. There's no way in hell I'll ever accept this, Annie. You remember that while I'm gone. If you're smart, you'll tell that woman to get lost." He fell back to guilt when anger didn't work.

Reggie started to defend her sister but Annie shook her head to stop her. This was her battle to fight. "Then you'll never accept it because I'm going to do everything in my power to make Bebo

want me in her life. She makes me feel alive. What I want matters to her. I never got that from you or Titus, and this is my decision to make, daddy, not yours."

The gauntlet was thrown and both father and daughter knew the stakes. "So be it, Annie. There isn't room or a place for me in your life anymore. I hope she's enough because she comes at the cost of your family." He opened the door and stepped out not bothering to ask Doris or Reggie if they agreed with him. As he walked past her, he ignored Bebo as he headed straight for the transport.

On the ride back to the city the only sound in the car was Annie's crying as Bebo held her. She hadn't heard what transpired in the car when the family had met, but from the grim faces of all the Paddio women, the Amazon had a good idea.

They stopped to drop Doris off first and Bebo walked her to the door leaving Reggie to comfort her sister. The older blonde put her hand on Bebo's forearm before she went inside wanting to say something before they parted. "Promise me you'll take care of her so her choice won't be in vain. My husband is a proud man, and this might take some time to resolve, but please don't think that I agree with what he told her tonight. I'm sure you want to get back to Annie but I'd like to talk to you when you have the time. There are some things about both my girls you should know, and I think with you beside me I can finally admit the truth. For now, could you keep this between the two of us?"

"You have my word, Mrs. Paddio, on everything you want. Whenever you'd like to talk to me you just call me and I'll meet you wherever you'd like."

"That's good enough for me."

The car's next stop was the brownstone in Arlington. Annie seemed numb as Bebo guided her and Reggie inside. The younger of the two blondes had been silent ever since they'd left the base. "Are you all right?" Her question got only a weak shake of Annie's head. "Annie, is this too hard? It isn't too late to go back to where you feel safe."

"No!" She flung herself at Bebo and buried her face in the blue jacket. "This is where I feel safe and he can't take that away from me. Please don't go. I want you to stay and hold me."

"Calm down, I'm not going anywhere if you don't want me to, but I do want to go slowly with you, Annie. If we decide to be together it'll be because we want the same things."

There was a part of her brain that was relieved because she wouldn't have the first clue as to how to go about being intimate with Bebo, but the other part was disappointed the princess didn't want her like that. Annie spoke just above a whisper as if she were too tired to put forth any more effort. "I'm just asking you to hold me. Tomorrow we'll talk about the rest."

The answer sounded too bland for something else not to be wrong so Bebo pushed a little. "Did I say something wrong? I know this isn't the best of nights, and I certainly don't want to add to your burdens."

"I just thought you'd want me is all."

"Wait, you think I don't want you?" Bebo cupped the blonde's face and kissed the tip of her nose. "Annie, nothing could be further from the truth, but your father is leaving for a mission and you obviously had words. Besides that, this is all new to you. I don't want you to feel pressured in any way. What I mean by waiting is I want you to feel comfortable with every step we take. If we do, we'll find ourselves sixty years down the road as sure of ourselves as we are now."

"You say the nicest things, I swear." She took the Amazon by the hand and pulled her up the stairs to her room. If it had been some romance novel, Annie would have come out of the bathroom in some sexy silk number, but she was too tired to think about it and chose flannel instead. Her new bedmate had stripped off her jacket, shoes and socks, but kept on her pants and shirt. "You can take off the pants if you want."

"I'm comfortable don't worry. Come here," offered Bebo as she sat on the bed. "Do you feel up to telling me what happened tonight?"

"I want you to know, but can it wait until morning? This day feels like it's lasted a week."

They settled down and Annie shifted over until her head was resting on Bebo's shoulder. Under her ear she could hear the steady slow heartbeat. Annie relaxed with the equally slow movement of Bebo's chest with each breath she took. Annie knew she wasn't asleep from the hand moving methodically up and down her back and as much as she wanted to stay awake to enjoy it, she drifted off with the princess watching over her. In her dreams she found herself in a deep green forest surrounded by silence. She thought she was alone until someone pressed up behind her and helped her into the high branches. From there she could see the blue green waters and a pristine beach in the distance. Annie didn't know where it was but it felt like home to her.

In the morning she opened her eyes and found they were in the same position they had gone to sleep in. The hand had stopped and come to rest on her lower back but the heartbeat and breathing were just as slow as she remembered from the night before. On Bebo's stomach their hands had come together in a human knot and she wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and go back to sleep.

"How are you doing this morning?" The voice was like a low bur under her ear and it made Annie smile.

"I feel like I'd go another round with my father if it meant waking up like this every morning. Thank you for staying with me."

Bebo kissed her forehead and then brought the small hand up to her lips for the same treatment. "You can take all the time you need, but you do realize you don't have to fight alone? Whatever your father's problem is with this, it's our problem not just yours."

"You know what I want?" The dark head shook when Annie lifted herself up a little so she could

claim a good morning kiss. "I want to not talk about my father until he gets home. Then I want you to kiss me some more to make up for all the time we lost last night. After that I'm going to make us breakfast. Perhaps you're being here will finally get Reggie to smile before nine in the morning."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" The fact that Annie was avoiding the huge elephant in the room didn't make it go away.

"My father is career military, honey." For once in a relationship the endearment slipped from Annie's lips without thought. "When his wife gave him two girls, he figured he would continue the family tradition through marriage since he thinks the Army is no place for a woman." She put her hand up. "I know it's not very progressive, but that's his mentality. It's the way he was raised and he's not going to change now, not for Reggie or me and certainly not for you. I was well on the way to giving him what he wanted just because he wanted it, and I didn't realize it until you showed up. In a very short time you've turned my world upside down but, instead of upsetting me, I feel invigorated. I told him that last night and he didn't like it. I guess I should have waited until he got back since his head really needs to be in the game so to speak, but I wanted him to hear it from me. Only thing is, Titus beat me to it and told him he was willing to be big about it and take me back."

"He'll get that by walking over my dead body."

"Ooh, somehow possessive coming from you is sexy as hell. With Titus it was just annoying. In the end though, the decision is mine and I chose you. My father coming back or never speaking to me again won't change that. Only you can change that." She finished by leaning down and kissing Bebo again. "So, my fairy princess, do you want to change that? This is your last chance before my heart runs away with yours never to be found again."

"I've been waiting for you to say that from the first day I saw you in that museum flying on your imagination. There were a million thoughts that ran through my head ending with the fact that my mother is going to love you."

Annie ran her finger along Bebo's eyebrow and thought how her life would change if this relationship really took root. She wasn't lying next to some Army grunt who would be transferred a couple of times then retire to some small house in Virginia. The woman holding her would someday rule a nation and have all the responsibilities that came with that.

"I thought we were taking this slow."

As if reading Annie's mind, Bebo looked up at her before pulling her down so she could rest her head back on her shoulder. "To be with me, I mean really be with me comes with a price, Annie, I'm not going to lie to you and say otherwise. If you can't see yourself leaving here and building a life away from what you've known, this won't work. I don't mean to be blunt, but sometimes I have to put the welfare of everyone else I'll one day be responsible for above my own happiness. My greatest dream is that I won't have to and I can find someone to share my life with. My mothers found they could balance responsibility with deep and everlasting love."

"Do you think you could feel that way about me?"

"If you give me the opportunity, you'll never doubt how I feel about you." Bebo rolled them over so that she covered Annie's body and started to place kisses on her face. They were soft and she didn't linger too long in any one place. When the tall woman was done, Annie's hands had wandered to every spot on Bebo's back she could reach. Her only thought, despite the very serious talk that had taken place, was how the journey would feel if Bebo weren't wearing a shirt.

"I think I'm going to absolutely love being at the center of your attention, highness. For the rest we have plenty of time before you have to go back. Please tell me I'm right about that part and you're not catching a plane this afternoon or something?"

"I'm all yours until the Cobras get back from their little play date."

"You might just regret having said that."

Annie rolled out of bed and headed into the bathroom to take care of her morning rituals with two blue eyes pinned to her every move. The flannel nightgown looked adorable on her and although her blonde hair was scattered on her head like she'd been caught in a strong wind, Bebo thought it was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

"I doubt that very seriously, Lady Paddio."

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Bebo laughed at how quickly they had become almost domestic. From that first morning together they had sat down to a breakfast meal Annie had prepared then they had taken the car to the museum to drop the blonde off for work. Annie had dressed casually since they were going to spend the day packing all of Amazonia's artifacts for shipment to the New Orleans Museum of Art for its second stop before returning home.

"Will you call me later?" Annie asked as she saw the museum come into sight.

"I was actually planning on coming in with you. I promised Mr. Baxter a cup of coffee awhile back and haven't been able to come before now. If you want I can arrange it for some other time. I wouldn't want to intrude on your domain while you're working."

The driver had brought Bebo a change of clothes when she'd arrived and Annie was enjoying the feel of the cashmere sweater under her cheek as they rode. "Only if you promise to make sweet eyes at me every chance you get," she teased.

When the door opened, Annie felt bold and confident as she walked to the employee entrance holding Bebo's hand. The relationship was in its infancy but she didn't want to let go of her strong partner before she had to. Her two co-workers stood in the employee lounge having coffee when they entered and it was like watching a tennis match as their eyes went from their faces to the linked hands.

"Highness, I don't think you've had the opportunity to meet Terry and Eris." She walked closer to the two gawking women and let go of Bebo's hand so she could introduce them. "This is Terry Olsen and Eris Omni," she pointed to the two. "Guys, this is Princess Bebo of Leon on the island of Amazonia."

"Pleasure," purred Bebo causing all three of them to shiver as if they had gotten caught in a draft. "You girls take care of Annie for me and I'll see you in just a bit."

"Oh - My - God!" said Terry and Eris together when Bebo left to follow the directions Annie had given her on how to find Carl Baxter.

"Details," demanded Terry. "You look like a woman who has found total satisfaction."

Stan found them thirty minutes later sitting close together and hanging on Annie's every word. "You three coming or should I just tell them you're too busy gossiping?"

"Stan, our little one has had great developments in her life, that should always take precedence over work don't you think? Lead on, good man," said Eris.

The wing that had housed the Amazonian exhibit had been shut down for the week so they could bring back some of the art warehoused for the month. All of the workers had been diligent in packing most of the pieces in the crates used to transport them. They had stopped for a break and that's how Bebo found them when she walked in.

"Stan, how are you?"

"I'm working hard, Bebo, but that's what I get paid to do. You decided to come out of the shadows huh? What you finally found a line that worked on the girl?"

A light blush colored Bebo's cheeks but she laughed at his joke. "I was just studying her technique of history giving, Stanley, there's no hidden motive in my being here." Annie moved closer, smiling at the open look on Stan's face.

"And the reason your eyes were glued the young woman's behind the whole time?"

"Well you got me there, buddy, but can you blame me?"

Bebo smiled at her as Annie got closer and in that one instant the blonde fell in love like an arrow had pierced her heart and Bebo claimed it. Here before her was a person who could isolate herself from the people who some considered the forgotten or the unimportant, but the one person Bebo seemed most familiar with in the museum was the person who by station, was the lowest man on the preverbal totem pole. Annie understood now the power of someone like Bebo and those who came before her. This was someone you would follow into battle even though you thought it was a losing cause.

"Blame you for what?" asked Annie as she pressed herself to Bebo and reached up and kissed her

chin.

"For wanting to take you out to lunch. All of you as a matter of fact since I already checked with the boss." Bebo couldn't resist and lowered her head for a quick kiss. "I missed you."

Stan looked on and his heart felt good. This was how he imagined Annie being treated by the person she chose to spend her life with. He just hoped his old friend figured out soon how in love Bebo was with her. In all her covert visits to the museum when Annie was working, he could see it in the way the blue eyes drank her in.

They shared lunch that day and every day after that for the rest of the week. On the weekend the new couple spent time at the Embassy so Annie could see the house. Bebo had spent time on the phone with her parents and tried her best to describe the young woman she was now seeing on a daily basis. She didn't want to get ahead of herself, but it was hard not to tell them how she felt about Annie.

Their next week went fairly like the first only there was more sexual tension between them as their nightly goodnight kissing sessions stretched into something more along the lines of trying to drive each other insane. More than once each of them stopped short of expressing their true feelings, thinking it was too soon in the relationship to be taken seriously.

On Friday, Bebo sat having coffee and reading the paper in the girls' home when two arms snaked around her neck from behind. "Reggie, I've told you a million times already I won't strip naked for you and drink milk out of the carton. If I do I think Annie will throw us both out of here."

"Very funny," said Annie right before she bit into Bebo's neck. "You got dressed and left before I got out of the shower," she said in an accusatory tone.

"Sweetheart, I can't take another morning of your playing with my libido while only wearing a towel, so cut me some slack, I'm trying to be good." The museum was back to normal and so was Annie's wardrobe. She slid into Bebo's lap wearing her skirt and silk blouse not bothering with the jacket until it was time to go. "Want to go out on a date with me tonight?"

"I'll go anywhere with you, but what do you have in mind? If you're thinking something dressy I'll bring something and change at your place if you don't mind."

"The Mikado is opening tonight at the Ford Theater and I thought you might like to go. I should warn you though, it might also be a good time for the paparazzi to get hold of you."

"Considering some of the women you've been seen with in the past, I'm sure they'll think I'm your assistant or something. Besides, between you and the traveling guards you travel with I'm sure we'll be fine. I'd love to go." Annie wasn't a gossip rag type of reader but she remembered seeing Bebo over the past couple of years while she was waiting to check out.

The princess kissed her and put her palm against Annie's cheek. "Are you kidding? They'll take a

good look at this face and hearts will break around the world because they didn't find you first."

As they left the theater that night a transmission came over the wire in Secretary Moines' office. It was the last act of the Cobra's in the field and the distress signal only gave a last location and nothing more. Up to then they had sent back coded messages that they had acquired their target and were moving in through the bush to take possession. If caught and discovered to be a highly trained special ops unit in Conger, it would be a political embarrassment to the Administration. He had two choices on how to proceed, but his gut told him to go with the more farfetched of the two. All he had to do now was convince Bebo to go along with it.

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Annie's laughter could be heard throughout the first floor of the embassy when they made it through the door at the end of the night. The play had been good and the dinner afterward even better. It was a new experience for her to be courted as Bebo had put it to her early on. On every date they went on she could tell the princess had made all the arrangements herself and had put a tremendous amount of thought into how they would spend their time, wanting more than anything for Annie to be pleased.

"I'm telling you it's true," said Bebo as she took Annie's coat. "Max hit my arm as I released my first arrow and it came about two inches from piercing Bear's leg. My mom thought I had inherited her height and looks, but my mother's sense of coordination."

"Queen Audrey isn't coordinated?"

"When it comes to anything but wielding any type of weapon. Mama loves telling people she's a lover not a fighter. Of course if you have a problem with that, you can take it up with the walking attitude problem most often found pressed up against her back."

"That's good to know. Then they won't be too disappointed when you show up with me and I'm not some black belt in anything."

Bebo turned her around and put her hands on the shorter woman's hips. "Soon, my little storyteller, I'll take you home and they are going to love you. I promise."

"Can I tell you something without and not have you think I'm a total nutcase?"

The princess laughed at the innocent question, loving how Annie had a way of putting things. "You can tell or ask me anything and I will never think that of you."

Her mouth opened and Annie was about to utter the words I love you, when the door to the study opened and Philip walked out. "I hope I'm not interrupting but I really need to talk to you, highness. We have a priority situation that I need your input on."

"Philip, you remember Miss Paddio," said Bebo, clearly not happy with the intrusion.



"Of course. I'm sorry for interrupting. Miss Paddio, it's nice to see you again. Would you mind terribly if I borrowed the princess for a little while?"

Having grown up in a military family, Annie was keenly aware of what ramifications a late night visit from someone as high up in the government as Philip Moines could be. "Is there anyway I can convince you to let me stay?"

"I'm sorry, miss, but what I have to say is of a highly classified nature and you don't have the proper clearance. It won't take long."

"Annie, if you want go on up and get comfortable. I'll join you as soon as I can."

The good mood from all of Bebo's funny stories evaporated and Annie was getting angry. "I'm not a child, Bebo, and I don't like being sent to my room as if I were."

"My apologies, you may go wherever in the house you please."

The hurt was as evident in Bebo's voice as it was in her eyes. "No, I'm sorry. I hate these kinds of meetings. They never bring anything remotely resembling good news and it's not fair to take that out on you."

"If I could, you know I'd let you stay. The day will come when no one will be able to send you away if you don't want to go, that's my promise."

A feeling of foreboding came over Annie as the door closed behind Bebo. She was sure that whatever Philip was there to say would bring them nothing but pain. Steph and Max took up positions by the study door, as Bear and Beth escorted her to Bebo's room.

"This couldn't wait till morning?" asked Bebo, pouring them both a drink from the bar.

"By morning I need to have an answer in case I have to deploy other options. I won't play games here, Bebo. We got a transmission from the Cobras earlier this evening. It was a distress signal. After trying to raise them since the initial call, we've come to believe the SOS was real. I have a location and that's all. There's no way to know if they're still alive or what exactly happened."

"And you are here because?"

He took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. It had been a long night already and it was nowhere near being over. His first call had been to his boss, and if the team had indeed been captured they would be written off as if they had never existed. It was never said out loud, and it sounded harsh but people like Patrick and his team knew the risks involved when they were in places the government couldn't acknowledge.

"I want you to take your people in and find them. When I told you about the mission that night, I didn't have clearance to tell you who they were going in to get, but now I have no choice. Their target was Michael York." He didn't say anything else wanting to see just how good her

intelligence was.

"The same Dr. York who has supposedly found a cure for the Ebola virus?"

Philip nodded. "The same."

"With the antidote, the virus can be used as it was first intended."

The man in charge of the most powerful force on the planet sighed and leaned forward. "Yes it can. Ebola was designed as a chemical weapon to destroy soft targets without touching landscape."

Bebo let out a humorless laugh and stood up to refill their glasses. "Gods, Philip, just tell the truth. It was made to kill people, period, the end, unless you add that it kills people in the most painful and inhuman ways conceivable in the darkest of human minds. What in Hades was York doing in Conger in the first place?" She turned and looked stricken. "Don't tell me he was looking for human guinea pigs? Because if he was, he can rot there along with the Cobras."

"He was there looking for human subjects, but not for what you think. The man is not Josef Mengela after all. The rebels released the virus in the mountain country to wipe out the population without having to actually hunt them down. York was working at a remote jungle hospice testing his antidote. We wanted to get to him before the butchers who are now in charge of the government figured out who they had in their grasp. With both parts of the equation they have the means to destroy thousands of lives, not to mention selling it to every other idiot with an agenda to kill people."

The glass of scotch was like a lifeline when she handed it back to him. "Why us? You and I both know you have dozens of other units like Patrick's at your disposal."

"Tell me that they are better equipped to move in that jungle than you are and I'll send them. Our guys are the best in the world, Bebo, and I have every faith in them but I'm asking you and I know you have every right to refuse. You know as well as I do how strapped we are at the moment around the world. To pull the type of unit I need to go in there and get the job done would take more time than Patrick and his guys have. If you do turn me down there'll be no hard feelings, but I figured with who was involved here, you'd want to go."

The laugh returned. She was smart enough to know when she was being played. "What? Annie's father is who we're talking about here, so I'm supposed to jump on my charging steed and ride to the rescue? Make the little woman proud of me?"

"Something like that."

"I need at least ten hours to get the equipment we'll need. The transportation to get there will be up to you, and just so we're clear, if you aren't there when I'm ready to leave I will personally walk back here and beat the shit out of you myself."

"Done."

"Now get out of here so the young lady upstairs can scream at me, because I have a gut feeling she isn't going to take this at all well."

She took the steps like she had weights attached to her feet. This was not how she wanted to start their life together but she had no choice. From the moment Philip had mentioned Patrick was missing she knew she'd go and get him out if she could. The reason was simple. As much as Reggie and Annie complained about his attitude, they loved him and wouldn't want the last words between them to be ones of anger. Bebo also knew that she wouldn't be able to live with herself knowing she could have helped him and chose not to.

"You're leaving aren't you?" asked Annie when she walked in and leaned against the closed door.

The blonde had changed and there was no flannel in sight tonight. The pale green short nightgown hugged her curves in all the right places. Soldiers and warriors did need to be reminded of why they fought sometimes, and here standing in her room was Bebo's reason, not just for fighting, but for everything.

"Will you think it cowardly of me to ask for an indulgence before we have this particular conversation?"

"It depends," said Annie taking a seat on the bed.

"On what?"

"What the indulgence is," she answered with her hands up in the air, as if Bebo should have known the obvious.

"I want to have another conversation with you instead. One that Philip's timing managed to steal from me." Bebo moved further into the room until she was standing before Annie. For the first time in her life she dropped to her knees for someone other than her mothers. "It doesn't though make it any less important or heartfelt."

"Baby, you can tell me anything just like you said of me." She went to pull off Bebo's coat but the princess stopped her.

"Not yet, I'll take it off in a minute, but not yet." With the tenderness she always showed Annie, Bebo took her hands in her own and looked at the difference in their sizes. "The first Amazons lived in the forests of Greece. Through the years, and eventually the centuries, they blended some Greek traditions with their own and kept them even after their first home had accepted some European customs. So, in the beginning when someone wanted to state their intentions it was not done with the giving of a ring."

"It was done with the giving of a betrothal bracelet," finished Annie. If this talk led to where she thought, there was no way she was letting Bebo go anywhere.

"With the giving of a betrothal bracelet," Bebo repeated, stopping to pinch the tip of Annie's nose in jest. "That's what I get for wanting to marry a historian." It slipped out before she could take it back so she plowed on. "Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself here."

"So you didn't mean it?"

"What I mean is, there was plenty to say before that part so just be patient with me. A little over a month ago I came here not to collide with fate, but to do something my mother had asked of me, but collide with fate I did. I found mine in a place of art and history, and I found that the most fitting place since I think she is as beautiful as any woman ever painted and I want to sit years from now and remember the history we have made together. There was only one problem." Bebo looked to their hands again and in her mind's eye she could still see Titus' ring on Annie's finger.

"She belonged to someone else."

"Who's telling this story, Lady Paddio?" The princess joked. "Until two weeks ago she belonged to someone else but the goddess smiled on this humble servant and her heart finally found itself in a place to see how much I loved her. And I do. I love you, Annie, with everything I am. That sounds so trite I know, but..."

Annie pressed her fingers over Bebo's mouth and shook her head with tears in her eyes. "No, it doesn't. To me it sounds like the answer to every prayer I've said since I fell in love with you. I just thought two weeks was too short a time to admit that to you."

"It's custom for me to speak to your parents about my intentions for our future, but right at this moment that isn't possible so I wanted to share them with you first." From her jacket pocket she pulled a bracelet made of gold that was a unique design of some of the things that held meaning only to them. A jeweler, one of the house staff was familiar with, had put a rush job on it and gotten it done in a couple of days.

Near the latch was a small likeness of Larissa to commemorate how they first met. Next was the White House, followed by the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, at the center was Bebo's crest. It was a medallion sectioned into four equal parts. In one corner were the trees of Argase, the mountains of Curasso, the fields of Selenta and the beaches of Leon. Overlapping all of the scenes was Artemis with her bow in hand. On the other side was a scroll for Annie's work, a sword that stood for Bebo's promise of protection followed by the palace in Leon. That symbolism was for the home they would build together if Annie accepted.

"Annie, I want to share and build a life with you, and this bracelet is the first step of my everlasting commitment to you. This is more than a piece of jewelry," she held it up so Annie could see part of the makeup. "There is and never will be another like it. For every Amazon who finds their life partner, they must make a ring of love that defines who they are together. On one half you will find our beginning," Bebo laid it flat in her hand and showed her the American landmarks. "On the other who we will be together."

"It's beautiful." Annie was having a hard time seeing through the tears so she picked it up out of Bebo's hand and held it closer.

"Not as beautiful as the girl I hope will wear it. Annie, will you join with me?" The dark head lowered in a sign of humbleness.

"Yes." She put the bracelet aside and ran her fingers through Bebo's hair to get her to look up. "I would be honored to be your wife."

"It's me who's honored, love." For a long moment those were the last words they exchanged as their lips came together and they kissed to seal the vow. As happy as she was, Bebo felt she had to tell Annie everything. "This won't be official until I speak to your parents but I think you have a right to know what happened tonight when you came up here."

In as straightforward terms as she could, Bebo told Annie what Philip had said and what she'd committed to doing about it. When she was finished Annie stood up and paced around the room for a few minutes before saying anything. Bebo could tell she was angry so she waited to see exactly what she was angry about.

"He's missing?" The man she had known growing up had been like a superhero. He left on missions and always came back. There wasn't a single time she remembered having to sweat out a mission because of news like this.

"Your father and all of his unit, yes."

"And they want you to go in there and get him out?"

"It's a matter of personnel and time, Annie, that's why I said yes. Tell me you would look at me the same if I refused to go when I know in my heart I could save him?"

"That isn't fair."

Bebo stood up and intercepted her as she went for another round of pacing. "Life is sometimes the most unfair game in town, my love, but there's one more thing I have to tell you."

"There's more?" she dropped back on the bed and suddenly felt bone tired. "What?"

"There are only a few people alive today that know this, but for as long as your country has been in existence, your government has had a pact with Amazonia." Bebo sat next to her and held her hand for the courage to finish. "Not all the children born to us are girls, Annie, but the way of the Amazons is the way of women."

"If we have children, I'd have to give up our sons?"

"Science is a wonderful thing, so if you didn't want to, we'd have no sons, only daughters. But

when Queen Bekka and her wife Laine ruled the island that option was not available to them. To them three children were born. My mother is the oldest, and because of that, she inherited the throne. Next though, came a son followed by another daughter, the Princess Sean."

"What happened to the boy?"

"Until he was twelve, he resided with his family then it was time to go off to school. When a male is born to one of our household, he is given the chance to follow whatever path he will find the most fulfilling. For those who wish to follow in the steps of our ancestors and become a warrior he is free to come here and serve in the US military where, because of our intensive training starting at an early age, they are given special assignments."

"Why are you wasting time telling me all this? When are you leaving?"

"Please, Annie, I wouldn't spend a minute talking to you when I could be holding you if it wasn't important."

"I'm sorry," she leaned over and tried to bury herself in Bebo's arms.

"It's okay and I don't mean to be longwinded but I'm almost finished. My grandmothers' son chose such a life of service. He came back to his family twenty five years ago to perform another service when his sister asked it of him."

"Which sister?"

"Audrey, Queen of the Amazons. She was joined and ready to start a family but she chose to carry an egg retrieved from Boden her Consort and fertilized by her brother. That little science project turned out to be me."

"Princess Bebo of Leon, daughter of Audrey and Boden, but also daughter of Arthur Leon. God, why didn't I put it together before now? That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, Captain Leon is my biological father and he's been a part of my life since I can remember. I can't leave him to die out there anymore than I could your father, so please don't ask me to." Bebo kissed the top of Annie's head and felt better for being able to share that with her. "Philip tried to guilt me into going because of your father. He doesn't know the rest."

"Thank you, honey, for sharing it with me. I don't want you to go for selfish reasons but I understand why you have to." She moved closer until she was sitting in the taller woman's lap. "Promise me you'll come back to me."

"Annie, part of my asking you to join with me tonight is so you'll have a place in my world no matter what happens to me. But please don't take that to mean I asked only for that reason. I love you and I couldn't go another minute without telling you."

The answer made her break out in sobs and Annie grabbed two fistfuls of hair. "No dammit, I

want you to promise me you'll come back to me. I don't give a damn about having a place to go if you die. If you're not there I won't ever feel that I'll fit in anywhere."

It was a risk since she didn't want to lie or give false hope, but Bebo looked her in the eye and said the words with as much conviction as she could. "I promise you I'll come back for you, love."

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Three more hours of the remaining ten went by with Bebo meeting with her people and asking them to join her. Since this wasn't an official mission for the crown, she couldn't demand they follow her into the jungles of Conger Africa. That part had only taken ten minutes of explanation with Annie sitting in the back of the room dressed in her jeans and one of Bebo's sweaters. The rest of the time the blonde had watched them pull out and pack the equipment and weapons they'd be bringing with them. She was a little concerned by the amount of what she considered to be rudimentary weapons, though she had never seen a more high tech or beautiful bow than the one Bebo placed on the top of her pack.

She stayed in the room but out of sight of the video monitor when Bebo called Amazonia and asked to conference with her parents. As important as the call was, Annie couldn't help but want them to come to the conclusion that she didn't want the princess to go. It was selfish and she didn't want to lose her father, but this was the happiest night of her life, but also the most painful. For a brief moment she thought of calling her own mother and asking if it was this hard to watch her father leave all those times he'd gone off on missions.

"Mama, I'm old enough to accept or reject offers as they are presented to me. Arthur is with them and I'm not going to leave him out there for some asshole to crack his head open like a melon with a machete. I don't mean to be graphic but you've seen the reports just as well as I have. These idiots aren't playing around."

"What about Annie? Doesn't she have a say in all this? Or did you not bother to tell her where you're going?" asked Audrey. She felt helpless being so far away.

"I asked her to join with me tonight and gave her a commitment bracelet. I'm as sorry that you have to find out like this. I'm just as sorry to have to share that kind of happy moment with this madness."

"Bebo, what about her parents?" asked Boden.

"As soon as I catch up with the general, mom, I'll make sure and follow protocol. Until then it's between Annie and I, and I want you to be happy for us." The night already felt like a long nightmare except for the love in Annie's eyes when she'd asked her to marry her, so Bebo didn't appreciate the added stress from her parents.

The flat of Audrey's hand could be seen on the screen as if she were trying to reach across the miles and touch her daughter's face. "Of course we're happy for you, sweetheart. Tell her we

look forward to meeting her and welcoming her into our family."

Bebo looked to the sofa and smiled. Her girl was curled up and smiling back at her with the sweetest expression on her face. "She's looking forward to meeting the two of you as well. Now, as much as I love talking to you, I have a girl to kiss and make promises to before I have to go."

"Remember your promise to me, Bebo," said Audrey with a sense of urgency.

"I remember, mama, and I made one even more important tonight. I promised Annie I'd come back in one piece and ready to get married. I love you both." Bebo held up her hand in the sign of love, which was returned by the two older women on the screen.

"Be safe, sprout," finished Boden around the lump in her throat.

"They love you almost as much as I do," said Annie as she stood and stretched. "And please don't tell your mother I said that." She pointed a finger at Bebo and tried to look menacing. "Are you finished now?"

"I'm all yours for the next five hours." Bebo stood as well and followed the woman leading her back upstairs. With the look on Annie's face not one person had the courage to stop and ask or request anything of Bebo.

The petite blonde stripped off her sweater as soon as she'd locked the door and removed her bra before turning and facing Bebo. "Before you go I want you to know why I want you to come back. I want to show you what you have to come home to." The jeans slid down her legs as Annie spoke in a low sexy voice her nervousness disappearing, replaced by a growing need to put her hands and mouth on Bebo.

With an extra sway in her hips, she moved closer to Bebo and started on the top button of her shirt. It was hard to ignore the hand moving slowly through her hair down to her neck, but Annie managed to get the garment on the floor. The belt was next and she didn't bother pulling it out of the loops, she just unfastened it and moved to the button. With a slow drop to the floor, Annie pulled both the pants and Bebo's underwear down with her. Sitting on her feet she looked up at the most perfect body she had ever laid eyes on.

"You're perfect," she said in awe.

"Hardly," Bebo reached down for her hand and pulled her up until their naked bodies came into contact for the first time. "You, on the other hand, are true perfection."

Before Bebo could take control of the situation, Annie pushed her back on the bed and started a slow crawl up the long body. Whenever she got to an interesting spot, the blonde would stop and drop a little kiss causing Bebo to really groan when she pulled up and straddled her middle. The royal could feel her soon to be lover's passion as it painted her abdomen. Annie was as beautiful as she had imagined as she sat there and moved her hands up to sweep her hair out of the way. Bebo enjoyed that Annie was a woman confident in her nakedness as her hands moved from her



hair down to her chest.

Like offering a gift Annie cupped her hands under each of her breasts and looked into the deep blue eyes. "I want you to make love to me, honey." Annie then lowered her body until their breasts were pressed together. "I want you to teach me how to please you." She hoped Bebo didn't mind how soaked she was or that she was using the flat stomach to try and find some relief.

Bebo's hands flattened on Annie's back and moved down to her butt when Annie kissed her, coaxing the taller woman's tongue into her mouth. As she went, Bebo had to remember that Annie had never done this before, but the rocking hips were eating into her calm reserve and she was fighting the urge to flip them over and ravish her smaller partner. "I don't have to teach you anything, love, you please me just by being here."

There was a fire burning in Annie's groin and she wondered if Bebo was as excited. It was true she had never been with a woman but there were certain things she had wanted to experience and thought she would try them on Bebo. She moved her face down until she was eye level with a dark and puckered nipple. A little hesitant, Annie let her tongue drag across the tip, liking the sound she produced deep in Bebo's chest. She realized the power she had over the tall and strong woman laying beneath her and Annie was enthralled as she continued her exploration. Her experiences in the arena of intimate matters had been to let Titus take control of what they did.

The hands that had been massaging her back moved to the blonde head as if to keep her in place but Annie wanted to see more of what made Bebo feel good. Pulling up a little, she was able to see the contours of Bebo's body as she kept going down until she was nestled between her legs. Any nervousness disappeared as she looked at the glistening dark hair of Bebo's sex. She ran her fingers through it slowly feeling the texture, liking the way the smooth lips felt and the fact that she was responsible for Bebo's current and obvious state of arousal. Oral sex had not been something the petite woman had ever had an interest in or tried until right then. She could smell Bebo's excitement and she wanted to quench it with her mouth.

For the whole time it took Annie to get to her final destination, Bebo had watched with a great amount of curiosity to see what she was going to do. From the first swipe of Annie's tongue any questions were quickly answered and just as quickly Bebo lost control. It was slow and tentative at first as if Annie were tasting a fine wine, but when she found the hard bundle of desire she sucked it in and kept at it until Bebo's hand tightened its grip on the blonde hair.

"Sweet goddess, Annie, please don't stop." If she had to narrow the feeling down to one word, Bebo could only come up with exquisite. Annie alternated the flat of her tongue with sucking the bundle, driving Bebo mad. The tall woman felt like this was the first time she had ever experience real pleasure.

The princess could feel the distinct tingling that turned the inside of her eyelids to a kaleidoscope of color and her heels dug into the mattress. Liking the response, Annie sucked harder and tried to stay in place as Bebo's hips moved with her. The blonde felt like a woman knowledgeable in the arts of pleasure when Bebo's body pulled as taunt as the bow Annie had seen earlier and just

as quickly melted back into the soft sheets.

Knowing her advances weren't going to be turned down, she straddled Bebo again and picked up one of the limp hands. "I want you to make me yours." She brought the long fingers to her lips and kissed every one of them before wrapping her hand around Bebo's wrist so she could control its movement. "I want you to take a little of me with you so you remember what you're coming home to." With a desire she didn't know she possessed, Annie moved the hand to one breast then the other, liking the way Bebo squeezed when Annie stopped. "I want you to know that no matter what, I belong to you and no one else." She put Bebo's hand on her hip and moved its twin to the other side. The blue eyes watched as Annie then took her own hand and ran it through her sex several times making sure that her fingers were coated in the wetness that being so close to Bebo and making love to her had produced.

Annie had her now, Bebo would have given her anything at that point, but there was only one thing she did want. She leaned forward again and painted Bebo's mouth with her scent, offering the wet fingers for her to suck clean when she was finished. When the princess accepted the gift, Annie moved Bebo's hand between her legs. "Take what's yours, lover."

Two long fingers slid in without difficulty and Annie started to rock and claim her pleasure feeling that Bebo wasn't in a hurry. When she started to feel the beginning of the orgasm, the walls around Bebo's fingers clamped down trying to prolong the pleasure as much as possible. Annie kept her eyes open and looking into Bebo's as long as she could.

"Let go for me, baby, I've got you," said Bebo before she lost Annie to the sexual haze she was in and she shut her eyes. When the green orbs closed, Bebo flexed and raised her body just a little so she could suck in one of the pink nipples that had been driving her mad from the time Annie had taken her clothes off. She was sure the hands squeezing her shoulders were going to leave bruises, but she wanted Annie to do whatever felt good.

The spasms began and Bebo curled her fingers upward and sat up until their bodies were touching again and Annie was straddling her lap. To muffle the final scream, Annie moved one of her hands and bit down on Bebo's shoulder. It felt like nothing she had ever experienced or could put into words. Just as the arousal started to fade, Bebo ran her thumb along her throbbing point of desire and it started all over again.

Lying draped over Bebo a short time later, tears mixed with laughter and Annie couldn't stop either one. Because she was laughing as well, Bebo let her get whatever she was going through out of her system before she bothered her with questions.

"Those were the best two orgasms of my life. Of course, I now see they are the only two orgasms of my life, but when I reached the promised land I'm glad it was you who got me there," she told Bebo without lifting her head.

"You'll be visiting this promised land so much in the future, you may get bored with the trip." Bebo swept aside a bit of blonde hair and kissed Annie's forehead.

"Maybe when I'm about a hundred and fifteen and moving my hips like that becomes a problem. Until then I'm expecting plenty of bedroom action once we're married."

"Technically we're not supposed to be getting any bedroom action until after our ceremony, but I won't tell if you don't." Even though Bebo said it in a teasing tone, it was technically true. To lie with Annie before joining with her would be seen by some as a sully of her reputation, but there was no way Bebo would've denied either of them this connection. "I'll really have to marry you now."

Somewhere in the house a couple of doors closed bringing reality back into their haven. Annie's tears started again and this time there was no laughter. "Please come back to me. I'll be lost without you now."

"On my word as a warrior, my love. There will never be another day that you'll feel lost because we'll guide each other out of any darkness." Bebo held her tight and tried to be of comfort. "I love you."

[Continued in Chapter 4](#)

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## ~ Amazonia ~

Book 1  
by Ali Vali

Disclaimers: [See Part 1.](#)

### *The Action*

They watched the sun come up, neither of them wasting time sleeping. Outside it was another gray cold day, and Annie felt it matched the bleakness in her heart. For the longest time after they had finished making love, Annie's hands had moved slowly and relentlessly over Bebo's body as if trying to memorize every inch. Now the blonde laid quietly over her and listened to the beating of Bebo's heart.

The princess' head was also turned towards the window and she could feel the dropping of each of Annie's tears on her chest. Their time had come to an end for now, but she felt confident they

would have years ahead of them. No greater power she thought would be so cruel as to give her a glimpse of this kind of happiness only to tear it away by death.

"Before I came here I asked both my mothers when they knew they had found the person they knew they would spend their life with," started Bebo in a soft voice. She combed through Annie's hair with her fingers trying to make her feel better. "It amazed me how two stories of the same subject could be so different."

"How so, honey?" Annie lifted her head and rested it on Bebo's chest so she could look at her face as she told the story.

"My mother Audrey is a bit more flowery than my mother Boden, so there was a little more detail in her story about the way the sky looked and the birds were chirping, you know, that sort of thing. For the warrior's part, she saw and zeroed in on the girl. When I heard them, I thought mom hadn't bothered to remember the rest and only chose to remember the outcome in typical fighter style. It didn't seem a very good way to commemorate such an important event in your life."

Annie felt her body rise and drop as Bebo took a deep breath. "Some people just have a hard time expressing their feelings, it doesn't mean they feel any less."

"I know that now, and that's why I'm telling you all this. It just made me think of what I'll tell our children when they ask me the same questions years from now."

A smile spread over Annie's face at the thought of a family together, but it also made her start crying again at the thought of never having the chance to fulfill that dream. "What do you think your answer will be?"

"I won't be able to tell them about the room or what was in it aside from Larissa, but like mom, I'll be able to describe everything about you down to the color of lipstick you were wearing. The head priestess of Artemis' temple told me of a vision before I left, which foretold of me finding my path. You are my path, my love, and I pray for a long journey full of love and enjoyment." She pulled Annie up gently so she could kiss her and hold her closer. "Could I interest you in the same trip?"

"You fell in love with me that first day?"

"It was more like I was struck dumb that first day. After our first long talk together, that's when I knew."

Annie lowered her head for another kiss before going back to their talk. "When you get back I'll tell you my side of that story."

"You mean you don't know and have to think about it?" Bebo rolled them over and hovered slightly over her to tease with more than words.

"I know exactly what I'm going to say, goofy, I'm just giving you extra incentive to come back to me." She pulled the solid body down until she was bearing most of Bebo's weight. "It's time isn't it?"

"We have a few minutes." Bebo pushed up a little and ran her hand down the side of Annie's body. "Would it be too much to ask to let me love you again?"

Like she had before, Annie took hold of Bebo's hand and moved it until it came to rest between her legs. "I told you, I belong to you. That means you can do with me as you please."

"No, Annie, we belong to each other and I'd never take your feelings for granted. I desire you just as much as I love you, but I'd never force you to do something you aren't in the mood for."

She moved her hips upward until her center came in contact with Bebo's fingers. "Does it feel like you're forcing me to do something I'm not in the mood for?" When Bebo's fingers parted and squeezed the rapidly hardening bundle, Annie thought she would come on the spot. "What I meant was, it's only been one night but I already crave your touch." She groaned as the pinch got harder as if Bebo were trying to squeeze more pleasure out of her. "Please, baby, go inside."

As slowly as she could, Bebo let two fingers enter Annie's warm wet center, and in return she felt a leg lift and press against her own. The blonde's nails dragged up her back as they started to rock together building the excitement between them. It didn't take much before they both went over the edge together.

"I'm beginning to think there's something wrong with me," said Annie as she looked up at the ceiling trying to catch her breath.

"Is there something I'm not doing right?" Bebo put her hands on the bed and pushed up until she was completely off of Annie.

"If you do anything more right, I may drop dead from pleasure. No, I'm just not usually this ravenous," she looked away and could feel the blush run up from her chest. "Sexually I mean."

"I feel honored then to have awakened your appetites." Bebo stood up and offered her hand to Annie. "Want to take a shower with me?"

"At this point I want to do everything with you. I'm just trying to figure out how I can sneak into your pack or your back pocket so I don't have to let you go."

With ease Bebo picked her up and carried Annie into the bathroom. "You never have to let me go, love, just do without me for short periods of time."

The water felt good as it ran down her back, but the sight before her was even better. Annie gave into a whim and bit down on Bebo's nipple since it was so close. "If you think this is going to be a regular occurrence, you're crazy, highness," she mumbled around the bit of flesh in her teeth.

"What showering together?" Bebo hissed.

"You leaving me behind to worry about you." She said it then wrapped her lips around where her teeth had been. "After this trip I'm planning on never letting you out of my sight."

"You keep this up and I'll rule from the telephone and through email since I'll never want to put on clothing." The threat only made Annie laugh and add her hands to her caresses. It was lucky for both of them the house had a good supply of hot water.

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"The plane's ready and waiting," Bear said when the two finally emerged from the bedroom. One more scream coming from inside and she was sure Bebo wouldn't be able to climb an anthill much less trees.

"We'll land in Jacolla and chopper in from there to a spot near where the unit was last heard from," added Steph.

Bebo was paying attention as they walked to the dining room, but it was hard to ignore the way Annie was looking at her. "Sounds good. Could you all go on down without us? I need to speak to Miss Paddio alone for a minute." She waited until they were alone before saying anything. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'll never get out of here."

"Promise?" Moving closer Annie looped her fingers into Bebo's belt. "Okay I'll try to be good but it's going to be impossible with you wearing these pants." The whole Amazon Unit had donned combat fatigues with dark green t-shirts."

"I promise to take them off as soon as I get back if you don't like them," teased Bebo.

"I never said I didn't like them, honey, but I do look forward to taking them off you when you get home."

Breakfast was a boisterous affair easing a little of the tension that had built up in Annie. She had over the weeks gotten to know the people who protected her future spouse and it helped somewhat to know these were the women who would be going with Bebo. From their conversations Annie could see that they were proud to serve, but it was more than a job. All of them also loved Bebo.

Sitting at Bebo's right, Annie reached over as the dishes were being cleared and placed her hand over the larger one. The move brought her bracelet into view and all talk ceased.

"I still have to speak with Miss Paddio's parents, but she has agreed to join with me," explained Bebo to her friends. She raised Annie's hand to her lips and kissed it. "Amazonia will have a new princess soon."

All five women pulled their chairs away from the table and stood. As the senior, Bear spoke for

all of them as they bowed in Annie's direction. "Highness, it will be as great an honor and privilege to serve you as it has Princess Bebo."

"Thank you, but it's just Annie."

"No, my love, you will never again be just Annie," said Bebo. "But then that isn't something to fear."

"I've got a lot to learn, so don't take too long out there."

Reggie arrived as they were leaving and Bebo got a kiss from Annie for her thoughtfulness. Driving back alone from the base after dropping off the unit wasn't something Annie had been looking forward to. Before they were ready the plane engines started and the ground crew signaled they were ready to take off.

"Keep an eye on her until I get back," Bebo said into Reggie's ear.

"You just worry about coming back, with daddy if you can."

The tall woman nodded then looked to Annie. She had no words or wisdom to share that would make this easier to bear, and even if she did, she was too choked up to say anything. The others tried to look away, but it was a special sight seeing the two young women sharing a long kiss.

"I love you, Annie."

"I love you too, now please promise me again. I need to hear you say it."

"A couple of weeks tops, then I'll be back. Count on it." Bebo kissed her one last time. "You stay strong and be safe."

From the door of the plane Bebo stopped and looked back. She raised her hand in the same signal she had shown her mothers the night before. Annie returned it now that she knew what I meant. It was just one of the many 'I love yous' she hoped to get from Bebo in a lifetime.

In what seemed like a split second later the plane roared over them and disappeared into the thick cloud cover. Bebo never saw Annie sobbing on her sister's shoulder. The die was cast and with it Bebo would shed light on hidden truths as she moved further away from Annie and deeper into the jungle.

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"This is rather sudden, isn't it?" Reggie held up Annie's wrist in the car, having some idea of what the new and unique bracelet meant. "I mean a few months ago you were looking through bride magazines looking for the perfect cake for the day you married the extreme asshole."

"Do you have a problem with this because you were interested yourself or is it you just want to

kick me when I'm down?" As drained as she was, Annie pulled free of the hold not wanting to pick a fight.

"She's gorgeous in a butch, 'I have the world by the ass sort of way', but no, that's not why I'm asking. You've lived your life a certain way from the time you could process thought, Annie, so forgive me if I'm a little confused. You've been after all the one who's tried to convince me to pick a more conventional life whenever you got the opportunity." She reached for her sister's hand again only this time it was to pull it into her lap and hold it. "What happened to change your mind?"

"It was a combination of things really, but the main thing, or I should say person, was Bebo. I guess when I dreamed of the person I'd live my life with, it was always a vague picture as far as looks but not when it came to what they would be like. We had a hard time reconciling what daddy does with our life choices, but I always admired him for the life he picked to live. He goes where he's needed and he fights the battles most other people don't have the courage to fight. Because he does, I know we have the freedom to complain about anything we want even if it's the Army we're bitching about. But that's all he centered his life around." The car crossed the bridge back into the city and Annie stared out the window as they moved through traffic.

"It's okay, you can finish. For the record though, I feel the same way you do about him, it's just the way he treats the people he supposedly loves that I had a problem with."

"I wanted someone with the same principles of service and self he has, but one who could see me as a person not an obligation he had to fulfill as part of what makes him a man and a soldier. Did you ever get the impression mom was just a prop for him?"

Reggie swiped at the tears filling her eyes from the pain she just knew her mother lived with. "She is a prop, but I have to think he loves her in his own way. Otherwise I just drive myself insane thinking about it I get so angry. Enough about them though, we were talking about you."

"I saw Bebo that first morning she arrived in the States, and she made me hungry, and I didn't even know I was starving. She's like a fictitious character from a book but you just know everything about her is genuine. For the first time I saw someone not as a gender I wasn't supposed to be interested in but as the person I couldn't live without. The first couple of times I was just trying to figure out what was going on in my head, then one afternoon I sat on a bunch of pillows as she fed me sushi and I just loved her." Annie turned from the window and laughed. "Insane huh?"

"More like romantic as hell." The young blonde laughed along with her. "Wait, you ate sushi? It must be love. So you're ready to pick up and move to an island full of women?"

"After last night, I'd be willing to move to a cardboard box in Times Square if it meant I get to be with Bebo and wake up in her arms every morning. I can see now what you've been harping about all these years."

Like she did when they were kids, Reggie bumped shoulders with her and said, "Told ya." She



wanted to laugh, but Annie looked at Reggie and her lip started to quiver. "It's okay, Annie. I promise we'll get through this together." Reggie put her arms around her and held her until they arrived back at the embassy.

"Reed, could you wait and bring us back home? I just have to run up and get my things," said Annie.

"Lady Paddio, her highness would find it comforting if you stayed in residence until she returned. I understand your status has changed within the Nation and until Princess Bebo can arrange for a royal guard detail, she thought you would be more comfortable staying here."

"I'd feel more comfortable with my sister, but thank you."

"The room across the hall from yours has been set up for Lady Reggie if she's also agreeable to staying. Please allow us to take care of you until the princess returns. I know I'd be more comfortable keeping watch inside here than on the street in Arlington." Reed leaned in from the door and smiled. Either way it went they would have to post guards.

"Are you sure you all wouldn't mind?"

"Trust me, miss, it would be our pleasure."

"Reggie?" Annie asked her sister.

"Do you have a cook on staff?" she directed the question to the driver.

"And a masseuse." Annie laughed as her arm was almost yanked off by a fast moving Reggie getting out of the car.

"Should I go ahead and fill out the change of address cards now after she discovers the heated pool?" Reed asked Annie in a joking tone.

"I hope you meant it when you said you didn't mind, cause you may never get rid of her now," Annie teased back.

"If you continue to cause the kind of smiles I've seen on the princess' face I'll hand feed her myself."

"Then that won't be a problem at all."

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The plane's crew stayed out of the passenger compartment not wanting to disturb the six sleeping women. They had been in the air for twelve hours and were getting close to their first stop. After refueling they had another six hours before reaching the rendezvous where they would leave their passengers with the sailors of the U.S.S. Lincoln.

"Did you get a load of that tall one?" The pilot looked over at his crew and wiggled his eyebrows. "The next time I go out drinking and am in danger of crossing any dark alleys I want to take her with me for backup. She's a looker, but she also looks like she'd beat the shit of you for trying anything remotely funny."

The airstrip came into sight silencing all conversation except with the tower. When the tires hit the tarmac Bebo's eyes opened but she didn't move. She'd been sleeping for at least ten hours of the flight and felt like she could sleep the other six they had left. Once they were on the ground she wanted to move as quickly as possible and cover some ground to take advantage of the cover of darkness.

Her mind drifted to Annie and how upset she had looked as they had driven to the base. It was an overwhelming feeling to have someone suddenly become the center of her world. She knew the proposal had not been too rushed, but there was still a lot they had to learn about each other and Bebo was looking forward to the process.

"She seems like a lovely girl," said Bear from her spot next to her.

"That was really lame, oh wise one." Bebo decided to get up and move around. As tired as she felt, it wasn't good to be sitting in one spot for so long. "I'll tell you all about her as soon as we get back."

"It's good to know you can still mentally function with things other than love taking precedence, highness. I was starting to get a little concerned this morning in the hallway."

"I want to get my mind off of love at the moment so I can live to experience more of being on the receiving end of Annie's looks."

One of the crew came back with drinks and snacks in tow. "Thought you could use a little something, though you might want to take a seat to enjoy it, we're about ready to go again. Is there anything else I can get you all?"

"No thank you, sergeant. Tell the captain thanks for the smooth ride so far." Bebo cracked open the soda can and took a long swig. The landscape outside was already vastly different than their starting point.

Bebo closed her eyes again and listened to the soft murmurs coming from the others with her as they spoke of home and the people they were starting to miss. Adventure always sounded good until the reality of leaving people behind set in and you learned that no unknown discovery was more important than those you loved.

As she drifted back to the land of dreams another plane landed well to their west carrying with it its own set of surprises. Neither Bebo nor Annie had any idea the avalanche of emotions their finding each other was about to set off.

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"Lady Paddio, may I come in?" The maid Sandra stood outside Bebo's bedroom and waited for an answer to the tap she'd given the door.

"Hey, what can I do for you?" Annie walked back to the bag open on the bed and continued her unpacking. After a nap she and Reggie had been driven home to collect some clothing for their stay. The ever-efficient Sandra had rearranged Bebo's closet in their absence to make sure Annie felt at home.

"Miss, you might want to change into something more appropriate and come downstairs as soon as possible."

She looked down at her jeans and sweater from the night before and wondered what was wrong with it. "What, did Reggie request a formal dinner or something?" Annie laughed and headed for the closet. "Please ignore her if she gets to be too much. If you're too nice it might just go to her head."

"Annie, you might want to look out the window before you make any more disparaging comments about me." Reggie walked in and put her hands on her hips. Little flags on the front of limos in Washington usually meant somebody important was sitting in back. "Me thinks we have company, and whoever it is has the house in a tizzy."

"We do, and at last check, she owns the house," said Sandra as she turned and left the room.

"Guess who's coming to dinner, highness? Come on, I want to go down and meet your future in-laws," joked Reggie.

"Wait, Sandra said I should change." As much as she was missing Bebo and worried about when she'd be back, Annie had a few murderous thoughts run through her head over the fact the princess didn't mention any impending royal visit.

"Whatever for?" The deep voice from the doorway made them both freeze. It was lightly teasing and it reminded Annie of Bebo's. When she looked up, Annie was amazed by how much the woman and her lover looked alike. If this was what Bebo was going to look like in about twenty-five years, Annie figured she'd be one big ball of want for some time to come. "Audrey owns more than one pair of jeans herself, and I see my daughter will have the same problem I do with keeping small blondes out of her clothes." The Amazon Consort pointed to the sweater she recognized and arched a dark brow.

The blush that colored Annie's cheeks made Boden laugh, only to be cut short by a slap to her middle. "Forgive my wife, Annie," said Audrey as she entered and stopped before the Paddio sisters. "May I call you Annie?"

"Your highness, I'm so honored to meet you both." Annie and Reggie bowed and waited to be addressed.

"Well technically you haven't. Met us, I mean," said Boden. "Please, Annie, we'll be family before too long if the goddess is willing, so look up and relax. I am Boden and this is my wife, Audrey." She held out her hand and was pleasantly surprised by the solid grip Annie returned.

"This is my sister Regina, and I'm Annie as you guessed. What are you both doing here? What I mean is, Bebo never said anything about it, we could've met you at the airport or something." Reggie hid her smile at Annie's rambling. Ever since they'd been children extreme conditions brought out the nervous habit in the otherwise confident blonde.

"Calm down and take a breath, little one, before we have to peel you off the carpet," Boden put one arm around Annie and the other around Audrey. "Let's go down and have a drink in the garden, and you can tell us about what's going on. We didn't mean to surprise you but Audrey couldn't sit at home another minute worrying, so we came here so she'd have someone to worry with."

"There are a couple of other reasons for our visit, so don't let the tall one lead you astray." Audrey remarked as they walked together down the stairs where the staff had set out some trays with Audrey's favorite snacks.

"It doesn't have to do with Bebo and I getting together does it? If you have any reservations, I can assure you I love your daughter."

"Nothing like that, but I'm glad to know Bebo has found someone so quick and willing to pledge herself to her. I just thought that these coming weeks would be difficult for all of us, but I also feel that the real battles will ensue once she returns." Audrey poured a glass of wine for everyone having sent the servants away. "I don't mean to scare you but I think that you must be prepared to fight for the things you want, and for how you want to live your life. Before we talk of such things though, I want you to promise me something."

"Anything, highness."

"Please call me Audrey, those titles have a way of working your nerves when they're used too much by the people in your own family." She handed a glass to each sister and smiled at Annie. "I want you to promise me that you'll always listen and try not to let your emotions impair your ability to understand."

Reggie almost snorted the burgundy out of her nose. "She can promise to try, but you'll find Annie sometimes has a temper that's hard to deal with." She ignored the glare being sent her way. Watching the older couple made it easy to imagine Bebo and Annie years from now. "She's more of a shoot first and ask questions later kind of gal if the issue's important enough to her."

"Then you should fit in with our family just fine," said Boden. She smiled at the young women as she nodded to Kip over their heads. "Love, your guest is here. Go on and I'll keep Annie and Reggie company with some stories of our sprout in her earlier years."

"I'll ask you girls to excuse me, but before I go I'd like to ask you, Reggie, if you'd be willing to make the same promise to me? You aren't bound by any law or other such thing, but I'll ask you just the same." Audrey looked at her for any type of reaction, thinking that the younger of the Paddio's was the hardest to read.

"Can I inquire as to why you'd ask either of us that?"

"You can, but I may choose not to answer. At this particular time, I choose just that. Would it be satisfying enough to say that it'll make perfect sense in a little while why I asked it? Life can sometimes surprise us with things that would have never crossed our minds to even imagine. There are reasons for such things, but if you let your anger overrule any explanation you'll never be ready to hear the truth, and sometimes others won't be willing to share with you again because of that anger."

"That makes sense I guess," said Reggie.

"Then can I get you to promise me the same thing you sister is willing to give me?"

"Sure, but I can tell you nothing ever surprises me."

Audrey just smiled and nodded her head as if making a mental note of Reggie's response. "Try to not embarrass Bebo too much, warrior, with the stories you pick. Just remember that she has the ability and capability to give you a black eye if she really wants to."

The sisters looked on as Audrey dropped a kiss on Boden's lips before she walked off. From the time of their arrival not too much time passed before one of them reached out for the other. It was an interesting thing to watch two people so in love, having grown up in a family where physical acts of affections seldom took place.

The woman was sitting facing the desk in the study when Audrey walked in and closed the door behind her. It had been years since they'd seen each other but the queen found that time had done little to dim the beauty that had broken more than one heart in her younger years.

When she heard the click, Doris jumped up and turned around. "Queen Audrey, it's so good to see you again."

"Dothan, has all this time weakened our friendship?" Audrey stepped forward and opened her arms and Doris gladly accepted the embrace. "All these years and you still look the same."

"Hardly, but thank you for trying to humor a middle-aged woman. I've been sitting here thinking of the memories tied up in this house. Gods, it seems like a lifetime ago I walked out the front door for the last time," she sat in the chair Audrey led her to. "At least I thought it was the last time. I should've believed when they told me in the temple my life would find a way to return to where I began. Now that it has though, how am I going to explain lying to them all these years?"

"Not telling the whole truth isn't exactly lying, but that's why I came. Had I known the girl

Bebo's been pining for all this time was your Annie, I would've come sooner. You have to know I'd never turn my back on you, and neither would Bo." Audrey sat on the arm of the chair and put her hand on Doris' shoulder.

"Even if it was me who turned my back on you?" The blonde looked up at her and gave her a watery look. "Don't try to justify my actions, Audrey, we both know I'm right. My only excuse is that I loved him enough to sacrifice my family for the sake of having a family. I look at my girls and I've never thought it was a complete mistake. Perhaps feeling that profound happiness was also my curse for never being able to give Patrick what he really wanted - a son."

"Children aren't a matter of want as far as who they are and what gender they turn out to be, they are a matter of acceptance. I've only had a few minutes with your daughters but I can see you've done a wonderful job. If you hadn't, they wouldn't be such wonderful adults. Have you met our Bebo yet?"

"I haven't spent a lot of time with her either, but from our brief encounters I could see the two of you shining in the depths of those blue eyes. She had both my girls dazed I think, but the princess only has eyes for one of them. Annie is a lucky girl, and it's about time I tell her as much, consequences be damned."

Audrey moved to the seat next to Doris and reached out to put her hand on the woman's knee. "You'll never be damned, my friend, because no matter what life throws at you, you'll always have a home waiting for you and people who love you. I have a few things with me if you'd care to have them. One is a letter from your mother."

With her face buried in her hands in shame, Doris started to cry and before too long sobs wracked her body so violently that Audrey rose again and put her arms around her. Even if it were her job to condemn or judge the woman for her actions, she could have done no better job than Doris herself.

"I meant no harm in bringing it, Dothan, she just wants to know how you are and what her grandchildren are like." Audrey pulled Doris' hands away from her face and started to wipe away the tears. "She isn't the only one. My only advice is that there have been too many years stolen from them already because of foolishness. Don't take a chance and take anymore from them, for one day it will be too late."

"How are they?"

"They're older, which is to be expected, but Erica and Teri are as feisty as ever. I feared for my life when I told Erica I wanted to send an exhibit with Bebo when she came. She takes her job as Keeper of the Archives very seriously."

"In the very few times I've spoken to her, mom seemed so excited about that job, I felt she didn't really miss me all that much."

"Your mother found comfort in the past, but don't ever think that her heart didn't long to share all

those special moments you've experienced over the years with you. A job cannot be a substitute for a child. Don't fool yourself." It was the only time from the beginning of their talk that Audrey's voice sounded slightly scolding. "It did make her feel better though, that it was her granddaughter who was going to be looking out for all our treasures."

Erica was one of the few people she met with at least three times a week, and no matter what was going on there was pain always visible in those green eyes. Her partner Teri seldom spoke of Dothan, but the queen never thought it was because of anger towards the woman, just a lack of strength to fight back the agony of losing her and why. Because of their children there would be no hiding the truth now. Annie and Bebo had unwittingly opened the doors on a hurt that had been festering in the dark for too long.

"How do I begin to fix this?" asked Doris.

"We begin with the telling of a story. We will tell them the story of Dothan Cyr, and how she became known to the world as Doris Paddio. When Bebo gets back and she's here to help Annie and Reggie process the first part, then and only then will we tell them the rest." Audrey cupped Doris' face in her hands and made her focus on what was important. "I won't lie to you and tell you that the hearing for them will be easy, but you owe it to them to let them know who they really are and where it is they come from. Bebo may get mad at me for telling you before she has a chance to talk you, but she has offered Annie a bracelet and your daughter has accepted. Ironic isn't it?"

"What?"

"She'll one day help rule the people your husband tried to erase from your existence. Bebo's always saying the gods have a sense of humor that's never squelched. I'm beginning to think she's right." Audrey stood and held out her hand to her old friend. "Come, we have two sisters to welcome into our fold."

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The second leg of their flight ended as the aircraft came to a stop in Jacolla on the eastern coast of the continent. With the various time changes, the sun was about two hours from setting as they deplaned. Offshore close to the base they were using, the aircraft carrier U.S.S Lincoln was anchored to provide emergency medical treatment and a helicopter ride in and out of Conger.

"Bebo Leon, right?" The young naval pilot held his hand out to her as if he were greeting an old friend.

"Good to meet you," she looked at this flight suit for the markings of rank, "Lieutenant." She then looked to the nametag, "Bidden."

"We're headed into the bush together, Bebo, so let's drop the ranks. Just call me Joe, cause on the way back when you need to call someone to get you out of that hellhole, Joe's a hell of a lot shorter than Lt. Bidden. Y'all want to grab some chow before we saddle up?" He cocked his head

in the direction of a building behind him where the base commissary was. The food wasn't great but it was better than the rations they'd have on the trail.

"How far in do we need to go?" asked Bear.

"The hop will take about an hour and some to get you to the spot of the Cobras team's last radioed contact. If you take an hour then we'll get you there about fifteen minutes after sunset."

"Then I'd rather leave now if you're ready. I want to be dropped off about a mile from where the last transmission emanated from. Since we don't know what happened to them I don't want to fall into the same trap." Bear nodded her approval of Bebo's thinking. Leaving now would also give them about forty minutes of daylight to work with to look for any clues along the way.

Joe and three other soldiers climbed into the chopper with them. He had a co-pilot and a gunner off each door. Jacolla was a friendly port but Conger was the area's hotspot at the moment and Americans were at the top of their kill list. Their orders though, were to fire only if fired upon. The brass didn't want to be blamed for taking sides or for adding fuel to an already burning inferno of violence.

As they approached their destination Joe broke the silence. "Bebo, have one of your crew grab a couple of those smoke cans before you get out. Once you have the Cobras just radio in your coordinates and we'll come a running. I won't land though unless I see yellow smoke. The powers that be typed up some preferable spots for extraction, but you just give me enough time and space to put down and not get the shit shot out of my bird and we'll get you out. You can bank on that."

"Good to know, and we'll try our best to pick an open but covered spot." Bebo gave him the thumbs up sign as he hovered above the tree canopy about two miles from their goal.

They rappelled down and the men at the doors were surprised when the Amazons unhooked at the top of the trees. With all the equipment they were carrying it was going to be a bitch getting down so they hoped they knew what they were doing and they wouldn't be back in a couple of hours with a medical evacuation.

Bebo moved a couple of branches down as her team fanned out in increments of a hundred feet. They were far enough down to see the floor of the jungle but high enough that someone would have to specifically look for them to be spotted. And then only movement would have given them away since their clothing and face paint made them blend into the foliage like big leaves. She brought some high-powered binoculars out of her pack and checked the GPS device strapped to her forearm to see what direction to look in.

"See anything?" Steph's voice sounded softly from the radio piece in Bebo's left ear. The microphone was attached to her throat and was sensitive enough to pick up the slightest whisper.

"Some monkeys enjoying an evening meal of fruit about three hundred feet to the west of us, but that's about it. If they came through here, Patrick and his guys did a good job of covering their



tracks. According to the layout they gave us the clinic should have been about four clicks from here. Let's see where Alice went into the rabbit hole from here to there."

"When we find them can I be the first one to tell him you called him Alice?" asked Beth.

Five of them dropped to the ground while Max stayed in the trees. They moved as fast as they could while still checking for any type of manmade device which didn't belong. The problems with high tech societies was that they sometimes expected the trap they themselves would set, missing the simplest trigger to a very untechnological log that would make you spit out your lungs if you missed it.

At the beginning of their second mile, Bebo put her fist up and let out a birdcall that blended in with the local fowl. She gave a series of hand motions that sent the group into the bush with the safety on their guns now in the off position.

"I think you'd have ducked in time, pal, but you should see the barbs on this thing they have rigged up to that trigger you just ran across." Max was sitting next to the thick branch rigged up with a simple pulley system shored up with vines that could be found growing everywhere. "I hope to the goddess one of the Cobras didn't run across one of these babies."

"There's another one over here," said Steph. "What's the plan here, Bebo?"

"The more appropriate question is what's so important here that requires such protection?" The darkness was coming quickly and the sounds of the insects seemed almost magnified with the setting sun. "Max, move up to where we want to start in the morning and we'll be right behind you. Give us a call if you run into something unexpected and we'll keep you company in the branches as soon as we get there. Don't forget your night vision, ladies."

They studied the traps as they went surprised that whoever had put them there managed to attach as many as five triggers to every one. The thought behind setting them up like that was if you were lucky enough to find one, you tended to let your guard down enough to miss the next one maybe three feet away. Bebo had never seen them used in that fashion but she had heard about them from Bo. It was a favorite of an opponent she had faced before she and Audrey had met.

Forming a perimeter around the spot they considered to be their starting point, the Amazons sat in the high branches looking for anything out of the ordinary. Beth picked the spot with the most cover and pulled out a small laptop computer. It took a second to boot and find a satellite hookup, but the screen came to life with a message from the Lincoln.

*U.S.S. Lincoln: Go head.*

*Snake Charmer: We've reached the go spot. Aside from a few traps on the ground, all's quiet. Out.*

Bebo had laughed when Philip had told them their mission code name before they left, but the check in schedule was something he had insisted on. When there was a message incoming a soft

beep would go off only in Beth's ear since she was their communications person.

After sending and receiving a reply, she switched to another screen showing any movement near them from the same satellite feed. The technology was advanced but every so often if an animal was big enough it triggered the heat sensors the device scanned for. She ignored those images that were moving too high and alone and concentrated on the twenty or so moving rapidly towards them.

"Company due north west, you should be able to see them in about ten."

The men weren't talking loudly but they weren't being quiet either as they moved through the bush. There were five in the front and a couple towards the back of the line in some sort of uniform, but the others were in civilian clothing and all were carrying guns and machetes. As they neared the trees, the man who was apparently the leader put up his hand and there was dead stillness.

*"Move and check the traps. The radar showed that helicopter hovering for a few minutes. I'm sure it wasn't because they were sightseeing."* His French was not the best but understandable enough to the women looking down on them.

*"Do you think they sent more?"* The man who asked the question was one of the uniforms that had been walking at the back of the line.

*"If they did we'll find them soon enough. Perhaps the next group will be more talkative than the last."*

"Hold," whispered Bebo so softly it almost made the others imagine hearing her voice.

*"Nothing, sir. They're all in place,"* reported one of the men in plain clothing.

*"Stupid and slow, a good combination indeed."* The comment made the ones who had gotten back from their patrol laugh at the leader's humor. After seeing what the man was capable of, they were willing to do anything for him just as long as his ire wasn't turned on them. *"Let's get back and we'll check again in the morning."*

None of them looked up as they started back in the direction they had come from. Bebo gave the order by putting her index finger up then followed it with a palm and then two fingers. They would go as soon as they were twenty feet ahead of them and they would keep that position until she gave the stop order. Perhaps finding what they came for wasn't going to be that hard after all.

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Annie and Reggie were laughing at something Bo was telling them when the Consort noticed her wife returning with their old friend. If both her daughters took after Dothan, they would retain the ageless beauty the family was known for.

"She did not," said Annie, wiping away the tears that had started to fall from all the laughter. For a short while Boden had managed to dim the constant worry on Bebo's behalf by telling her funny stories she would be able to tease her lover with when she returned.

"I'm telling you, naked as the day she was born. Bebo came out of the womb a big handful so you'll have your work cut out for you, Annie, but she's also a lot of fun to be around."

"Spoken like a true doting mother, love," said Audrey when they got closer. "And if that was the conclusion to the story I think it was, I'd start sleeping with one eye open." The girls laughed at the banter then looked over Audrey's shoulder and noticed their mother.

"Mom? Is something wrong?" asked Annie. She could see that the green eyes so much like her own were red and swollen as if she'd been crying for a while. "Did you hear something?" Thoughts of Bebo and her father rushed back to the front of her mind and it made her nauseous.

"No, honey, I was just here to meet with Queen Audrey. I haven't heard anything about your father or when he'll be back."

Leave it to the hierarchy to keep her mother in the dark thought Reggie. "Mom, there have been some developments that I think you should know about." She explained with as much detail as she remembered hearing from Annie then added where Bebo was and what she and her group hoped to accomplish. When she finished, fresh tears sprung to Doris' eyes and it only confused her family further. "What's wrong, mom? If you hadn't heard about dad, what has you so upset?"

"Before your mother answers that, I want you both to remember your promise to me," said Audrey as she put her hand on Doris' shoulder and squeezed. "Do you want me to do it?"

"No, it's my decisions that have gotten us to this point so I should be the one to tell them." Doris took a seat facing her daughters and took a deep breath. "I've been debating this over the past couple of years, thinking I had all the time I wanted in finding a way to tell you." She had to stop and take another couple of breaths to try and center her emotions.

"It's ok, mom. Whatever you have to say, just say it. Reggie and I'll be right here for you when you finish." Annie moved so she was kneeling in front of her mother. The royal couple looked on with approval liking this young woman who had captured their own child's heart. Compassion was the key ingredient for a good ruler.

"A long time ago a child was born to Erica and Teri Cyr," began Doris, thinking that telling it in the third person would make it easier on her. "Erica is the current head of Amazonia's Archives and her partner Teri works for the queen's consort as a military liaison. They had only one daughter born to them and they named her Dothan Cyr."

"Wait, how do you know so much about who does what in Amazonia?" asked Reggie.

The impatience made Boden laugh softly and Audrey felt the rumble against her back. Their thoughts were running in the same direction. The youngest Paddio reminded them both of Teri

and her demeanor as a young woman. How she had become one of their best liaisons and negotiators still amazed Bo.

"Patience, little one. A story is best enjoyed with no interruption. At its conclusion is when you should unleash that enthusiasm you have for the why of everything," said Bo.

"Dothan wanted nothing more than to follow her mother's career choice and work in the Archives and have a family. The year before the queen's mask went to Audrey, Dothan was invited to come to Washington and work here at the embassy to establish closer ties to the Smithsonian Institute. While Dothan was here she ran into a young soldier she hadn't seen in years and agreed to have dinner with him. After a few dates, her dreams changed and she picked a new name and a new direction for her life."

"Dothan Cyr became Doris Paddio, didn't she?" asked Annie softly looking at her mother's face for the truth.

Doris nodded her head and started to cry. "Yes," she was able to get out before words became impossible.

"But why not tell us?" asked Reggie. She felt betrayed that Doris would keep something so important about their heritage a secret.

"Reggie, please try and keep your voice down," said Audrey. "I know this is a lot to process and if your mother doesn't mind I'd like to finish." The upset blonde nodded her head and felt almost grateful that her part was over. "Your father for his own reasons, and only he can answer whatever questions you have on the subject, made your mother promise not to share this with you. I miss my old friend, but I never condemned her for wanting to have a family away from what she'd known all her life. Our tribe is made up of a diversity of women, each of whom brings some special gift to the island. Their children though, are free to discover and live life the way they see fit. It is something we encourage in all our classes while the children are in school. Sometimes that means they will move on and find happiness in some other part of the world."

"Yeah, but that's not what happened here," said Reggie not calming down. "I'm sure just because you want to move and do something else doesn't mean you abandon your family. Why didn't he want you to tell us? Was he afraid, God forbid, we'd turn out to be less than perfect in his eyes and love women?"

"Your father wanted you to grow up without certain influences in your life. To give you a chance to see what the world outside of what Amazonia had to offer. What Queen Audrey said was right, sometimes people want to leave, but then their children find the concept of the island and the people just as fascinating and want to return." Doris was able to speak after accepting a glass of water from Boden.

"What does all this mean to us?" asked Annie. The shock of what had come out of her mother's mouth had made her slump to the grass.

"What it means is that you have dual citizenship because of Dothan and your grandmothers, and it also makes your joining to Bebo that much easier." Audrey spoke but signaled to Bo with a slight nod of her head to help Annie back to her seat. Her consort complied and rejoined her on the chair they'd been sharing. "Bo and I will leave you to finish your discussion." Audrey rose and took Bo's hand as they prepared to retire upstairs for a short rest. "Please take your time and I'd like it if you all stayed with us tonight. I know Reggie and Annie have decided to stay with us until Bebo returns, but I'd like it if you joined them," she said to Doris.

"Thank you, highness." She stood and bowed in gratitude for Audrey's generosity, which Doris didn't feel like she deserved.

"It's nothing, and please, you are among friends now so stop your crying and talk to your girls. Just send someone for us if you need anything." The petite blonde queen gave her old friend another hug before taking Bo's hand and following her into the house.

Kip was again waiting for them to deliver news of their next visitor. They had brought more than enough guards to allow the captain to act as more of a personal secretary while they were in the house. "Philip is waiting in the study. He wanted to come and see you before going home for the evening."

"Promise me you won't hit him," Audrey turned and looked up at her wife.

"He manipulated her out there and you know it as well as I do, so why shouldn't I?"

"Because I'm asking you not to for now. If she comes home with a bruise anywhere on her then I might change my mind, but for now I want him to be able to talk to share information with us." With a soft hand, she reached up and caressed Bo's cheek.

They exchanged greetings and Philip was glad to see them again even if it was under strained circumstances. He told them of the transmission they had gotten from the Amazons and promised to share any future messages and location with them until their daughter returned.

"I know you're pissed at me, Bo, but you know she and Bear were the best two to lead those people out of there. Once she's done we'll get them out as soon as possible, but we couldn't let York fall into the rebels' hands. If they decide to unleash that shit somewhere like London, or here, think of the millions they could kill."

Bo exhaled and tried to keep her hands from clenching. Her problem had always been keeping perspective when it came to Bebo. Logically she could understand why Philip had done what he had, but as a mother she was as terrified as Annie and Audrey combined. Once you had been in the situation the Amazons found themselves in, you knew what a close walk with death it was.

"Just make sure your first call after hearing from them is to us. If I get something that's hours old, I'll kick your ass from here to the Pentagon."

"Duly noted." He rose and bid them good night wanting to check in with the office before

heading to his Virginia home. "I swear it, Bo, as soon as I hear anything, you'll hear it."

Audrey shook her head the whole time they were climbing the stairs. "What? You said I couldn't hit him and I didn't, you never said anything about not threatening him."

"Warriors, rough around the edges but you gotta love them." The queen stopped at the landing with Bo a couple of steps below her bringing their heights level. "You know I love you for the worry wart that you are, but you have to have faith in all the hours of training you put into our cub. She'll make it out and make us proud doing so."

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The group would stop and disburse every so often checking to see if any of their snares had been triggered. Sounds of the abundant wildlife could be heard in the trees and jungle floor as they trekked on helping to cover any noise the Amazons made. Even without the help of those things that belonged there, the women moved silently through the trees.

When the men went to check on their perimeter protection the same two men that led and pulled up the rear would stop and talk in their broken French. The smoke from their cigarettes drifted up to where Bebo was pressed up against the trunk. She listened to what they had to say while she looked along the tree line to the compound they were headed towards.

It consisted of four main buildings and a number of shacks along the wall of jungle the space had been carved from. Around a few of the structures, the vines and aggressive vegetation were starting to reclaim the area.

"What do you think, a village they took over?" Rita's voice sounded in everyone's ear, as she was the closest to the buildings. She looked to Bebo and saw the very slow nod of her head and the clenched fist to keep them from saying anything else out loud and also to keep them in position. They would head no further in with their quarry so close under them.

The tall man that had taken the lead all night looked one last time towards the black jungle and flicked his cigarette away. "*They haven't gotten too far if they're out here, so let's get back. I want to report before our friend turns in for the night.*" All the men dressed in street clothes looked grateful for the reprieve and moved quickly to their bunks.

Bebo watched them all break up and head towards the shacks at the edges of the compound. From some of the huts, an almost instant din of screaming and frightened protests arose from what sounded like female voices. It clarified in her mind that the area was a compound that had been taken over by the rebels not only for a place to stay but to inflict their special form of torture on the people that lived there.

The princess pointed to her neck to get her team to turn off their radios and moved closer to where she was positioned. They looked like a band of thugs but sometimes even thugs had sophisticated equipment capable of electronic surveillance.

"Give them until the screaming stops and then we'll go in and take a look around. I want to wait until we have the Cobras in sight before we fire off a shot." They listened to the princess while keeping an eye out for any movement back in their direction.

Checking her watch, Bebo saw it was three in the morning when total silence filled the area and had for over an hour. It was as close to the dead of night as they were going to get. Before jumping to the ground, she motioned to Bear then pointed two fingers to her eyes, asking her to keep an eye out, and then moved her thumb across her throat in an upward fashion allowing them to turn the radios back on. A friendly warning was worth the chance of being intercepted.

By a stroke of luck, one of the men stumbled out of one of the huts and headed close to where the princess was standing. She waited until he was well into the bush and into answering nature's call before moving closer to him. He was one of the non-uniformed volunteer help who had been walking around checking snares. By the time he bounced on his feet a couple of times and zipped his fly, Bebo was standing right behind him.

She used a technique of ancient martial arts taught only to a chosen number of cadets on Amazonia dropped the man to his knees immediately. Two quick jabs to his neck caused such a reaction in his body, he started to pant trying to get air into his lungs. When he was immobilized, she jabbed one more time to the front of his throat allowing only a trickle of air to trickle into his lungs. It was relief enough to keep him alive for two minutes instead of the thirty or so seconds the first two jabs would have resulted in.

*"Where are the men who came through here a couple of days ago?"* Her French was a lot better than his, but she figured he could understand her.

*"I don't know who you're talking about."* It hurt so badly to get the words out. With each syllable it caused precious air to escape making his chest burn.

*"I'd say you're wasting my time, but that wouldn't exactly be true. You're wasting your own time and until you tell me what I want to know I'm not going to release you."* She looked at her watch only for show, but it did get his attention. *"You've got about two minutes to tell me what I want to know."*

*"I don't know about any men, please."* She shook her head and started towards the darkness of the trees. *"Wait,"* his pleading whisper cut through the stillness. *"I...they were here for only a short time but then they were moved to the north of here for interrogation. I don't know where they are now."*

There was a minute left on her mental clock. *"Who's in those shacks?"* She pointed in the direction he had come from.

*"They're just some of the village women. The soldiers let us have a little fun with them for our work."* Blood was starting to trickle from his nose and he was getting almost euphoric from the lack of oxygen to his brain but he still smiled when he saw her fingers moving towards his neck again. He had told her what she wanted to know and now would be allowed to leave to warn the

leader. With this information he could probably make some money.

Bebo jabbed only the front part of his throat cutting off the small amount of air getting in. The last thing the man saw was the face of what looked to be a black demon with a bow that came down from the trees and carry him upward. If placed high enough the body would not be found or detected for months if at all. Once she was sure that Steph had him under control, Bebo moved to the main buildings and took a quick look. Five automatic weapons were trained on the area as she made her inspection.

"You think they took them to the clinic?" asked Bear when Bebo returned to the trees.

"According to the information we had, this was supposed to be the clinic. What we have though, is a small village with a pack of misfits to watch it." Bebo signaled for Beth to come and join them. The laptop looped through to the Lincoln and to the latest satellite photos of the area. They all looked at the area and for any openings in the lush vegetation that made up the jungles of Conger.

"This is a possibility," said Bear pointing to a stop about five miles from where they were. "It borders the river. No hospital works very well without a water supply. What do you think?" she asked of Bebo.

There was another possibility ten miles to the west of where Bear was pointing and it too had a water source near by, just not as large. If they went to the closest one first it would add that much more to their walk to get to the next location. It wasn't the getting there and fatigue that bothered Bebo; it was the time factor of choosing incorrectly.

"Get back to the Lincoln, Beth, and tell them I need live feed in about two hours. We can't afford to give up any more time than we have to if we're going to find any of these guys alive and our friends with the machetes still in the dark about York," directed Bebo. Soft tapping followed and she could feel Bear's eyes on her as she looked at the quiet village.

"What about these guys?" The trainer pointed to the shacks where the soldiers and rapists were sleeping.

"It would be sweet, Bear, but not now. One is all I'm willing to get rid of now. We can't take the chance and announce our arrival by leaving a sea of bodies behind us."

Beth finished and put the laptop away. "They said to give them an hour to coordinate with the folks back home to get the thing back in the position you want. If the weather's good they should be able to show you someone picking their nose once the sun comes up."

"That's exactly what I'm interested in, how'd you guess?" The two women laughed at the sarcasm that reminded them of Bo. "Let's move out." She signaled to the others to stick to the trees. In the dark it was impossible to spot any more triggers and she didn't want to be slowed down. "We'll move for another hour then take a break and decide what direction we're heading."



The GPS device kept them on target for the first and closest location. When Beth brought out the computer again, the first light of dawn was breaking through the trees. From their perches in the branches they could see that the sky was going to cooperate showing only a few clouds. For fifteen minutes the picture concentrated on the first location that was now about a mile away.

The scene below them seemed normal. They watched villagers moving around with the laziness of people who had just risen from a night's sleep. Their movements were relaxed as they went to the river to collect water and there were children throwing rocks into the water as their parents went about their business.

For about two minutes the screen blurred and then another location came into view. The village to the west was even smaller than those they had come across and looked to be a large communal pig farm. Again there were villagers going about their business but there was something hinky about their movements.

"What don't you see?" asked Bear.

"Men and children," answered Bebo. She quickly pointed to the very edge of the screen before the picture disappeared. "It's what I do see that makes me think this is the location." It wasn't a military truck, but it was large enough to be able to be used as a transport vehicle. "What do a bunch of pig farmers in the middle of a jungle need a truck for?"

"Pig deliveries?" joked Beth. "I'm sure there's a huge supermarket around here somewhere." The picture was still up but they were done, so she sent the Lincoln a message as to which location they were headed to while Bebo punched the coordinates into the electronic positioning device.

"My question is, why isn't it ever the short walk?" Bebo smiled and dropped from the branch down to the ground. She wanted to be able to move as quickly as possible until the day got to its hottest point. By then they would be far enough away from any danger to sleep until late afternoon. That would leave them rested enough to reach the village by nightfall.

The others stayed in the trees until Bebo was about fifty yards away. She was looking for any more traps but the jungle floor was clear for now except for its own natural killers. When she looked up to give the order to have them drop, Bebo saw the movement close to Rita. Without hesitation she pulled the bow from her back and sent an arrow toward the woman's head. Any protests on the guard's part died away when she saw the large poisonous snake twitching and hanging from the arrow that pinned its jaws shut to the trunk.

"Thanks, Bebo." She waved and felt a wave of relief wash through her. From her boot she pulled a knife and cut the head off so she could retrieve Bebo's arrow.

"Anytime. You should see me try it with a blindfold while smoking a cigar and singing, then I'm really impressive."

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The place stank and was filled with enough bugs and things that crawled to make sleep impossible. With no windows and no source of light it only added to the sense of anxiety in the hot room. They had been stripped down to their underwear, and their captives would come every so often and drag someone off. Then the screaming would begin driving up the fear of when it would be your turn with the fuckers doing the torturing.

"Where do you think they took Brian?" Patrick had to concentrate to recognize the voice asking the question. He didn't know where Lt. Turner was, but the big Georgian was responsible for their current position.

"With any luck they're trying to keep him alive to see if he'll talk," answered Junis. The damned barbed log had come out of nowhere along with the group of men who'd surrounded them when Brian had screamed. The vision of the bastards peeling their man off their little trap made his head hurt. It was the moaning that told them Turner was at least still alive.

"As soon as they run out of locals to play with, we're fucked. You all know this right?" asked Titus.

"They're not saving us for last, Titus, they're waiting for someone," said Michelle. At the moment she would have preferred a beating instead of having one more thing crawl in her ears.

"How do you know that?" Titus sounded irritated.

"Because they were lucky enough to find all these armed Americans taking a stroll though the woods, and grandma's house is nowhere in sight." David Norris sat with his back pressed to the wooden wall and dreamed of a hot shower and a cold beer. "She's right, we're too important for the rank and file. They're waiting for someone in charge to show up."

"We need to get the fuck out of here then," said Titus. Some pig farm was not where he was punching in his ticket.

"Should we use your head as a battering ram to get the door open?" asked Billy Wade.

"He's right, Billy. We have to find a way out of here because we all know they aren't sending anyone for us. Hell the government will deny we even exist so it's up to us to save our own asses," said Patrick. This was a new experience for him. Being a prisoner in a country like Conger was the equivalent of dipping your dick in honey and sitting on a fire ant pile.

They heard a woman screaming and it cut their conversation off. Not even the heat of midday was stopping the rebels from their killing. From the capital city of Alteci another military convoy pulled out from the presidential palace now in rebel control. The message from the interior had been received and the leader of the coup had sent who he considered the right people for the job. Retrieving information was not only their specialty, but also more importantly a form of pleasure. The Cobras would not only talk, they would then beg for death.

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Morning came again in Washington and Annie laid in bed looking at the picture of Bebo with her parents sitting on the nightstand. She wanted more than anything to have the tall woman in the bed with her and holding her. After what her mother had told them the night before, sleep had been impossible. It was a toss up between being angry or hurt at having something so important being kept from Reggie and her.

"Please hurry back, love. I really need you here." She ran her finger over the face she'd come to love and hoped somehow her plea would reach Bebo's heart.

The door opened and Reggie stood in the hallway looking like hell. "Can I come in?"

Annie held the corner of the blanket up and her little sister gladly took the invitation. "How are you holding up?" She asked the younger blonde.

"After hearing that my father browbeat my mother into giving up her whole identity because he's homophobic? Just peachy. There was one thing that this did explain for me, or at least cleared it up in my head."

"What's that?"

"Where his reaction to my lifestyle came from. It makes me feel sorry for mom for all the shit he must have given her when we weren't around." Reggie turned on her side so she was facing Annie and put her hands under her chin. "I want more than anything to find someone to share my life with, but if it means having to give up who I am as a person, I don't mind ending up alone."

"I haven't had much time with Bebo, but that's where I think I've lucked out. I'm not bragging, Reg, but don't settle."

The younger blonde smiled before giving her sister a mock glare. "I know, I asked her out first, remember?" She reached over and brushed a strand of hair back behind Annie's ear. "Do you think she knew about this?"

"I think Bebo would've been too young to remember mom, and I think she would've told me if she'd known. This is something that she couldn't have kept to herself if she'd had some idea."

"That's great that you're so confident after being together such a short time." In an instant a glow came into Reggie's eyes as if something important had occurred to her. "You know what else this means? We have every right by birth to walk through those Archives, Annie. Hell our grandmother runs the place."

It was a lure to think about, but Annie still had something else on her mind. "What do you think the rest of the story is? After what Queen Audrey said last night, there has to be something we're missing."

"Just one more reason for daddy and Bebo to get back."

"I'm sure there's more than just that for wanting my daughter home, I'm hoping anyway," said Audrey from the door. She was still wearing her pajamas and robe wanting to go down and read the message Philip had sent them that morning. It was short, but the fact the girls were still on the move and heading in what they thought was the right direction gave her hope they were all right. "A mother never wants to think of her children this way, but I remember when Bo had to go places without me when we were your age. I missed her as a whole, but some of those body parts took preference over some other things."

Reggie and Audrey laughed at Annie's instant blush. "Can I just say there are many reasons I want her home and leave it at that?" asked Annie.

"Like I said, I'm her mother and while I'm loving that she's in love, great detail on the subject isn't necessary." Audrey walked in and took a seat on the bed. "We got a copy of a message they sent from Conger this morning. They're on the move and think they've found where they're keeping your father and his unit. With any luck this will be over soon."

"There was nothing else?" asked Annie. For once in her life she wished she had some sort of vice like smoking to vent some of her nervousness.

"She's fine, Annie. If there's one warrior on the whole isle of Amazonia the trainers have poured their heart and soul into training, it's Bebo. And with her are some of the finest fighters and protectors we have. What we have to learn as scholars is to accept what drives someone like your Bebo and my Boden." She placed her hand on Annie's chest over her heart.

"What?" asked Reggie and Annie together.

"Boden comes from a long line of warriors and she instilled that spirit into our daughter from a very early age. Thing is, you have to be of the same mind for something like that to work. You cannot do something and love it enough to be good at it if you don't like it. Bebo is like her mother," Audrey pressed down a little more on Annie's chest. "She feels the need to prove herself in battle here. In her heart she was born to protect the innocent and preserve the rights of individuals to live the way they so chose to live. Sometimes we have to understand that can't be learned in books or taught to people who have no desire to hear. It must be forged at the end of a sword. From the first woman who called herself an Amazon, that has been our tradition."

"So you're saying that there's no need for teachers if your army is powerful enough?" asked Reggie.

"Think of it this way. When a body is found to have a cancer growing inside, you don't kill the person because of what you see as a flaw. You remove the part that is diseased and hope the healthy tissue is strong enough to fight back and flourish. In the world there are people who are of a mind to try and bend others to their will by beating them down. The only way to defeat them is to remove them so the others who want to live in peace can do so."

"Do you think you can spend time with us today? Reggie and I have so many questions." This

gentle woman, Annie could see, had a lot to do with the person she'd fallen in love with. Bebo may have been born to be a warrior, but she also had a heart for history and learning just like her other mother.

"I'm sure your mother will be able to answer whatever questions you have to get you started. Tonight, if you like, we'll spend time together and I'll bring you up to date on what Amazonia has become since she left." The queen rested her hands on her lap and looked over at the same picture Annie had been studying that morning. "I may be asking too much, but don't shut your mother out. She needs, I think, to feel needed and accepted by the two of you especially now. When your father returns there's a chance she'll find herself alone if you turn your backs on her."

Annie reached out and took one of Audrey's hands in hers. "We wouldn't do that, highness."

The promise bracelet came into view and Audrey wanted to see what Bebo had picked, but wanted to also respect their privacy. It was more than a piece of jewelry to their people; it was a bit of a person's heart. "My daughter has chosen well."

"May you always think so." Annie lifted her hand up when she saw the queen's lingering look. "I'd take it off to let you see, but I think it would kill me to do it. You can take a look if you want though."

Before she looked Audrey explained the symbolism of the bracelet and how some people didn't feel it appropriate to share with others. "What I mean is, don't feel like you have to show it to me because I'm her mother. This is the equivalent of my daughter's most private thoughts."

"It's because you're her mother that I want you to see it. You say that Boden had much to do with Bebo becoming the person she is, but I think you don't give yourself enough credit. There is a lot of you in her heart, but more importantly in her mind."

"Thank you for saying that, Annie, but right now my heart and mind is rooting for the part that's all Bo."

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The energy bar Bebo was eating had attracted a small monkey and she was laughing at the way he was trying to get the peanut butter off the roof of his mouth when she shared a piece with him. She and the group had been napping since one in the afternoon high in the tree branches. They had set up some trap lines of their own, not to kill or maim someone but to sound a small alarm in their ear pieces if someone walked through the hair thin lines.

"How much farther?" asked Beth. She was sitting in the next branch over and eating another energy bar, hers made mostly of dried fruit.

"Three miles tops." It was close to six so like the night before; they would have the cover of darkness when they arrived. "Get on the horn and send one more message then tell them we're going silent until I have the unit in hand, or we find they've been moved again."

After that was done and they finished the simple meal, they started moving again, Bebo wanting to be in place when the sun went down. Something in her gut told her they were running out of time, and she didn't want to go home and tell Annie her father had died before she had a chance to save him.

In the camp the door to the cell opened and the men outside laughed as the team blinked up at them like blinded owls. "Dat one there," the tall man said in broken English. He pointed to Patrick and the guards dragged the general out.

As soon as they were able to let him stand Patrick almost fell his legs were so numb from sitting for so long. A cane slapping against them a couple of times got the blood flowing soon enough and he was moved to a small room with a single naked light bulb hanging in the center of the ceiling. The generator powering the electricity in the space could be heard sputtering outside, and the whole thing reminded him of a bad action movie.

"Would you like something to drink before we begin?" Another man spoke from the corner; his English much more polished and educated sounding than the guard's. Patrick squinted but he still couldn't make out his face. "I asked you a question," he said, this time sounding a little firmer.

"No."

"Good, we can see now that you're able to talk, so I'll explain how this works. I'm going to ask you a question and if you don't answer," he stopped to laugh, the others joining in. "Let's just say it'll be in your best interest to answer." Pelli knew his limits as far as who he could play with before the real interrogators arrived in the morning, and he figured he'd start with the oldest and what he saw as the weakest link in the bunch they'd captured. He wasn't expecting the man to tell him anything but throwing him back in with his people, broken and bloodied, would loosen their tongues when the others arrived.

"If you want to kill me, go ahead, but I'm not giving you shit." Patrick stuck his jaw out in defiance and the man standing next to him punched him so hard it felt like a muscle had pulled in his neck it whipped back so fast.

"The left leg, Mau," Pelli ordered. A thick club swung down and landed just above Patrick's knee. Everyone heard the bone snap when the blow was complete, but all they managed to do was make the general break a sweat. "See, sir, you may think you aren't giving me shit, and you can continue to do so, but it'll come at a price. Eventually we'll run out of bones and I'll have to find something else to amuse me. Or should I say, someone else? Perhaps one of the lovely young women you're traveling with?"

"Fuck you." Patrick gathered what saliva was left in his mouth and spit it toward the voice.

"The right leg, Mau." The club came down again, only this time it not only broke the bone but the skin as well. Still Patrick stayed quiet. "One last thing, then I'll send you back to think about our next meeting. Mau, his right hand." His henchman picked up Patrick's hand and placed it on

a small table beside his chair. From his belt he pulled out a large knife and buried it in the palm. When he twisted the man was satisfied when Patrick finally let out a small squeak of pain. "Something for the maggots in there to feast on until we see each other again."

The sun had finished its descent by the time they carried Patrick across the compound to their holding cell. On the other side of the wall, some wild pigs the villagers had managed to capture were penned and eating some scraps. With no care for his injuries, the rebels threw him back in and relocked the door. When the lock turned again, Patrick gave himself permission to moan. The bugs were instantly attracted to the open wound on his leg and hand driving him mad.

"I can say with certainty we're in the right place," said Bebo. She lowered the binoculars after Patrick disappeared from view. His blond hair sticking out like a beacon in the sea of people moving around in the village.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Steph.

"I'm open to suggestions," said Bebo with a grimace. She was trying to forget the mental image she'd just seen, and hoped the rest of Patrick's people were okay. "After all, I'm not going in there alone."

"This might not be the most acceptable, but I say we wait. If this place runs like the last, they'll be asleep after inflicting a bit more pain, and we don't know how many there are." Bear took her own look and chimed in her opinion. Sitting in the large tree about three hundred yards away, they were all mentally calculating how many rebels were stationed in the village. So far Bear had counted twenty-eight, but some of the shacks had shown no movement. It could mean they were empty, but then again some of them could have been getting in some sleep.

Bebo was about to answer in agreement when the man who had broken Patrick's legs dragged a woman from one of the shacks. In her arms was an infant that looked to be about a few weeks old. She was crying and trying to use her body as a shield to protect her child from the man's viciousness.

"*No, please I'll do whatever you want just spare my baby,*" the woman said through her sobs. It was some form of local dialect and the Amazons watching didn't understand the words but the pleas of a mother were a universal language.

Mau laughed and ordered two of his men to hold the woman still. From his belt he pulled his machete and for an instant Bebo thought he was going to kill the child, but he had one of the men strip it from her and hold it. The infant was crying only adding to the bizarre scene of hatred.

"*You're nothing but a whore and part of the scum that has infected this land for too long,*" Mau told her. He used the long blade to cut her shirt open. The action got Bebo to start moving.

It wasn't the brightest thing she could have decided, but there was no way she would sit and watch some atrocity happen and do nothing. The day she was to face judgment and try to enter the Amazon land of the dead, this would not be something counted against her, and she hoped

Annie could forgive her if her sense of right got her killed.

*"Just remember you made this decision by refusing me, I spared your child, it's you who's killed him."* Mau spoke the words close to her face as his men stood by and laughed at the woman's whimpering. Two strokes and her breasts lay on the ground at her feet. In a land where children depended on their mother for nourishment, not being able to breast-feed was the child's certain death along with its mother. He wiped the blade clean on her ripped shirt and left her in the square to die. *"She wanted that kid so much, give it to her,"* Mau ordered the man holding the infant.

They were his last words as an arrow pierced the back of his neck and sliced through his vocal cords. Before the two men with him could sound the alarm two more projectiles came from the jungle and dropped them. Bebo came at a run and twisted his head to finish what the arrow had not. The others joined her and dragged the men to the closest building along with the woman to try and keep the element of surprise as long as possible.

The woman was still crying and trying to hold her child for the little time she had left. Above her hovered strange women in face paint and heavily armed. *"Please you must save my baby."* She tried to hold the child up and hand it to the closest person.

"It's ok, you're going to be fine," said Rita in a soft voice. It was a lie, but the Amazon wanted to provide as much comfort as possible to the condemned soul bleeding out before her.

*"Take my baby, I beg you."* Her vision was growing dim and her strength had left her.

"I think she wants you to take the baby," said Bebo as she went about pulling the arrows out of the three throats. She wanted to leave behind no physical trace of their being there. "If you do though, just remember what kind of commitment that is. Do you think Jeanne is ready?" Bebo asked referring to Rita's girlfriend still back in Amazonia.

"She'd probably thank you for pushing me to the alter that much sooner. She's been ready for this since two days after we starting dating." She took the child from the woman and held it to her chest to see if it would stop crying. "I'll take good care of," she peeked in the diaper to find it was a girl. "I'll take good care of her I swear it on my honor." Rita bent low and whispered into the woman's ear. She lifted the limp hand and placed it on the baby's back so the woman could feel her child as she slipped into the next life.

*"Thank you. Thank you, goddess."* It was the last thing the woman said before the blackness took her. She was still breathing but her mind had mercifully shut off the pain as she slowly started to slip away.

"Congratulations, Rita, now try and find some place to leave the kid until we're done here," said Bear. There was a horrible stench where they were standing and when she looked into the sty, she could see the wild pigs feeding on some of the dead villagers the rebels had thrown into the pen. "Fuck me, we need to finish and get the Hades out of here."



"Steph, you and Beth take position here and cover us. Bear, take Rita and take up a position at the next building over. Max and I are going where we saw them take Patrick. With any luck they're all piled in there together." Bebo looked at all of them and put up her fist, the warrior's sign of courage. "Come on, Max, let's go get the reinforcements."

Three guards sat close to the doorway of the cell the Cobras were in. They were talking quietly amongst themselves but just as quietly two arrows cut through the night and pinned two of them to the wall behind them. The third met his maker at the end of Bebo's knife.

"And here I thought my knife throwing needed more work."

"Has anyone ever told you that violence makes you funny in a strange sick sort of way?" asked Max, as they moved closer.

"It's an old family tradition if what Boden tells me is true. I'm just trying to forget this isn't a game and you don't get to wipe the paint off after we're done. It's kind of disconcerting otherwise."

Max used the butt of her rifle to get the lock off the door. "Hi, fellas, care to come out and play?"

"What in the fuck are you doing here?" asked Titus. He threw the door open wider and crawled out.

"You're welcome for coming all the way out here to get you," said Rita as she offered her hand to the others to get out. "Bebo, you'd better get over here."

Patrick was lying there looking like the pain was making him start to go into shock. He turned his head when he felt someone kneel next to him and turn on a small flashlight. Even with the paint he recognized her. "You?"

"Yep, sorry to disappoint you, but it's me. This is going to hurt like a bitch but we have to get you out of here. You think you're up to helping me?"

"Just leave me and get my kids out. I'll just slow you down." He turned his face away from her and to the dark wall.

"I promised your daughters I'd find you and get you out, Patrick, so you don't get to be so noble. If you want I'll give you a stick to bite on, but you're coming with me."

"Mau!" Pelli yelled from the door of the shack he was using. When there was no answer, he motioned for one of his men. "*Find him and tell him to leave the women alone for a minute. We have to be ready for tomorrow.*"

"Mau is the guy you just did a tonsillectomy on, Bebo, so I'm guessing this means trouble," said Max. The Cobras were all looking into the cell waiting for Patrick to give an order, looking a little lost in their underwear.

"Not that you all don't look cute, but do you have any idea where your clothes are?" asked Bebo. That got her a group of shaking heads. "Okay, this is where the hand to hand stuff we went over will come in handy. We're going to move out of here and cover you. Your job is to find someone who looks like they're your size and boot up."

"We don't take orders from you," said Titus.

"Boy, shut the fuck up and do what she says. I don't see anyone else out here trying to help us," said Junis. They watched as Bebo looped her arms under Patrick's and started to drag him out of the cell.

"Max, tell the others we're on our way out. I'm headed to the trees with the general so try and find something for these guys to wear and shoot with." She laid him out in the open and took her pack off. From the front pocket she took out a field kit and pulled out the supplies she'd need for a quick bandage. They needed to stop the bleeding before shock really did set in. "Patrick, I need you to stay awake and with me. I'm going to get you out of here but I can't without a little help from you." She wrapped the bandage around his leg after knocking away as much dirt and bugs as she could see. As she worked she looked up at Arthur and smiled. "How you doing?"

"I'm a little hungry but I'm sure glad to see you."

Patrick interrupted them and tried to get her to move on. "Leave me I'm telling you. We haven't had any food or water for days, so it'll be a miracle if they make it a mile before they collapse. You don't need to be carrying wounded as well."

The princess acted like she hadn't heard him speak and turned her attention to Junis. "Did you have the opportunity to find York?" She fashioned another bandage around Patrick's hand as she spoke.

"We were on the ground about five hours when some fucking flying tree wiped Brian out. They held us in some hellhole first for hours then moved us here. We've been in that pit ever since." The bandage was finished and Bebo pulled the injured man into a sitting position then thought of something. Laying him back down, she jabbed her fingers into two points on his thighs.

"I can't feel my legs," said Patrick with a bit of panic in his voice.

"Trust me it's going to hurt like a bitch when I release those pressure points and you can. What I need now though, is for you to be quiet as I carry you out of here."

"What do you need us to do, Bebo?" asked Doug.

"I need you to do what you were trained to do and back up my people. What's the slogan? 'Be all you can be.' That's what I need you to do." Before she attended to her load again, she pulled an arrow out and sent it flying between Michelle and Titus. Max followed suit with one of her own and dropped another guard while Bebo renocked. "Junis, Billy and Carey, those look about your

size. Try and find some good boots. We have a lot of walking ahead of us and I don't want anyone getting foot rot."

The screaming of names was getting louder and louder as the men being called weren't reporting. Pelli was a minute from calling the alarm when he saw someone carrying one of his prisoners across the yard to the bush. If the leadership showed up tomorrow and there were no Americans, it was going to be his balls hooked to the generator so he called for his men to open fire.

"Hang on, Patrick." He was folded over her right shoulder and was doing his best to hang on to her belt without making it difficult for her to run. The safety came off her rifle and she returned fire with one hand while keeping the other on the middle of his back. They were twenty yards from the trees and cover. "You doing okay up there?"

"It's the crowning moment of my career," he said with a flat voice. The bullets were coming closer but then the jungle was also getting closer and he could almost believe they were going to make it.

She kept running until the village could no longer be seen. It was only a matter of time before the rebels started searching though. "Do you think you can hold on to my neck?"

He hated to ask why since he had a feeling he already knew the answer, but curiosity got the better of him. "Why?"

"Didn't you like to climb trees when you were a kid?" She put him down and maneuvered a rope from her pack around his waist. The question was meant to spare his feelings but she had no intention of letting him fall. With care she spread his legs and sat between them and tethered them together. When she got up Patrick rose with her.

Voices were getting closer as they started climbing. Bebo had tied off her equipment to a vine and tied the other end to a belt loop. The arm around her neck tightened as they got higher but Patrick stayed quiet. She passed the bottom branches and headed for the middle of the old tree she had picked. The spot she chose was wide and the branch had formed a small indentation in the wood that reminded her of a large cradle. She sat and made sure her passenger was positioned so he wouldn't fall while she bent to pull up her stuff.

In a few minutes she had painted his face, hair and chest with deep green paint and stretched his legs out in front of him. From her kit, she pulled a stick and pressed it against his lips. Leaning forward she whispered in his ear, pointing down to the woods for the need for silence. She could hear them fanning out and looking for them, their yells to each other to be careful ringing out from below. Why didn't any of them ever bother looking up she wondered?

"I need to release your pressure points now, but like I said, it's going to hurt worse than when the bastard broke them."

"Why not leave them?" He was starting to sweat just thinking about it. When Bebo had relieved the pain he almost wanted to kiss her.

"It's not the greatest for circulation. Trust me, sir, if I could I'd leave them the way they are because of the pain."

He looked at her and tried to avoid the inevitable. "You don't have to be so polite, it's not going to make me like you anymore than I do now. I won't accept Annie being with you."

She slipped the stick in his mouth and smiled. "Of all the things we could be talking about, that's the best you could do?" Before she released him back to his pain, Bebo took the opportunity to set the bones so the ache wouldn't be as great as he thought it was going to be. "It's her decision, general, so don't blow the chance to share in her life. I'll respect whatever choice Annie makes and you should give her the same courtesy. She's your child so I'd think you'd want her to be happy."

The jabs came before he could respond and he had to fight the urge to throw up. Then it gradually started to subside to just a dull ache. "Why are you helping me? If you had asked me to leave you, I would have."

"We're all different, sir. My mother says that's what makes the world such an interesting place. She's right. Think of how bored you'd be if everyone was just like you." She handed over her gun and a couple of extra clips. "I know you don't like me, but I'd appreciate you not shooting me when I turn my back so I can go and help the others." It was said as a tease but they both knew there was more than a bit of truth behind the statement.

"You're wrong, Bebo, you aren't all that different. You're very much like your other mother. The one who sees the world like I do. The only difference between us is she always comes out the winner in all the games she plays. Yes, you two are very much alike," he said in a whisper when she walked to the end of the branch and jumped. She was like a being touched by the gods with special powers as he watched her move through the trees. It was the lack of fear he guessed, and he searched his brain for what the Amazons did in the later years of training to make people like Bebo ignore one of the most powerful of human emotions.

In a way she was right. He could pull the trigger and end it all here where there would be no one to ask questions. Killing her would accomplish so many things. It would keep her away from Annie, let him hurt those who had done nothing but humiliate him when he was younger and show the people close to him he had won after all. No woman would come in and steal what he had worked for and was proud of. He raised the gun and aimed, his finger on the trigger. One squeeze was all it would take, and she even stopped and looked straight at him giving him the clear shot. Looked him right in the eye even at the distance she'd already made and dared him to pull it.

"Come on, Patrick, prove me wrong," said Bebo to the trees.

True to his nature he pulled the trigger.

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Annie and Reggie followed their mother to the very back of the garden. A small shrine had been set up to Artemis and before it knelt Audrey and Boden. They were holding hands and had their heads lowered in as if in prayer.

The girls watched as their mother laid a basket of fruit and flowers at the statue's feet and pulled a couple of sticks of incense from it. Doris lit one and placed along side the two already burning and prepared to join her sisters in meditation. She figured the best way to orient her girls to the ways of the Amazons was by showing them.

"Artemis is the patron goddess of the Amazons. We pray to her to thank her for the good in our lives and in times when we need guidance. As in all things, there should be a token of gratitude to repay for her listening to our requests. The priestesses have always said the goddess enjoys things that are fresh from the earth to grace her altars."

"Mom, if the Methodists could see you now, baby," teased Reggie. She took one of the incense sticks her mother held out and lit it, getting a poke in the side from Annie to keep quiet.

"Not to worry, Annie. It's also my belief that the goddess also enjoys a bit of humor along with all our woes. For us praying to the ancient gods is common place, but I can understand what Reggie is saying," said Audrey. She sat on the grass and patted the ground next to her so the Paddio's would join them. "We aren't trying to convert you to something you find foolish, but we find that the differences between religions is only a matter of semantics."

"What do you mean?" asked Annie.

"We find good things in our world and we thank the gods. Here you find good things or need guidance and you pray to the one God. Where Bebo and your father are right now, there are people who still find wonder in the sun rising in the morning, in the river still flowing day after day and in the fruit that both the sun and water bring throughout the year. Whose right and whose god is more powerful?"

"That you believe in some higher power is all that's important. Is that what you're saying?" Annie looked at her really wanting to know the answer.

"What's important is that you have something to believe in that brings you comfort in the times in your life you need comfort. None is completely right and none is completely wrong."

"No wonder they made you queen," said Reggie with the same humor. "You have a really good answer for everything."

"Years of practice, Reg. Boden and I raised the question asking champion of all time."

"Ha! You should have been around Annie growing up." Reggie got another punch to the arm, which caused them all to laugh.

"I'll pray to anyone who'll listen if they just bring Bebo back to me unharmed." The words slipped out and so did the tears she'd been trying to keep at bay all day. "Shouldn't we know something by now? It's been two days."

Doris and Audrey both looked at Annie and felt her pain like no other two people could. To marry someone willing to go and fight, and watching them go was the worst torture a person could endure. This was Annie's first time though, but it never did get better.

Bo leaned in and kissed her wife's neck. The sigh she had felt escape Audrey's body made her feel bad for ever making her wife feel this bad. "Why don't you take Reggie and Dothan for a walk, Adie? I'd like to talk to Annie for a little while if that's all right with her."

Annie nodded her agreement and smiled when the queen turned and faced her spouse. "Don't feel bad, my love. There has never been a time that, while I worry, I haven't been proud of who you are and what it is you do. It's our job to wait behind and worry, but that shouldn't make you sad, it should make you think of the love that binds our hearts together. And now you should be happy that your cub has found someone to worry for her like I do for you." Audrey bent her head and didn't care that she had an audience. She kissed her wife long and passionately. "I love you."

"Gods, Adie, I love you so much I find it hard to breathe at times." Bo kissed her one more time before giving her a smile. "Now get going before their eyes really do pop out when I roll you around this grass," she teased.

"You love her a great deal," commented Annie. She looked at the Amazon consort as she watched her wife walk away.

"Audrey is easy to love, but yes, I love her with all that I am. She was the first person I ever met who saw not the warrior or who I pretended to be, but the woman only I thought I knew. It took only one afternoon to know that she would hold my heart for as long as she pleased. It's funny you know...something so clichéd that it doesn't bother mentioning." Boden sighed and stretched out on the grass.

"What?"

"You look at someone like me and Bebo and the world sees certain things. We're tall and strong, we can fight like a fury unleashed, but when our days are ended it's people like you and Adie where the world finds true strength. I think for the first time, the Amazons will have a little of both worlds when Bebo ascends to the throne, and we'll have her mother to thank for that."

The story of Bebo's parentage came back to Annie, and in reality, Boden was her mother not Audrey. "She told me how she came to be, highness. I believe you've had more than enough to do with who Bebo is."

A dark brow arched in a familiar pose, on a face that was like Bebo's, it was eerie. It sent a shiver through Annie. "And do you think that's a good thing?" Bo was surprised Annie already knew so much about her daughter.

"I think you already know the answer to that question, but if you need to hear it from me, yes it's a very good thing. Watching you and the queen, I can only hope our children turn out as wonderful as Bebo, and that she still looks at me the way you look at her more than twenty years from now."

"If you got Bebo to give you a betrothal bracelet in less than three months, trust me, Annie, she thinks you're pretty wonderful yourself."

A couple of blades of grass came loose in Annie's fingers when she pulled at the turf. This was all so new and she felt that she wouldn't be enough for Bebo. "I don't...what I mean is..." she looked at her future in-law and was at a loss for words.

"You can tell me anything, and I promise it'll be just between us. I can go get Audrey though if it'll make you feel more comfortable."

"I'm just not used to my parents being that affectionate with each other...like you and Queen Audrey are. I just don't want to disappoint her if I'm lacking, you know, in that department." She had to still her fingers before the gardeners put a bounty on her head and she made a big bald spot on the lawn.

"I can see what my daughter finds so attractive about you, little one, and you can stop your worrying. Some people find it hard to show how they feel about each other, but it doesn't mean the feelings aren't there or that they don't love each other. It's just with Audrey and I, well let's say we never got out of that newly married - can't keep our hands off each other stage. The greatest thing about it aside from the obvious and most important reason, it embarrasses the heck out of Bebo." The joke had its intended affect and Annie laughed.

"Do you think she'll be okay out there?"

"I think she'll be fine, and I'm not just saying that to make you feel better. Bebo has worked all her life for this moment and the ones that will come after this, but that's not why I asked to speak with you." Boden sat up and reached for one of Annie's hands. "What Bebo's doing now, the fighting and the trying to save innocent lives, it comes naturally because of the training she's undergone, but there's a price that's heavy to pay when it comes to your spirit. It changes a person when you know you're responsible for ending someone else's life."

"Is that how you felt, the first time I mean?" Annie sandwiched Boden's hand between hers.

"I got to see a dark part of my soul I didn't know existed, and I had a hard time dealing with it, yes. When she was called to come here, I wanted to say no, because if she was forced into something like what's happened she wouldn't have the one thing I did to see me through."

"It was Audrey who pulled you through wasn't it?"

"It was more than that, it was what Audrey and I have together that brought enough light back in

to make the darkness bearable. She'll need you as much as you'll come to need her, so please don't turn away from her." The plea ended in a small and soft voice that marked how important Annie's reply was to Bo.

"You never have to worry about my commitment, Bo. I love your daughter and I need her more than anything or anyone who has ever touched my life. I've found solace from the world, and it's in her arms. No matter what happens or how fragile she is when she comes back, she'll find the same peace in mine."

"Thank you, Annie. It may be selfish of me, or make me an old fool, but I needed to hear you say that out loud." Boden got to her feet and offered her hand to the young woman.

"Now that we've gotten all the heavy stuff out of the way, could I ask you to teach me something?" Annie brushed the seat of her pants clean of any grass and smiled up at Bo.

"Anything." Boden followed Annie's eyes to the trees in the space and laughed. "Your on. We'll have you swinging from the branches by tomorrow." The three women by the back of the house looked up when Annie let out a squeal.

Audrey followed it up and found her wife and Annie standing together on a high branch. She shook her head and wished Bebo had been there to see it. "She isn't afraid of heights is she?"

"Terrified," answered Reggie with an evil laugh.

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The bullet left the chamber and Bebo prepared to jump but at the last minute stayed in place. Her gut told her Patrick didn't care for her, but he was too honorable to just kill her in cold blood. The bullet passed so close to her Bebo could hear it, but he had aimed it at the man on the ground near where she was headed. She looked up and gave him a short wave of thanks. It wasn't like she hadn't seen him, but it was nice to know Patrick was looking out for her.

He lifted his hand in return and gave her a series of hand signals to tell her to stay vigilant and that he would provide as much cover as possible. If she didn't have places to be, Bebo would have climbed back up to the general and demanded to know where he'd learned their sign language so well.

The battle was on and the rebels were running around trying to find where the shots and arrows were coming from. Already twenty of them lay dead in various spots around the village and the others were running into the jungle trying to find cover. What they found instead though, was the Cobras lying in wait. The Amazons had given up their side arms and guns to their American counterparts and were content to fight with their bows from the trees.

An hour passed and as the sun set a dead calm came over the area. Pelli and his men were dead or had managed to flee into the bush. The only visible movement was the villagers who thought it was now safe to come out of their hiding places. More than one woman was seen holding a



mutilated family member that had been thrown in piles behind some of the building for later burning. Others were going through the possessions of the dead rebels trying to find boots and other valuables to help replace what was taken from them. Along side this group were the Cobras trying to find a pair of boots for their upcoming long hike back to the first village.

"Did you see where they put your gear?" asked Steph of Michelle. The rest of her group was collecting any identifiable weapons like the arrows sticking out of more than one dead rebel. There was no sense advertising they had been involved if they didn't have to.

"They blindfolded us from the start so I have no idea. I'm thinking though that we not only have to find that, but Brian as well. We don't know if he's still alive but we don't like leaving men on the field."

Titus walked up wearing a pair of pants that were way too short for him and a pair of boots that looked like they pinched a bit from his careful steps. "Where's the general?" he demanded of Bebo.

"I treed him and came back for your sorry ass. Make a thorough search of the area then let's get moving. We have plenty of land to cover before morning if you are all up to it."

"I don't take orders from you, bitch," he grabbed a fist full of her shirt and tried to pull her forward. "Try and remember that."

"Walker, let go of me before you're drinking your meals out of a straw for months to come. Now!" With her chobos in her hand, Bebo came down hard on one leg but not enough to break any bones. There was no way she was carrying another guy out of here if she could avoid it, but she wasn't about to take shit from this man either. "Touch me again and I'll break both of them and leave you for these fuckers to finish off. Because believe me, there'll be more coming after us once they find this place. I think you and the rest of your group were on today's menu, so move out."

"Titus, man, relax and let's get the hell out of here," said Billy from beside him. They had all seen Annie disappear to the room where Bebo had been standing alone that night in the museum, and they had also seen how the Amazon guards had turned him back when he tried to go after her. What had escaped no one's notice was the missing piece of jewelry on Annie's left hand ring finger. The girl had made her choices and the winner was their savior. "If you have scores to settle then I suggest the blue mats back home if Bebo's willing. This isn't the place and we have injured men."

Bebo moved to where Mau laid dead and started to remove his pants. He was the largest man she'd seen out there and thought his clothes would be the easiest to fit over the splints she knew they'd have to put on Patrick's legs. "Thanks, Billy, now if you could find me enough wood and maybe a sheet or blanket for a stretcher. I need to get back to your general and get him squared away for travel."

"You got it, Bebo. Thanks for coming to get us."

"No problem." She started for the trees with Arthur on her heels as she went. "Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine, Bebo. You're right, they were saving us for someone else. They only took Patrick tonight as going after the weakest link since he was the oldest. Not much sport in torturing him, or they thought he'd break easier than the rest of us." Arthur looked up into the tree they'd stopped under and shook his head. "How in the hell did you get him up there?"

"Teamwork," teased Bebo. "Hold all my stuff and let me go get him." She rose into the branches so quickly it made Arthur think she had just gotten up from a good night's sleep. Her gun was laid out across Patrick's lap when she found him and his eyes were closed as if he were taking a nap. They opened with no sense of urgency and he studied her for a long moment as she stared back. There was something about Patrick, being so close to him, that reminded her of someone other than his children. "Miss me?"

"What happened?"

"We killed all the bad guys and then went shopping for clothes and accessories. Don't worry, general, all your people are fine and ready to move out." She came closer to him and took the weapon from him then looked at his legs. The area where the breaks were already had bruises that took up his whole upper leg, which made her worry about blood clots.

"Don't trust me, do you?" he asked when she took the gun back.

"I'd have pinned your head to this tree with an arrow hours ago if I didn't trust you, sir." She let out a long sigh and tried to clear her head. "I know this isn't the best time but I wanted to ask you something."

"No, I won't approve of your joining with my daughter. Not now, not ever, so if that's the only reason you came out here, you wasted a trip."

"How'd you guess that right off?"

"I'm not as ignorant of Amazonia's customs as you think I am, highness, and before you ask I'm not going into it with you."

"Then do you know that it's Doris' blessing that's the most important to me?"

"I know my wife, and she won't go against me on this. She knows what the consequences of that are."

Bebo shook her head and tried not to let her anger take over. Her mother Boden had been right, some people outside of Amazonia could be cruel without reason. "To love by intimidation is to never know if you're loved in return, but that's your business. I just wanted you to know what my intentions are, and in the end I'll go by what Annie wants, because you're clearly making this

decision based on your own happiness and not hers. To that end I'm sure the elders will understand."

"You know that Titus is the better choice for her, if you're so concerned about her happiness you'd put your own selfishness aside and see that. He can give her the kind of life she and her future children can be proud of." He wasn't totally prepared when she quickly moved forward and grabbed him under the arms and hauled him to a standing position, his feet not touching the tree branch as she held him suspended in an amazing show of strength considering she didn't look like she was straining.

"If I thought that, I'd walk away, general, so don't pretend to know my thoughts and feelings when you won't explain yours. I come from a place where brute strength and the ability to beat any opponent are held in high regard. And if that's all I based my life on, I'd still be the better choice, but I don't. I love Annie and I want to spend my life not only keeping her safe, but loving her and watching her become whatever will make her feel fulfilled."

He looked at her then over the side of where they were standing. Patrick had a feeling that if it had been any other person with a little less morals, he would have been brought down the easiest way possible when she just threw him to the ground. "We're at a stalemate it seems because we're never going to agree on anything."

"No we're not. I'm going to get you and the others out of here because I promised to do so, then I'm going to deliver you back to your family. What you do with that second chance is up to you."

Without too much gentleness, Bebo moved him back into position on her back and started down the tree. Hopefully the others would be there with the supplies she had asked for and they could start back for home.

[Continued in Chapter 5](#)

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~ Amazonia ~

Book 1

by Ali Vali

Disclaimers: [See Part 1.](#)

*The Chase*

Bebo and Steph worked with Frances to get Patrick's legs splinted and ready for travel. Under a large tree Beth sat with the computer and was reporting their latest developments to the Lincoln.

*Snake Charmer: We have most of the Cobras in hand. Missing Turner and their original quarry.*

*U.S.S. Lincoln: You have two more days to get to an extraction area before we have to move positions. Once that happens we will not be able to provide the same level of air cover.*

*Snake Charmer: We'll try our best but our orders were to pull out once we had all our targets. Out.*

"What's up?" asked Bebo when Beth knelt next to her. The princess scanned the page and shook her head not liking what it said. "Let's move out then."

Titus and Arthur took the first shift of carrying Patrick's litter. The others followed single file as the Amazons ran point looking for any traps like the one that had taken out Brian. From the trees Max kept an eye on everyone making sure no one lagged and no one uninvited got close enough to do harm.

They stopped after four hours of walking and the women shared some of their energy bars with the Americans. Junis went and sat next to Bebo and stretched his legs out in front of him. "What's up?" he asked the woman with her head resting against the tree behind her with her eyes closed.

"The stock market last time I checked, but who knows since we've been out here." Hearing his voice and having to answer made the image of Annie in her mind disappear. Bebo opened her eyes and laughed along with him. "Sorry, it's been a long haul." She explained the message from the ship and how much time they had left. "Are you positive that first village we went through was the hospice?"

"Walker went ahead and scoped out the area. He reported seeing a man fitting York's description being led from one of the buildings along with a group of women who could have been nuns or missionaries. That's all I can give you."

Bebo took a deep breath and held it for so long Junis thought she was going to pass out. "I guess that means I have to talk to Titus." She patted his leg and got up moving closer to the Captain and his general who had their heads together in a whispered conversation. "Can I talk to you, Captain Walker?"

"I got nothing to say to you, bitch."

"You really do need to work on some new lines, but I need you to put aside your feeling for me and report on your earlier surveillance. I need a run down on what you saw at the first village before you got captured."

"Like I said I don't report to you and I'm not here to help you." Titus folded his arms over his chest and looked to Patrick to see if he was going to dress him down for his behavior.

The royal also looked to Patrick to see if he was going to intervene, and when he turned his head and looked at the foliage she figured it was a lost cause. The others in the unit also took note of the two men's behaviors and Junis decided to take charge.

"Captain Walker, I'm ordering you to answer her question. This isn't a contest to see who gets the girl, it's our lives at stake here and I for one am ready to get the hell out of this fucking hellhole. Either you answer her question or I'll make sure you face court martial when we get out of here."

"I'm in charge here, Junis, let's not forget that," said Patrick focusing in on the group again.

"I'm sorry, sir, but your injuries have left you in a state of mind we can't rely on at the moment. If you want to reprimand me, you can do so once we get back to base. I want you to know though, that I plan to file a report of what happened out here and what kind of cooperation our counterparts received." He leaned closer and made sure Patrick could see his face clearly. "And I mean a full report, sir."

The general gripped the sides of his makeshift bed and glared at his number two man. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm trying to keep us all alive, but you can interpret my actions however you like. We don't have time for this shit anyway. The Lincoln's put us on a timeline that isn't very favorable." Junis stood up and looked to his people. "Billy and Doug, take a turn with the litter and let's move. For now we're taking our directives from Bebo and her people. Move!" The big man's voice rose as loud as he dared and he was relieved when everyone fell back into formation.

A mile later Max called down from the trees with a serene birdcall that was just slightly different than the ones they'd been hearing in the jungle. This was the area they had all moved through earlier in the trees so Bear had already pointed out a few triggers on the jungle floor making their progress slower than Bebo had planned. The Amazons looked up and watched the movement of Max's hands.

The princess put a clenched fist into the air and all noise from the group stopped. They were in the middle of an area full of traps and the safest place for all of them was where Max was sitting at the moment, but that wasn't an option. She motioned to Bear and Beth to find them all a hiding place from whomever Max had spotted ahead of them. As the two women did that, Bebo took charge of Billy and Doug and the litter they were carrying.

"Stay put and shoot anyone who gets within ten feet of you," she handed both healthy men a weapon before disappearing into the tree above them.

It was part of the posse from their first night out. The group of civilians along with some uniformed rebels were checking their traps for any human targets they might have ensnared or killed. From her vantage point, Bebo could see the line of men coming closer and their

movements as they went from one trigger to the next. Again they couldn't take the chance of being discovered before they had all of their people together but it never hurt to even the odds if you could do so without being detected. And the added noise would muffle any cry from the infant Rita had strapped to her chest.

From her back pocket she pulled the weapon Annie had found the most amusing when she had packed, and smiled when Max pulled out one just like it. Bebo positioned herself against the trunk of the tree and waited for one of the runners to move to the next trigger. With luck there were three other men following close behind him. She pulled back on the slingshot and let the hard nut from one of the trees in the area in its pouch fly to the trigger releasing it.

The sound of rope and vine being pulled taut as the log came down filled the air around her but it was soon replaced by the screams of the men who it had hit. The area became a beehive of activity when the men working with the rebels moved towards their friends. The two Amazons took advantage of the chaos and set off another two snares cutting down the number of men by a third when they were done.

"*Stop! Everyone stop moving,*" ordered the man who had been walking at the front of the line. He walked to where the first set of men lay moaning from their injuries. "*Idiots,*" he whispered as he removed the machete from his belt. With three swift strokes, the leader beheaded the injured men.

In the healthy group left, one of the younger men moved toward the other group of injured ignoring the order to be still. Bleeding from the nose and ears lying in the middle was his older brother and seeing what had happened to the first set of men, he wanted to protect the only family he had left.

"*Please, sir, he's all I have left.*" He cradled the bloody head in his lap and looked up at the man blocking out the little sun that filtered through the trees.

There was no warning just another swipe of the large blade and the young man fell over. His blood poured out over his injured brother who a second later joined him in death. "*Anyone else want to beg for someone's life? I don't have time to deal with stupidity,*" the man pointed to the traps. "*Now back out of here and let's move. I know someone's been out here and there's no answer from Pelli's group.*"

The Cobras and Amazons sat silent as the men moved on towards the village they had left behind. As soon as they were far enough away, Beth pulled out the laptop and checked the satellite feed. If there was no one else on the path they could make better time before these men reversed their course and came after whoever had killed every rebel under Pelli's command.

Bebo dropped next to the litter but ignored the man lying on it and instead concentrated on Beth. When the guard gave her the all-clear sign she motioned for Beth to join her along with Junis. "Bear and I'll have a go at carrying our package, general," she said to Junis. "You get your men and follow Rita and Steph, and I mean step for step. We need to make time if we want to put some distance between those guys and us before they find our little surprise. Max will keep an

eye on you from above and if you hear this bird call," she demonstrated the signal and waited for him to nod, "Move into the bush as quickly and quietly as you can."

"How much farther?" asked Junis.

"We have about three miles to the village we think is the hospice. The village you first came across didn't have any markings or equipment of a hospital. I believe it would have been a first stop for York and Brian. When Titus saw him, York was probably there to tend to either some injured rebels or trying to keep Brian alive for information. The river bends to the east of here and along the banks there's a village that looked promising."

Bear didn't want to do it in front of the men, but she felt like she had to speak up. "The movement we saw there was normal, Bebo. I thought we all agreed on that."

"We did, but I think it's because the rebels are stretched thin. You had one village to the west guarded by Pelli and his group of goons, and the first one guarded by our friend who just killed most of his men. Unless you want to hack your way through all this shit or fly down into the middle of the village square there was no reason to waste any men on it until you're ready. If Brian and York are still with us, that's where we'll find them."

"And if you're wrong?" asked Patrick.

"You'll get to enjoy my company that much longer, sir. We're getting out of here either by air or on foot, so don't worry your pretty little head about it."

The two women adjusted their gear and picked up the litter. Knowing time was getting short, they started down the path at a jog. Ahead of them, Beth and Steph were pointing out traps as they moved. All of them were drained and ready for a rest but no one voiced a complaint as they kept moving. As the hours moved on, the temperature was starting to get unbearable so Bebo called for them all to stop. Several of them stood with their hands on their knees trying to suck wind into their lungs and fight the nausea of the exertion.

Canteens filled with fresh water were mixed with a sports powder, to replenish some electrolytes they had sweat out on their run, were passed around as they sat wherever they had stopped. Steph and Max did a quick scan of the area, then gave Bebo the all clear. The princess motioned them all into a circle, her backup staying in the trees to keep watch.

"I need to know if you all can go on. We can stop here and rest for a couple of hours but after a short break, if you feel like you can go on, I'd like to keep moving." She explained the new timeline they were on and where they were headed.

Sweaty, mostly red faces looked back at her and Bebo could see the fatigue in their eyes. Being tired led to mistakes, but she felt she had no choice except to keep pushing them. Between the two groups they had enough expertise in warfare to handle anything they ran across, which would balance out the tiredness.

"How much farther until we get to the next village?" asked Carey Sanders. The small brunette could feel the blisters on her feet, but the thought of what could have happened to her and her fellow women soldiers if Bebo and her friends hadn't shown up would keep her running until she passed out.

Checking her GPS, Bebo did some quick calculations. "About two miles. If Brian and York are there, we have another four or five miles to reach the pickup point. I wish it could be closer but there isn't a clear spot for Joe to land anywhere around here."

"I say we keep moving," said Billy. It was hard to say what his hair color because the style was so short but he had big brown eyes that were at the moment extremely blood shot. "It sounds like a ways to go but it'll be a hell of a lot longer if we have to walk out of this pit all the way to Jacolla.

Junis looked at the group from while drinking from one of the canteens. He was so thirsty he could feel the liquid as it made its way down his throat. "Permission to speak freely," he said to encourage those who were silent.

"I can go as long as she can," Titus said, pointing to Bebo.

"I say we go on. It's hot, but until I get my weapon back, I'm not going to feel too comfortable out here," said Michelle. The rest of them just nodded their heads agreeing with her.

"The only problem we're going to have is carrying Brian out of here when we find him," said Arthur. "Of all the people among us to get injured, it had to be the moose from Georgia," joked the blond eliciting laughs from his fellow soldiers.

They sat for thirty minutes before Bear and Bebo moved back to the litter. Billy and Doug tried to take a turn but the two women waved them off. "You'll be responsible for him soon enough if we find the others, guys, so just move out." She gripped the front part of the litter and adjusted her pack on her shoulders, but before Bebo took her first step, a picture of Annie flashed in her mind.

As long as they'd been out there she'd tried to keep thoughts of the blonde at bay, but a deep longing set over her as she visualized her smile. When she started to move, Bebo sent up a silent prayer that this mission was almost finished so she could get back to what was important to her. Behind them though, the biggest complication they would face was about to hit the ground running in an effort to settle an old score.

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A number of trucks pulled into the village as the group of men who had been checking snares emerged from the jungle. The leader, who had killed six of his own men, looked to the second vehicle and was the first to notice the woman sitting with her head back and her eyes closed. She stood out among those in the back of the trucks with her thick auburn hair that was pulled into a long braid, and her skin looked as if it would burn easily if she stayed out too long in the African



sun. Without calling attention to himself lest she turn her ire on him, he pointed her out to the man in a uniform identical to his own who had been traveling with him.

"Did you find him?" asked the woman. Without opening her eyes, she turned her head to face the woman she'd addressed. "I mean we're in the middle of nowhere. How Pelli could've fucked this up is beyond me."

"There are a few villagers left, but that's it. We're looking but we have yet to find him and his men." They had come as part of a team, the woman seated in the truck and the one talking to her from the window.

It was the four dead bodies near where the American prisoner's had been kept that caught her attention when she decided to open her eyes. The three men lying so close to the mutilated woman who lay dead with her eyes open wasn't right and Niazia Suire was prompted to get out of the truck. Her partner Eva Tesoro followed her to the spot and looked at the rest of the landscape trying to find whatever had spooked Niazia from the cab.

"What?" Eva asked.

"Who do you suppose was brave enough to defend this village from these three?" Niazia pointed to the three men stripped of their boots and clothing. "I don't remember his name but I think this guy was with Pelli the last time I saw him." She moved closer and studied the wounds on the big man's body. He was killed from a shot to the throat. "Have the men fan out and check, because I think we have company."

Niazia was one of the main reasons the rebels had been so successful to that point. The mercenary had given the rebel leader sound advice on taking control of the country and ridding themselves of any potential threat. She had fanned the fires of old hate between the tribes and watched as they destroyed each other at the end of their blades. Who won didn't matter to either her or Eva; they were simply there to fight and to get paid.

"Dead. They're all dead," reported one of the men. He wanted to back away when black eyes looked up and pinned him in place.

"Did anymore of them have these wounds?" she pointed to Mau's neck.

"Most of them, but there were others with gun shots."

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours Nia?" Eva removed her baseball cap and ran a hand through her short black hair.

"I think, lover, that we missed out on some very big fish, and I think they were taken out of here by Amazons." With her foot she rolled Mau over to see if the wound went all the way through his neck. "Before you say I'm crazy, this is an arrow wound. Now I wish I'd taken Pelli more seriously."

"Do you think they were on foot?"

The rebel standing close to them cleared his throat and prepared to garner favor. *"We tracked a helicopter that hovered close to our position a few days ago but saw no signs of anyone in the jungle."* He stuck to his French knowing some of his men could translate if the women didn't understand.

*"Why wasn't this reported?"* demanded Niazia.

*"We've been trying to find whomever it was but followed the trail all the way here without luck."*

*"Did any of you idiots ever venture to look up?"* She put her hand up to keep his mouth shut and looked back to her driver. *"How much farther in can you move the vehicles?"*

*"Not much. To make it to the first outpost without taking the long way around requires you to go on foot. If you want to drive it, you're looking at a day and a half."*

Niazia closed her eyes for a long moment and turned her pale face to the afternoon sun. There was one thing that drove her to places like this around the world and that was the chance to fight, a chance to prove that she was a better warrior than anyone else on the field. Up to then the game had been boring since she and Eva hadn't found anyone in their league, but this was a chance to change that and to repay an old debt.

With a slow smile spreading across her face, Niazia ran her hand along the long scar on her chest. She could just imagine sending a pile of bodies back to Boden and her little blonde bitch to show them how far she'd come and how deadly she still was. It had been years but the memories of her years on Amazonia were still fresh in her mind.

*A group of teenaged girls stood in the corner of the training yard laughing softly as their ringleader cracked off another insult. Their instructor, Naellie was going through some advanced defensive sword moves in the center of the arena with her elite class of warriors. The cadets were in their twelfth year of study and among them there was an outstanding young woman who had mastered almost every weapon and hand-to-hand fighting style the instructors had shown her.*

*Black eyes stayed glued to Naellie's pet looking forward to knocking a bit of luster off Boden's star. Niazia had come up through the classes with the tall girl and was sick of being labeled an underachiever by the instructors who compared everyone to the mighty Boden.*

*Of all the things they had learned, Niazia thought the sword was her strongest suit and she felt, given the chance, she could make Boden bleed. She got a nudge in the ribs from one of her friends when it became apparent she wasn't paying attention.*

*"Does anyone have any questions?"* asked Naellie as she finished her lecture and slid the sword back into its sheath. *"Good,"* she continued when no one answered. *"I want you to be very careful since the weapons strapped to your backs aren't toys, but using real blades is the only*

way to learn."

*With determined strides, Niazia got to Boden's side before their teacher could point to Bear as the tall woman's practice partner. Boden laughed low enough not to be heard by anyone else at the girl's move. The young woman was more than aware of Niazia's hatred of her and her constant attempts to beat her at anything. She shook her head and waved Bear off when she offered to spar with her.*

*"Take Kip on, my friend, I'll be fine." Boden bowed her head as they all did before starting a match.*

*The sword in Boden's hand was much heavier than most of the ones the others were using but she had enough strength to wield it without problem. She twirled it slowly as she waited for Niazia to make the first move. Facing her, the shorter woman circled her twirling her own weapon and her other hand was in a clenched fist. Niazia waited until most of the other students were engrossed in their matches to turn the odds in her favor.*

*"You think you're so great," she whispered harshly to Boden. Before the brunette could answer, Niazia brought her fist forward and opened her fingers. A fine white powder flew into Boden's eyes and even though she tried to close them, she was temporarily blinded and she brought her hand up to try and wipe her eyes clean.*

*Naellie and Bear both saw what had happened and soon the others turned when Boden cried out from the stinging powder. They all stopped and looked on as Niazia's sword slashed out and caught Boden's side making her bleed.*

*"Put it down, Niazia," screamed Naellie. Bear was at her back and ready to jump in and save her friend.*

*"No!" screamed Boden, taking her hands away from her face and taking a deep breath. All she saw was a blur through her tears but she wasn't about to let the little bitch get away with what she'd done. "Leave her to me."*

*"Just say you surrender to me and I'll leave you to bleed," said Niazia softly so no one but Boden would hear her. The red stain on Boden's shirt was getting larger and so was the size of the small woman's smile.*

*"If you're so confident, then come on and give it a try because we both know cheating is the only way you'll ever beat me." To fight the sting Boden closed her eyes and concentrated on the sounds around her. The rest of her class had stopped to watch and all she could hear was the sound of Niazia's boots as they scraped along the dirt.*

*The dark head lowered and Boden put down her sword making her opponent think she was doing as she had asked, but Niazia couldn't resist taking one more swing at her so that the tall woman would always wear her mark. With a strong stroke downward she aimed for the middle of her chest. Whomever Boden ended up with would remember Niazia for as long as the big warrior*

*lived and removed her shirt. The thought was making her want to laugh when the big sword came up and stopped hers inches from Boden's chest.*

*"Careful what you think is a weakness, you stupid idiot." Boden pushed her back and tried to open her eyes again the tears now streaming down her face in an effort to clear her vision. "Maybe, just maybe you should start paying attention to our esteemed teachers instead of making jokes with your friends at the expense of others. Then you'd know that when you lose one sense you need to rely more heavily on your others." Getting a clearer picture of where Niazia was standing, Boden moved forward and started a number of offensive strokes. On the third one Niazia stumbled and the very tip of Boden's sword sliced through her shirt.*

*"You bitch!" The scream came as Niazia looked down and saw the blood covering her chest. Boden had left her with the same scar she had planned for the tall warrior. Just as quickly any other words died in her throat as Boden stood over her and pressed the tip of her sword to her heart.*

*"I believe you mentioned something about surrender."*

In an old habit she rubbed the area again as she looked to the jungle. After that afternoon both Niazia and her mother were banished from the island by Queen Bekka for conduct unbecoming an Amazon and for her unprovoked attack on Boden. They had gone to live in South America where her mother found work as a mercenary, a job she would teach her only child. When Niazia had turned twenty-two she had met and fallen in love with Eva, and a few weeks after that her mother was killed in a battle outside of Bogota fighting for the drug cartel.

Her death was something else Niazia blamed on Boden and the ruling family. Had they been allowed to stay on Amazonia, her mother would have continued to serve the queen and lived out her life the way she had intended. Instead she had died alone and left to rot in a place far from her home.

"How would you like to go for a walk with me, lover?" Niazia asked Eva.

They had met years before when Niazia was working in Spain for the Basque insurgents in Barcelona. Walking along the empty streets one night, the red head came across a man slapping a woman so hard he knocked her to her knees. He was screaming at her for the rest of his money and the young woman was cowering at his feet. In an act Niazia defined as compassionate she gutted him where he stood so he'd leave the girl alone.

After that, and after the death of her mother, Niazia found comfort in teaching her new charge the ways of the Amazons and how they fought. Eva was much smaller but her companion found she had a rare talent for torture. The small brunette could have men begging for death within an hour, but the more they begged the more she made death linger just out of their reach.

"I'd love to." Eva smiled up at her before standing and moving back to the truck to get their weapons and equipment.

"Get those guys who just came from the other village and tell them to head back. Eva and I will be heading back ahead of them, but their job is to make sure no one gets out of here alive. Tell them I'll hand anyone who fails over to Eva and her bag of tricks just for the fun of it." The man who had driven them ran off to do her bidding and Niazia ran her fingers down her chest again, along the ridge of the scar. "Who did you send out here for me to kill, Boden?"

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"Tell me what you want, love," Bebo whispered into her ear as her hand came slowly up her thigh. Annie could feel herself getting wetter and she moaned and tried to turn and open her legs wider so the hand would come to rest where she needed it the most. "Tell me, Annie."

"I want you to go inside me." Annie's voice sounded so sultry to her own ears and it felt like she had a fever, but the heat didn't come from sickness. She realized Bebo had found the want that had been buried in her heart for so long. The Amazon had uncovered the woman Annie didn't realize existed who was waiting to be taken by the warrior of her dreams. "Please, baby, I can't wait anymore. I need you to touch me. It feels like I've been waiting for you all my life."

"But I'm here now and I love you, Annie."

The long fingers were positioned just at her entrance and beginning their slow journey in when the alarm went off next to the bed. Rudely startled awake, Annie picked up the offending object and tossed it across the room. She fell back into the pillows with a satisfied smile for destroying the thing responsible for pulling her out Bebo's arms, but just as quickly she groaned when she felt how hard her nipples were from the dream. "Just what I need to start doing when she's like a million miles away."

"What?" asked Reggie from the door leading to the bathroom. From the moaning she could guess what Annie was dreaming about, but the torment factor was too good to pass up.

"Nothing." Annie rolled over and tried to hide her blushing face from her sister.

"Tell me," whined Reggie. She jumped up and down and silently clapped her hands at her sister's state of embarrassment. It wasn't that she wanted to make fun of her, well she did, but a part of Reggie's heart was thrilled that Annie wouldn't die without knowing what it was like to be totally in lust with someone.

The younger blonde figured love and showing someone how much you cared through a variety of different things was in some ways the easy part. Holding hands, cooking them a meal, picking up flowers was important to making a relationship work and showing the other person you're thinking of them, but the total need for someone to put their hands on you and make your brains melt to goo held its own importance. For some it was lost after the initial haze of togetherness wore off, but with any luck it would be like what she'd seen in Audrey and Boden. They loved each other, it was clear, but the looks between them also spoke of two people still very hot for each other too.

"I was having a dream about Bebo and the damn alarm went off when it was getting good. Satisfied?"

"Totally," said Reggie with a laugh. She ran and jumped into the bed making Annie bounce hard enough to almost fall off the other side. "I'm glad to know that my sacrifice wasn't in vain."

"What sacrifice?" Annie found a pair of green eyes twinkling down at her when she rolled to her back.

"Well if you remember correctly, I dated her first and graciously stepped aside when it was clear you had an interest in her. If I hadn't loved you so much and cared about your happiness it'd be me having wet dreams, baby."

Aside from the subject they were discussing, waking up like this with Reggie reminded Annie so much of when they were growing up. On Saturday mornings when they weren't expected anywhere, they would spend their time lying side by side talking about everything and anything that came to mind.

"Thank you for your selfless acts, my beautiful and giving sister. My libido thanks you as well." Annie hugged her before getting up. She wanted to go back to work today hoping that by keeping busy it would keep her mind off of Bebo and her absence, or more importantly why she was absent.

"You're welcome, but I expect you to name your first three children after me, especially after having a talk with the staff."

"What are you talking about?" Annie moved to the bathroom stripping her pajamas off as she went.

*That's new*, thought Reggie looking at the retreating back. For the longest time she thought her sister had been born fully clothed she was so modest even with her own family. "They just mentioned you were a screamer, or else you were doing something to Bebo to make her voice go up about ten octaves the other night." *I still got it, baby*, Reggie laughed mentally as she watched the almost full body blush that swept over Annie.

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"*Hurry, child*," the woman standing at the river said in a scolding voice to the boy standing next to her. They had been sent for water and he had wanted to linger and play at the water's edge.

"*I don't want to go back, mama. That man hits me when I don't do what he says.*" He continued to ladle water into the urn at a slow pace. "*And I miss papa.*"

The men were still alive, Shalla caught glimpses of them every so often as they were herded to the jungle with axes in their hands, or at least she had seen some of her neighbors. It had been days since she had laid eyes on her husband. She feared he was dead but saved her tears for long

after her two boys went to sleep at night.

Their lives had changed weeks before when the men came and killed anyone who showed any type of resistance. The villagers had heard rumors of what was happening in their country, but they were so deep in the jungle where nothing had changed for generations that they had thought they were safe. The Habu tribe was learning quickly though that the world was getting smaller by the day.

Shalla helped her son put the jug on his head preparing for the walk back to the hospital where they had her working. Michael York had been the one bright spot in all this madness. He protected all of them as best he could from the tyrants who had come to destroy their world as well as tried to heal those who were sick and injured.

"*Careful for snakes, Wazi,*" she cautioned as they stepped away from the bank and back into the thick vegetation. They hadn't gotten twenty feet when two figures in black and green faces stepped behind them and put their hands over their mouths to keep them quite.

"*Sssh, I come to help you.*" Bebo whispered in the woman's ear. She held her tight enough to keep the woman in place but not hard enough to make her any more afraid. They had been watching the village for over an hour and it seemed normal as the people went about their business, but something wasn't right and this was their first opportunity to find out what was wrong with the picture.

Titus watched from his hiding place and couldn't believe when Bebo spoke to the woman in her own language, or at least that's what it sounded like. "She speaks this shit?" he asked of Beth who was standing next to him.

"Well technically it isn't shit, it's kind of an offshoot of a Swahili dialect, and I believe she speaks it well enough since the woman is looking relieved and nodding."

"Is there anything she can't do?"

"Cooking and playing the banjo come to mind," the guard teased, loving the way the vein in his forehead had started to bulge as he looked at Bebo. "She just likes to read a lot and learning new languages is like a hobby of hers. Look I know you don't like us much, especially Bebo, but she really is an extraordinary person. I know you don't want to hear this but it's not like you lost out to some snob who was just out for sport."

"Fuck you." Hatred in its purest form dripped from his words.

"Unless you've got really nice tits in a nice C cup and are wearing a garter belt under all that finery you have on, you're not my type, big boy."

Bebo escorted the two villagers off the path and shot Beth a look that stopped anything else from coming out of her mouth. "I'm sure it's boring as Hades to just sit here quietly but let's see if we can't manage it." She offered the woman her hand and sat her on a log for their talk. "*I am Bebo*

*and we have come to help.*" She was having trouble finding the right words and pronunciations so she hoped the woman understood her.

*"They've taken my father and they're hurting me and my mother all the time,"* said Wazi when he had the chance. Bear had let him go and allowed him to go and sit next to his mother.

They spent a few minutes talking and answering Bebo's questions. The princess didn't want to keep them too long lest they be missed by the men who had blended in enough to fool whomever was watching. Relief flooded all of them when Shalla reported they had a big white man in the hospice and that Dr. York had tried to help him as best he could with the limited supplies they had. Brian was in pain but he was alive.

*"Go back and wait. We're here to help you but I want to wait until your men come back from their work to move."* Bebo reached out and put her hand on Wazi's head. *"You watch out for your mother and keep your head down tonight."*

Bear picked up and handed them the water urns and watched them go. From the trees Steph and Max made sure they got back all right, then went back to the positions Bear had assigned. A little while later one of the men they had been watching emerged from one of the huts with a bag and a towel draped around his neck. He headed in the direction that Shalla and her son had come from and his watchers figured he was going for a bath. For the first time they noticed a weapon of any kind as he slung the assault rifle over his shoulder. It was not a gun a villager here would have ever seen much less owned.

He was on the trail when the first bird call came summoning death. If he was going for a bath he wasn't going to be missed for some time. The second call stopped him and made him look to the trees for the agitated sounding fowl. He rubbed his eyes as he watched someone almost materialize out of the tree her camouflage was so good. The woman just stood there looking at him and then she cocked her head and gave him a smile.

The toiletry bag dropped from his hand and he turned to run back to the village and sound the alarm only to run into a solid body standing behind him. He never heard Bebo as she had followed his steps from the time he moved into the jungle. From their posts the Americans watched and wondered when Bebo was going to pull out some type of weapon and off the guy. They were all shocked when she instead jabbed her fingers to the sides of his neck and just as quickly the man dropped to his knees, his chest suddenly paralyzed.

Patrick and Arthur both looked on with the same level of interest. They had heard stories of this technique of killing but both thought it was legend to make a good story. For a brief moment Arthur glanced at the second hand of his watch and waited. Less than a minute later the man fell over and stared up at the canopied sky with dead eyes.

"She's been given the gift of the great warrior," said Patrick in a tone that was half way between a question and a statement with a good dose of disgust thrown in. What a waste to teach something to a woman who would probably use it so sparingly.



"I didn't know the legend was true, but she was a good choice to entrust it to." He watched as his daughter looked to the sky herself and took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders.

How different she seemed from the little girl he remembered running toward him whenever he came for a visit. Uncle Arthur, she had called him with her big blue eyes never stopping their study of the world around her. To Arthur, Bebo was born ready for whatever life threw at her because it was in her nature to succeed no matter the odds. Even when she was at rest, he could see the restlessness in her from the way her muscles twitched and her eyes hungrily took in the sights. Here before them was the future queen of the Amazons and he puffed his chest out a little that part of her was his doing.

The flurry of hand signals to the women in the trees and on the ground made Patrick's eyes bulge. She was planning on going in to the village alone in broad daylight. "Is she crazy?"

"No, she's their leader and when they get back to the island they will sing of the brave warrior she is and how they would follow her to any place she asked. Look at her, Patrick." He pointed toward the woman removing her bow. "That's who Annie fell in love with and who will protect your girl until there is no life left in her. Be smart because there is no way you can compete with that."

"You worry about your family, Leon, and I'll worry about mine."

When the sun started to set, the others were brought back from their labors for the rebels. The village seemed as quiet and as peaceful as when they left it. The men had gone from their regular daily farming and herding chores to chopping down trees and making the traps the rebels wanted. They were promised their lives in return when the armed men were done and it was time for them to leave.

"*Get up you lazy bastard,*" yelled the leader when he came into the hut he was sharing with his second in command. The man was still in the cot he'd been lying in when the leader left.

He kicked the bed and turned it over to get the man moving when the body just dropped to the ground revealing a pool of coagulating blood he'd been lying in for hours. The man standing over him pulled his pistol from his belt and ran outside. As he opened his mouth to yell for help an arrow from the trees silenced the sounds in his throat.

Unlike the fight they had encountered at the first village, this one was over in minutes as the Amazons and Americans took care of the remaining men Bebo had left with swift justice. Shalla came out of the hospital and assured everyone Bebo and her people were there to help when the other women started crying thinking that something even worse was about to befall them.

"*He's back here,*" Shalla pointed to the last cot in the hospice.

Brian's breathing was shallow and the bruises that covered his chest along with the puncture wounds looked painful, especially where the broken ribs had come through the skin at the impact of the log. He opened his eyes and looked at the woman with her hand on his forehead. "Well

fuck me with a carrot. What are you doing here?"

The princess laughed at the expression and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "I'm here to carry your ugly ass out, and as for your sex life, maybe we can hire someone once we get home. If you pay enough I'm sure they'll fuck you with whatever you like, though, it boggles the mind to think you'd be into produce. You should try a woman with nice curves. They're much more interesting and feel better than anything you can eat. Wait scratch that last part, at least the eating part."

"Fuck, Bebo, don't make me laugh, man. It hurts like a bitch." He smiled for her and tried to keep his eyes open. "Are the rest of my guys all right?"

"I found them in their underwear pining away for you so don't worry. Have you seen your good doctor?"

Someone cleared his throat behind her and Bebo turned around. He was slightly overweight with thinning brown hair. His shirt looked as if he hadn't washed it in days the sweat stains were so pronounced and mixed with little specks of blood along the front.

"I'm Dr. York."

"Pack up whatever you need and don't want anyone to find once you're gone, and fill my friend here up with whatever drugs you have on hand to make the trip easier on him." Bebo stood up and felt like smiling for the first time in days. With everyone she came for in the same area this nightmare was almost over.

"I can't leave these people to die, ma'am. You can take your friend if you want but I'm staying."

The last conversation with Philip came back to her as she looked at this man who had the potential to wipe out entire civilizations. "Your choices are to leave with us or I kill you where you stand. I'm sorry, Dr. York, but there isn't an option C for you to consider."

She wasn't American, or at least part of the American forces, her uniform was too different and the bow on her back didn't fit with anything he'd seen in his time in Africa. His eyes studied the paint that made her stand out in the clinic, but Mike was sure when she was in the jungle someone could brush up against her and not notice her. The threat, and that's how he took it, was delivered in the calmest voice she could muster and he was sure she meant every word.

"Who are you?"

"That's Princess Bebo to you, buddy, so get packing," said Brian.

"I'm sorry to be so rude, doctor, but I'm not sure how many more of these guys are out there and once they find the last place we left it's going to be a foot chase to the finish line if we want to make it out of here alive. You and I both know why your government won't allow me to leave you behind. It's noble of you to want to help these people, but if your formulas fall into the wrong hands the world as we know it could change with something as innocuous as an aerosol

can."

He ran his hand through oily hair and sighed. "What's going to happen to these people, the villagers I mean?"

"We've taken care of all the men who held them prisoners in their homes, giving them a chance to take to the jungle until the danger is over. Wars between the tribes aren't a foreign concept to them, and in a couple of months things will get back to normal. The world may not understand it, and you and I may think it's inhuman, but it's a part of their culture nonetheless." Bebo moved closer him and dropped her voice. "I also need you to tend to Brian while we're moving."

"Bebo," interrupted Bear. "Shalla and her people are ready to go."

"Pack, doctor. We move out as soon as you're done." Bebo moved out to the village clearing where there was a group of people with various bundles. "*Good luck, Shalla, and may the gods keep you safe.*" The tall warrior motioned for her guards to pass out the weapons they had stripped off the dead rebels. It was enough to give them a chance to get away from anyone trying to harm them.

*"The gods have already smiled upon us, highness. We have lost some, but for most of us, our families are still here to enjoy another day."* The woman bowed and reached for Bebo's hand and kissed it.

"*How did you know who I am?*" Bebo placed her fingers under the woman's chin and encouraged her to stand straight.

*"The Amazons aren't the only ones who keep their history alive through stories. Our shamans tell of a traveling pair who came once ages ago and taught our warriors many things to keep our people safe. When we saw you fighting it was like seeing a piece of our past come to life. My wife speaks the truth, highness, you are a gift to our people and you will forever be welcomed here. We will pray for you and your people's safety."* The slight man had a pleasant voice and his face reminded Bebo of his son.

"*Be well, and you too, Wazi.*" Bebo pulled an arrow from her quiver and handed it to the boy. "*For you to start practicing when you get to where you're going. A gift from one warrior to another.*"

"*Thank you, highness, I promise to get as good as you,*" said the smiling boy. He clutched the arrow to his chest as if it were the greatest treasure he'd ever been given.

"We're ready, Bebo," reported Max.

"Then let's finish this."

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"When was this taken?" asked Boden looking at the photograph Kip had just handed her. The years had hardened the features of the woman in the picture but she was still as recognizable to Boden as the last time she'd seen her.

"We pulled our agent out a month ago but she left some local people in place she trusted to continue the search. These were sent out last week, we just got them tonight. The woman with her as you remember is Eva Tesoro, a Spaniard she met years ago. Niazia concentrates on battle tactics and fighting, and her pet specializes in torture."

"Charming," said Boden. Her own set of memories flooded her brain as the situation just got more bizarre and dangerous for her daughter. Why the fates would put her only child in the same place as the one person who hated her more than anyone alive was beyond her. "Do we know where she is now?"

"The man who got the pictures out said she's advising the leader of the rebels and helping with some of the larger fights, but no, we don't know where she is at this moment."

"Don't know where who is?" asked Audrey from the door. She had spent the day in a pair of comfortable jeans getting a lot of her paperwork done, but now wanted to spend some time with her wife before Annie and her sister got home.

"Niazia's in Conger," said Bo without preamble. If being married to Audrey all this time had taught her anything it was not to try and hide anything from her. The blonde was petite but her temper was fierce.

"I thought our people had tracked her and cornered her in Yugoslavia." Killing wasn't something Audrey relished ordering but sometimes it was the only way to correct your mistakes. No one could have known how dangerous the woman would become when her mother banished her from Amazonia, but after the pile of bodies she'd left in her wake over the years, Audrey had been left with no choice but order, with Bo's backing, her extermination.

"We did, but she got away and covered her tracks very well until now, highness." Kip looked between the two women and felt like she was intruding.

"Bo, what's going to happen if she runs into Bebo? There's no way to hide that she's ours and you know how she feels about us."

The Amazon Consort crumpled the picture in her hand then went and hugged her wife to her chest. "We have to have faith in Bebo, love. Like you told me when this began, I know we did our jobs well in every aspect of her life including her skills as a warrior. If Niazia runs into her, I'm sure she'll sell her soul to kill Bebo, but our cub won't be so easy to get to. Just remember she isn't out there alone."

When Annie got home she listened as Bo explained the newest development and what it meant to Bebo. Just as she thought she had no tears left, a sense of despair almost swamped her as the tall woman spoke.

An hour later Philip arrived bringing news of the Amazons' latest transmission. They had all their targets and where heading to the first pickup spot. The two royals had let Annie stay for their meeting with the Defense Secretary not having the heart to keep her in the dark any longer than they had to.

"Does this mean it's almost over?" Annie looked at him with such an open expression on her face it made him want to hug her and tell her it was going to be fine, that Bebo would be home soon.

"It's almost over, Miss Paddio." He leaned over and put his hand on her knee where she sat sandwiched between her future in-laws. "I'm sorry to have taken her away for so long, but I knew she was the only one we could count on to get the job done. You should be proud of her."

"Thank you."

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Their progress was slow going because of Brian's bulk and their trying to keep from jostling him too much. After moving for hours, Bebo and Junis had no choice but to call a halt and let their people rest. They were getting back to the part of the jungle the rebels had booby-trapped and she didn't want deal with another injury.

"Get some sleep, highness, or we'll be having to carry you out of here along with these guys," said Max. They were both so delirious that she couldn't remember the last time they had gotten to close their eyes for more than ten minutes.

"I can sleep when we get home."

"Come on, Bebo, I got Arthur, Carey and Titus to take the first watch. We haven't run into anyone or anything remotely dangerous in hours so take a break and get some sleep. They promised to wake you if even a bug gets too close."

Bebo tried her best to find cover as it started to rain. They had been lucky up to that point with the weather but the skies opened up in the early morning and the rain came down in sheets. It didn't matter though, she was so tired that as soon as she closed her eyes sleep took her back to Annie and the comfort of the petite blonde's arms. Arthur was close enough to watch his daughter's face relax in sleep and he smiled at the way it made her look so much younger.

The rain was the best thing that could have happened to the woman watching them and her group of fighters. It muffled any noise that could have given away their position and Niazia watched the bedraggled looking bunch hunker down for a rest. She had sat in the high branch for over an hour studying each of them individually to see what she was up against. A few hundred feet behind her sat Eva with the rest of their men. The renegade Amazon would have attacked already but she had pushed the rebels to the point of exhaustion to make up ground and she was giving the same luxury Bebo was giving her people.

It was the tall woman sleeping under a large fern tree and the man keeping watch over her that intrigued Niazia. There was something about the young woman and the man that jiggled something in the corners of her mind. *I should know them*, she thought as she tried to make out the woman's features under the camouflage paint. That she and some with her were Amazons was a forgone conclusion after Niazia had seen the weapons they carried.

The swift bringer of death slithered close to her and Niazia sat perfectly still. If you want to coerce a mamba into striking all you had to do was move. She could almost feel the sweat dripping down her neck mixing with the rain as the snake crawled across her lap in search of an evening meal. With a quick hand she reached down and grabbed it by the head, amazed at the strength in the long green body as it coiled around her arm. It was time for a little wake up call if only to have a little fun with her prey.

Titus was spared his life when the reptile fell on him because Niazia had cut the thing's head off before throwing it. It didn't keep him from jumping up and screaming like death was after him. The reaction was more than she could have hoped for and when Arthur jumped up and stepped in front of Bebo, Niazia figured out who he was. The more important question though was who he was protecting. Little Arthur who trailed after his older sister like a puppy when he was a boy wouldn't so readily take an arrow for someone not important to him, or so she thought.

From a dead sleep to instant alertness, Bear ran to Titus and clamped her hand over his mouth. When she saw what he was screaming about she pulled him into the thick foliage and dragged him to a safer position. "Max, get to Bebo and stay with her. There's someone out there." The guard didn't ask questions she just moved.

Niazia put her knife away and pulled free her bow. The movements of the woman behind Arthur were almost identical to the woman who had haunted her dreams for years. If this was who the lost Amazon thought it was, revenge was going to be sweet. With no fear of being seen she stood up and pulled back on the string and prepared to shoot.

"Take the men and go," Bebo ordered Arthur and Junis, who had just awakened close to her. "Stay on the trail and don't veer from this course," she stripped off the GPS device from her wrist and handed it to the general.

"Where are you going?" asked Junis.

"I'm going to take Max and Steph and find whoever's out there and give you time to get out." Bebo swept her hair back out of her face very much like Boden and Niazia was sure. "Don't worry, we'll be right behind you. I want you to keep going until you reach the pickup point. Bear, Beth and Rita will stay with you and check the trail for triggers as you go."

"I'm not leaving you." The words left Arthur's mouth just before the arrow streaked through the air headed for Bebo's chest. It was as if they both sensed it or heard it despite the rain and he made a quick decision. He stepped in front of her and took the hit for her. Had they still had their gear, which included flack jackets, he would have walked away, but those were long gone.

It was a perfect hit for a quick death. The arrow nicked his heart barely, but enough to make sure his chest filled from the blood oozing out of the dying muscle. He looked up at her as she cradled him and brought him down to the ground. The sun was starting its ascent and it formed almost a halo around Bebo's head.

"You stay with me, dad. Keep your eyes open," she said in desperation.

"You get going, sprout, and don't worry about me. There's a girl back home waiting on you and that's why I did what I did so don't you worry about it okay. I want you to tell my sisters I love them." Around them the soldiers moved to protect their fallen comrades and the Amazons took to the trees to find where the assault was coming from. "And find Greg and tell him the same thing. I love him like I have no other outside my family. Do you promise?"

She was at a loss as to who Greg was but there wasn't time to ask. "I promise but don't talk like that, you're going to be fine." She looked at his chest and the dark blood coming from around the arrow. It looked grotesque as it mingled with the fine blond hair that covered his body. "Don't you leave me."

"I'll always be with you, Bebo. I love you and this time it was my honor to carry out the acts of the one for the good of my child."

The body in her arms went limp and it stunned Bebo for a moment. Arthur was dead. "No!" Her scream scared the birds from their perches and for an eerie second the jungle became almost silent except for the rain falling.

"You gonna run over there and clamp your hand over her mouth?" Titus asked Bear as he looked at Bebo.

"If you open your mouth again, I'll kill you myself and be done with it. Are we clear?" Max stepped closer to him and removed the chobos from her sheath and slammed one into his upper arm. The blow was enough of a warning shot to keep him quiet.

Beth moved to where Bebo was standing holding her father and called down. "Twenty feet about half way up. She looks like one of us."

Something in Bebo snapped when she looked up and saw Arthur's killer. She took to the trees armed with only her chobos and the arrow she had pulled from his body and went after the woman like a swarm. Niazia laughed as she watched the hate take over the handsome features and knew she was going to be easy to bring down. Her mother had been a challenge she had never been able to best, but the older woman was disappointed by how easy it was going to be to bring down Boden's child, because if there were gods in the heavens, this was that bitch's kid.

Her second arrow took flight and Niazia along with everyone on the ground held their breath as it sped towards Bebo's chest. What happened next was what started the legend that Bebo would become. She stopped on a high branch close to the woman and snatched the arrow from the air with a swipe of her hand. Looking at Niazia, she snapped it in half and threw it to the ground

below. From the sheath at her side Bebo removed her chobos and moved closer.

"Only a coward kills from a distance when it's so much more personally satisfying to kill while you look your opponent in the eye."

"I see you've inherited your mother's superior attitude and ego." Niazia put her bow down and pulled out her own clubs. "But unfortunately for you she mixed her blood with Audrey's weak line. I always figured the ruling family would be the Amazons' downfall, Arthur proved that."

Another yell of outrage was torn from Bebo's chest as she swung at the woman's head, but her opponent easily defended the pathetic attempt. The voices of every trainer she'd ever had screamed in Bebo's head to calm down and pay attention to her form, but she was too angry to listen. The lack of concentration allowed Niazia to connect first with the side of her neck and then with her knee knocking her from the branch. Not wanting to drop her weapons, Bebo stopped her fall by latching her legs around another branch close to the ground. The fall seemed to break the grip of emotions choking her and she hung there long enough to get her breathing under control.

"Get moving and don't look back," she ordered Bear. "You know she didn't come out here alone."

"You're very perceptive, highness, and it's going to be so rewarding to send you all back to Audrey and that bitch in little pieces." Niazia jumped down knowing she had the advantage after Bebo wasn't able to get anywhere near her with the chobos.

When the princess turned around it was the Amazons' best warrior that faced Niazia. "Tell me your name so I can give my mothers your regards," the voice sounded dead calm and it made the woman stop her movements.

"I'm Niazia Suire and I'll send my own message thank you." She looked down as the troops started to pull out as Bebo had ordered. Taking a moment she yelled out her call to Eva to get her and the men moving. They had to find out what an elite group of both Amazons and Special Ops was doing in the middle of Conger. The call was heard but didn't give her as long as she'd planned for a counter move when Bebo connected with her stomach.

After that the fight was on and they exchanged blow after blow as they moved through the trees. Max and Steph would look back every so often to see that Bebo was holding her own, but they were trying to hold off the advancing force as best they could to give Bear and the others the best possible chance at escape. There was only another couple of miles to go and they'd be at the clearing.

As Eva got closer to her lover she stopped to watch the fight Niazia was engaged in. It looked like the red head had the advantage as she maneuvered the taller woman out to the end of the branch. Even if Bebo was able to fight back, she was so close to the end that the branch was about to give out on her.



"She taught you well, but not well enough," taunted Niazia as she pushed Bebo further towards her death.

The princess would move no further back and she redoubled her attack to buy time. "You left, or I should say were banished, before my mother reached her full potential as a warrior."

"I'm sure she's convinced you she's the best, but if you're anything like her you don't measure up to the warrior I've become."

"I can only hope to be like her, and I'm glad to have the opportunity my grandmother didn't give her so long ago," Bebo came down hard with her right hand and knocked one of Niazia's chobos from her hand.

The set back didn't faze her since all she need was to move Bebo back another foot. "Oh yeah, what's that?"

"The chance to kill you." Another blow knocked the other one loose and Bebo had her where she wanted her. With an innate sense of balance, she pushed her legs down a couple of times and used the branch as a springboard. As the young woman vaulted over Niazia's head, she had the arrow the woman had used to kill Arthur in her hand and she buried it to the feathers in her chest.

Like her mother, Niazia dropped to the ground in a place far from home to rot forgotten in death. Close to them, Eva let out a scream as she watched what had happened to her lover then ordered the men to kill Bebo and the other two.

"Your pack's a couple of trees over," yelled Max as she opened fire at the ground taking out five of Niazia's men. The rebels were mystified that these women moved towards them instead of running in fear, as they were accustomed to. They watched more of their friends drop from the bullets raining down on them, and those who didn't fall in the hail of bullets, turned and ran.

Eva stood her ground and continued to fire until she was out of bullets. She dropped the gun when it clicked empty and moved toward Bebo with her knife at the ready. More than anything she wanted to avenge the woman who had saved her from a life of hell on the streets of Barcelona, but she was no match for Bebo. It took one sweeping arch from the Amazon's knife to almost sever the smaller woman's head from her shoulders showering Bebo in a warm spray of blood. The brunette dropped from the branches and landed close to where her lover Niazia lay dead.

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Joe and his gunners scoured the landscape looking for yellow smoke. At the edge of the clearing he'd asked Bebo to try and make, he spotted it and radioed the bird behind him to keep close as he brought his own in for a landing.

They came running from the jungle with their two makeshift stretchers and made for their ride home. "We wait until the other three make it out," screamed Junis over the engines.

"I have my orders, sir, and if they aren't here now we have to go." Joe didn't want to say it since he didn't see Bebo among those who had made it out, but the rebel leadership had finally figured out what they had within their grasp in York and a large contingent of men were heading in their direction.

Junis pulled out the sidearm Bebo had given him and pointed it at the pilot's head. "I said we wait, and that's what we're going to do. It's your choice, son, you can sit here and whistle the Macarena or we can dump you here for the buzzards and I'll fly us out myself."

"They could all be dead for all we know. Let's get out of here while we still can," said Titus. Any other complaint out of him died away when Bear moved closer to him with her fingers in a striking position. He remembered that guy Bebo had jabbed in the neck and didn't want to experience anything remotely like it.

Just as Joe was about to pucker his lips and start whistling, he let out a relieved breath when he saw them emerge from the bush. She looked inhuman covered in blood but it was a touching scene to watch Bebo cradle Arthur's body in her arms and carry him to the helicopters. When Doug and Billy moved to help Junis and Bear held them back.

"I think this is something she feels she has to do," said Bear.

"I didn't think they were so close," commented Lacey. She and the others had taken their borrowed boots off and thrown them in the grass as soon as they reached their ride out.

"They were close enough," said Junis. He had his suspicions of their relationship. After they had been rescued and started to move, he had seen the way Arthur's eyes followed the tall royal. There wasn't anything remotely sexual in it but it was filled with love just the same. The kind of love a father has for his child.

"Hey," Bebo said to all of them as she laid Arthur at the back of the cabin. "Let's bring him home."

[Concluded in Chapter 6](#)

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~ Amazonia ~

Book 1

by Ali Vali

**Disclaimers:** [See Part 1.](#)

### *The End*

Audrey looked at Philip's face as he gave them the news. It was done and they were coming home. He waited as Boden dropped into the chair behind the desk and wept with relief that their daughter had survived. To see such an open display of emotions from the usually stoic woman was a rarity and he turned away when the queen slipped into her consort's lap and just held her with the quiet strength Audrey was known for.

"Thank you for coming so soon and telling us, Philip. Bo and I appreciate your keeping us informed." The blonde hadn't moved from her partner's lap but the tears had stopped and Bo had relaxed.

"There is just one other thing, highness." The amber color of his scotch seemed to mesmerize him when he kept his eyes glued to it and wouldn't look up.

"She isn't hurt is she?" Boden's voice sounded rough and scratchy as she asked the question. "Just spit it out."

"It's Arthur," having no choice Philip looked at the man's sister and watched as what he left unsaid sunk in. He was glad she was still on Boden's lap.

"What happened?" asked Bo. The trembling was starting in Audrey's body, she could feel it and before long they would turn into sobs.

"The last message we got from the Lincoln was that he died in the last battle they faced before they made it out. It's still early and none of the team extracted has been debriefed yet so that's all I know. I'm so sorry, Audrey."

The queen didn't doubt his sincerity but it didn't ease the pain any. Not being able to ever talk to him again made her regret having so much time go by without seeing him. They had both been so busy with their duties and responsibilities that it had been over six months since they had last seen each other, but at least they had spoken almost every week no matter where he'd been stationed over the years. Arthur had been her protector until Boden had come along and taken the job from him, but he still liked to check on her and Sean to make sure they were doing all right.

Audrey nodded at his words and started to cry. She hoped he hadn't suffered and that whatever had happened wouldn't haunt Bebo for the rest of her life. About the time her tears started in earnest, Annie walked into the house from work. The limousine parked out front was one that she recognized as Philip's and she increased her pace, walking in on them without being invited, her heart already beating faster.

Seeing Audrey sitting on Boden's lap and both of them crying made her look to Philip as if the answer as to why they were upset was written on his face. The grim set of his mouth made Annie

think that he had come to bring bad news of the mission or worse of something happening to Bebo.

Philip saw how pale and frightened she looked so he spoke before she had a chance to. "She's fine, Miss Paddio, you have to believe me."

"What's wrong?" Annie leaned against the closed door for support, trying to stay on her feet. The room was starting to spin and she wanted to just run away and not hear any bad news.

"I just had to deliver some bad news about Captain Leon, but Bebo's fine and on her way home. She should be here in a couple of days. You'll also be happy to know that your father and his men will be coming with her. Your father sustained some injuries but he'll be fine and make a full recovery."

"What happened to Arthur?" Her voice was shaky and she stayed against the door afraid that her knees would still give out if she took a step into the room.

With the shock of the news, Bo and Audrey had forgotten that Annie knew exactly who Arthur was and what he meant to their family. "He was killed as they were getting out, Annie." Bo didn't move as she delivered the news not wanting to disturb Audrey anymore than she had to.

It was a shock, but in a way she almost collapsed from relief. She felt terrible, her heart going out to them while another part of Annie's heart felt horrible for the thoughts running through her head. She couldn't help but think that if one had to be sacrificed to get them all out safely, she was glad it wasn't Bebo who had to pay the price. Her greatest pain was for her lover. She wondered how Bebo was holding up and if she'd been there when her father had died. With a deep steadying breath she pushed away from the door and went to kneel in front of where Audrey was sitting with Bo.

"I'm so sorry, highness, for your loss. I met Arthur on numerous occasions and he seemed like a nice man." As always in all these times, the words sounded hollow and completely inadequate, but Annie was compelled to say them anyway. "Is there anyone you'd like me to call for you?"

"Thank you, Annie, but we'll take care of everything." Boden smiled and patted the soft hand lying on her wife's arm. Once again she thanked the gods that Bebo had found someone so like her mother to love. Like Audrey, Annie was a sensitive, touchy kind of person who didn't hesitate to offer comfort in any situation. "Philip, thank you again for coming. Audrey and I will want to take part in the arrangements as soon as it's possible."

"I'll leave you for now and call when I have a definite arrival time. The transport plane that brought them down there was on standby so it shouldn't take too much time." He again expressed his sympathies then bowed to the queen, her consort and finally to Annie before turning to leave.

When it was just the three of them Audrey looked at her wife and saw her jaw was starting to tremble as well. Bo and Arthur had shared a special relationship from the time they were children because of the avenue of service they had chosen for the nation. He was as much

Boden's brother as he was hers, in spirit anyway. "Why him?" Audrey asked plaintively.

"Love, please don't torture yourself with questions that have no real answers. If I knew your brother at all, he died doing something he believed in for someone he cared about. We both know how he felt about Bebo, and if she was in danger, I'm sure he did what he thought was best."

"But how do you know?"

"Because I would do the same in the same situation for the ones I love. I'd gladly lay down my life if it meant keeping you and Bebo whole." Boden cupped her cheek and smiled through her tears.

"I'd rather you fight to stay alive for all of us." Audrey said softly, wiping away a tear, then kissing her partner gently. "I could never go on if I lost you."

Annie followed Bo as she carried Audrey to the garden at the back of the house. It was getting close to sunset and they were just planning to sit and enjoy the fading light amongst the trees. They sat in the same spot that Annie and Bebo had enjoyed their picnic the day she had come to visit. She could still remember the chase in the trees between father and daughter, and how much they seemed to enjoy each other's company. Perhaps with time she and her own father could come to some understanding so their time together wouldn't always end in some lecture on how she should live her life.

"I've lived in this city for a long time but I don't ever remember feeling as at peace as I do in this spot," said Annie.

Boden smiled at her and continued to run her fingers through Audrey's hair as her wife's head rested in her lap. "Did Bebo tell you about this garden?"

"I came here one day to talk to her after we'd had our first fight, I guess you could call it, and she was running around here like a banshee through the trees with Arthur hot on her tail. In all my life I don't ever have a memory like that one with my father. They looked like they were having so much fun, almost like children at play." A sad expression came over her face and then Annie seemed to come back to the present and realize what she was saying. This wasn't the time for her remorse and pain from her past; this was a time to comfort Audrey and Bo for their loss. "I'm sorry, that was a long winded way to answer your question. She told me a little bit, but then we moved on to different subjects."

"Don't worry about it, Annie. We all have things in our lives that bring us some bit of sorrow, but then that's why we have families who will listen when it's needed. You're part of our family now and I hope you like to play, because if you don't you'll be absolutely miserable living with the sprout."

Audrey finally opened her eyes and looked up at the woman lavishing so much attention on her and snorted. "Just Bebo, oh queen of playtime?"

"I didn't say I didn't like to play, love. The reason I passed that on to my kid is playing keeps you young," teased Bo as she stopped combing the blonde locks and pinched the tip of Audrey's nose.

"I love you, every bit of you."

The declaration prompted Bo to lean down and kiss her gently and with as much love as she could put into the gesture. "And I love you, always."

Annie looked on and suddenly couldn't wait for Bebo to be home, if only to be able to look into her eyes and tell her the same thing. "I should leave the two of you alone for awhile."

"Please, Annie, don't go. It's just that every so often I can't hold it inside and I have to tell my big bear how I feel about her. When you live on an island full of women who think she's the sexiest thing going, you have to stake your claim when you can, you know?" Audrey's tease got her another pinch to the end of her nose and Annie laughed.

"Let's see if we can get back on track here before I have to put you over my knee," Bo said, the last part meant for Audrey. "Annie, I guess you can say you feel at peace here because in your blood, you're an Amazon and your family has held within our tribe some of the most prominent jobs to be had. Every tree and living thing in this garden was born in the forests of Argase."

"Bebo mentioned that place in the story she told of Larissa. She said that's where the goddess Artemis spends most of her time on earth, or so think the Amazons."

"Bo and Bebo are right. I'm not a warrior but there's something about that place that pulls at your soul and brings you peace. Sort of like an old favorite coat on a cold day. There's one tree in particular that is my favorite. I was sitting there one day reading a book while waiting for my mother and I looked up and found this big lug." Audrey looked up and smiled at her warrior. The talking and the remembering of good times was helping her put the pain for Arthur away for a little while. She knew it would always be with her but she had her good memories of him and her family to get her through the worst of it. "Bebo told me to ask you about that day. Will you tell me?"

"Love, how many times have you told that story?"

"It doesn't matter how many times I've told it, I want to hear you tell it."

Boden smiled down at her, her love reflected in her eyes. "Then you shall, my love." She took a deep breath and her eyes seemed to look into the distance as if seeing the past she spoke of. "I sing of the beautiful Princess Audrey..." started Boden.

*It was a rare day off for them and the three friends were running through the trees blowing off a little steam after their school finals. Their training as warriors required every bit as much classroom time as any other profession a young woman could choose. All that was at an end*

*though, and they were finished with school and ready to start contributing to the nation. The thrill of finally finishing cadet training and going on active duty had them pumped up and full of energy they needed to burn off.*

*"Do you think they'll let us stay together?" asked Kip. Along with Bear and Boden, she had finished tops in their class and was waiting for their first assignment.*

*"We just have to ask for the same details down the line, so let's compare lists later," answered Bo. "With my luck they'll post me in the mess hall or something just as stupid."*

*"Yeah right, like that's going to happen to the greatest thing to come out of this academy since Artemis came down from Mount Olympus and founded it," teased Bear.*

*"Cut it out, feathers for brains, I get enough of that from the others."*

*The teasing insult prompted Bear to stand up on the branch and start toward Boden with mischief in her eyes and the chase was on. They moved through the forest at an almost unsafe speed laughing the whole way until Bo moved to the ground to find a good ambush spot. She was running along the grass when she caught sight of something that wasn't supposed to be there and she stopped dead in surprise, the game forgotten. Leaving herself so exposed gave Bear an opportunity most didn't get when it came to Bo. From her perch, Bear shot an arrow well above Boden's head to the tree in front of her not seeing what the tall woman was looking at.*

*The young blonde woman closed her book and looked up to see what had thumped into the tree above her and felt her heart drop at the thought of it coming any lower. Then her eyes turned to the woman standing there in traditional warrior leathers worn in the summers to help with the heat. She seemed to be frozen in place and just staring at her.*

*For Boden it was a moment that would change her life. From the first sight of Audrey, all the plans she'd just been discussing with her friends and the future she and her family had talked about became meaningless. What she wanted was to stand and fan this woman all day if that's what it took to stand at her side forever.*

*With a shake of her head Boden moved closer. "Are you all right, miss?"*

*"Is it illegal to read here or something?" The question was as teasing as the beautiful smile that accompanied it.*

*"No, it's just that my idiotic friend didn't see you standing there. She was actually shooting at me."*

*"Do you have some effect on people that even though they're your friends they shoot pointy things at you?"*

*Boden cocked her head to the side and gave the girl a big smile. She liked the sense of humor she had and loved the sound of her voice. "I don't think so, but you never know. The effect I have on*

*people I mean."*

*"What's your name, warrior?"*

*"I'm Boden of Argase, miss. And you?" Boden had moved close enough to see that the girl's eyes were green. A shade of green so beautiful she had trouble looking away from the girl's face.*

*Audrey held her hand up in a silent request for Boden to help her up. In a way it was to see if this woman's touch affected her as much as just looking at her. Once on her feet, she continued to study the thick dark hair and blue eyes as she continued to hold on to the hand Boden had offered. "I'm Audrey of Leon."*

"I saw her and my life changed forever. She was beautiful, intelligent and a bit of a smart-ass, but I wouldn't want her any other way," finished Bo.

"You really did change all your plans for me?" Bebo had been right, she should have asked to hear this story from Bo a long time ago.

"Any good strategist will tell you that plans are only good if they are flexible and can be changed. What does it matter now? I've lived my life with you up to now doing what makes me happy, but more importantly living with the woman I love."

"What was the first choice of assignments on your list?"

"Combat, but then so was Laine's before she met your mother."

"Did you ever regret not going with your first choice?" Audrey looked at her and saw nothing close to regret but she had to be sure.

"I have only one regret about that whole day," Boden began as she pressed her palm up against her wife's face. "And it was that I only got to kiss your hand when I figured out who you were."

"Don't forget the part where you dropped to your knees to do the kissing," joked Audrey.

Annie loved watching these people together and hoped that a lot of Boden had rubbed off on her daughter. "I remember that part and when you told me to get up because you never wanted to see me on my knees again, not for anyone."

"Yeah well, I've changed my mind about that one, but only when it comes to me. I rather enjoy you on your knees now." Audrey sat up and winked at Annie before kissing her wife again.

"Thank you for that story, sweetheart. It made me feel good enough to go and do my duty. Want to sit with me while I call mama?"

"You got it, and if you want, I'll break the news to Laine."

"Break what news?" asked Reggie.



"You two go on and I'll tell Reggie and mom. Thank you for everything." Annie stood with them as Audrey and Bo prepared to leave.

Audrey hugged the young woman then stepped aside so Bo could as well. "No need to thank us, princess, it's our pleasure to have you here," said Bo before she stepped back to Audrey's side.

"What did you call me?" she asked, her voice suddenly sounding as weak as her knees felt.

"Princess Annie. See, along with not having to drop to your knees for anyone, you get a nifty new title when you marry into this family," answered Boden.

"That's the only perk?" asked Audrey.

"No, love, the best perk is you get the girl." With that Boden swept Audrey into her arms and carried her to the house. Annie stood dumbfounded watching them leave, only turning when they were gone and Reggie's snickers had turned to a genuine laugh.

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"Are you okay?" Max was sitting next to Bebo on the plane and she was starting to get worried that the princess had hardly spoken after walking out of the jungle.

"Why do you suppose he did that?" She spoke softly, with her head turned toward the window, her eyes not really focused on anything. "He just stepped in front of that damned arrow like there was no other choice."

"Did you see that one like you did the second one she shot at you?"

Bebo turned away from the window and looked at her closest friend. "No," it came out in a harsh whisper and her eyes filled with tears.

During the fight with Niazia and her men there wasn't time to think about what had happened to Arthur, but then it was over and they were free to go. The rain had washed the blood off his chest and he looked like he was sleeping against the tree where she'd left him, but he wasn't. Arthur had died for the people he had loved most in his life, especially Bebo. His daughter knew it was more that that though, as much as it would hurt her mothers to hear of his death she couldn't begin to imagine the devastation that they would have gone through if it had been her.

As if reading her mind Max put her hand over Bebo's and spoke from the heart. "I know this maybe isn't the time you want to hear this because it sounds like I wished the death of someone else for the life of my friend, but Arthur knew what he was doing. As big and tough as Boden is, and as strong of will and mind as your mother is, they would have died along with you after the news had reached them. Arthur was a brother to them both, but we both know what you mean to the queen and her consort. With that instant selfless act, he saved all three of you. And then think of Annie."

"You don't think it's wrong to think that? That it's wrong to find something good in his dying?"

"What I think would be wrong would be for you to throw away the opportunity he gave you. Arthur gave both your mothers the means to have a child, buddy, but in the end it was their love and protection that raised you. I think by going home and marrying your girl and giving your mothers plenty of grandchildren to spoil is how you repay him for his gifts - all of them."

"Thanks, Max. You know, he said kind of the same thing right before he died. He told me it was his honor to sacrifice the one for the good of his child."

"Then don't let his sacrifice be in vain, my friend."

Junis stepped up and waited to be acknowledged by the young women sitting together. They had just left their first refueling stop and were now really on their way home. "Hey, Junis, you look good," Bebo remarked. They had all had the opportunity to take showers at the base at Jacolla before boarding and it had looked like a pound of jungle dirt had drained off each body when they were done.

"Can I talk to you for just a minute?"

"Sure have a seat. Max, you don't mind do you?" Bebo squeezed the hand in hers in thanks. "Come back when we're done if you want." She then looked to the man standing in the aisle of the plane. "What can I do for you, general?"

"Please, you saved my ass and those of my soldiers, you call me Junis." He sat down and unlike Max; Junis took up the whole seat. The officer from Tupelo Mississippi wasn't overweight, he was just big.

Bebo looked at the lowered head and the way he had his hands pressed together on his lap and waited to see what was on his mind. Whatever it was, it seemed to be important for him to get his thoughts in order before he started talking. Not being a generally chatty person, the princess sat in a comfortable silence willing to give him whatever time he needed.

"I may be way out of line here, highness..." he started, not really knowing how to start his story.

"Junis, I don't mean to interrupt, but I want you to know something before you begin." He looked up at her and she noticed the big green eyes that were so full of life. "What we went through back there made us friends, in my opinion anyway, so you can tell me anything you please and I promise I'll listen. The other thing is friends don't call friends highness, okay?"

"You're a lot like him you know?"

"Like who?" The air in her lungs felt like it had gotten trapped and Bebo couldn't exhale for a long minute, her words faint, as though she had gotten the wind knocked out of her.

"That's what I meant by being out of line before. You remind me of Arthur and how he was around people. Not a lot of people know this, but we went through boot camp together, then officer's school. After all those years of hearing his jokes and the way he cut up with people, I don't think anyone really knew the real man."

"He was pretty much what you saw. Arthur was never a really complicated man, but don't take that to mean he was simple. He was a great man and a good soldier."

"I'm not doing a very good job here," he paused and rubbed the short hair along the top of his head. "What I meant was, these guys are always going on about their girls and their kids but he never did that. It just made me wonder about him is all, and one night when we were still green behind the ears and they put us in a place kinda like we just left, he and I had a long talk. He told me about growing up in a place so beautiful it made him ache from missing it, and he talked about having two sisters and how much he loved them. I listened to him and I thought to myself what a fag this guy was."

"Excuse me?" She bristled, ready to defend Arthur's memory.

"I grew up in Mississippi, Bebo, during the sixties I might add. Guys spouting poetic about where they were born wasn't a common occurrence, and if they did, they weren't real highly thought of. Arthur though, he showed me a different way of thinking and made me shed a lot of the ignorance I'd carried around with me for a long time. He was like a crusader for opening people's eyes to seeing why people are the way they are and how sometimes it isn't a choice. He also showed me that it really didn't matter among friends."

Bebo looked back to where Patrick and Brian laid close together with a couple of nurses watching over them. "Sometimes even crusaders fail."

"No one's perfect, you're right. It worked with me and it made me so happy to meet you that first day at the Pentagon."

Blue eyes bore into him wanting Junis to get to the point. "Why is that?"

"This was a guess on my part, but I saw it in his face. The way he looked at you wasn't the look of a man trying to figure out how to get a date or score some time with a pretty girl. It was different, and he looked so happy."

"You're very observant."

"Nah, I'm just a redneck who gets lucky now and again. I just wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for what you did for us and to tell you I'm so sorry for your loss. Arthur was my friend and I wanted you to know, and I'm glad to have met the person who I now see was the pride of his heart." He put his hand out not being able to say anything else because of the lump in his throat.

"Thank you, Junis, he was lucky to have someone like you looking out for him all this time, and

just for the record, I was really proud of him too."

They sat together in silence for a while longer giving Junis the time he needed to compose himself and finish what he had to say. "You may know this already but he met someone about a year ago that he seemed really fond of. I saw them together a couple of times and he introduced me one day when we ran into each other in a restaurant close to where he lived. I didn't ask and he didn't tell, but that guy was someone special to him I had a feeling. If you don't mind, I'd like to give you his name so you could call him. He should hear about what happened from someone who cared about Arthur. Because of where we were and what we were doing the Army will never acknowledge this mission and anyone we lost on it. I don't want him sitting around waiting for a phone call that'll never come, wondering what he did wrong to drive Arthur away."

The shock stunned her into opening and closing her mouth a couple of times before anything came out. In all their talks together, Arthur had never mentioned seeing anyone, not that he had to, but it would have been nice to have seen them together. Now one of his final requests made sense to her. "How long ago did you say this started?"

"The first time I saw them together was about a year ago. I'm sorry if I'm way out of line here." He didn't know it, but Junis had given her another piece of a puzzle Bebo would soon have to sort out.

"I'm sorry, Junis, I'm not asking you that because you're out of line, it's just that I didn't know, but it makes me happy to know now. It's always a good thing to know the people you love are loved in return." She turned in her seat and hugged him with affection. "Thanks for taking the chance and talking to me, I really appreciate it. Don't take this the wrong way, but you've come along way in the waxing poetic arena yourself."

"Why do you think my wife was so fond of Arthur and all the stuff he talked to me about over the years?" He returned her embrace and smiled. "I'm beginning to learn that women really love guys who can show their sensitive side."

"Hey it worked for me," teased Bebo.

"It sure did. You take care of Annie or the guys and I'll kick your butt good, lady. Her father takes some getting used to, but his girls are really sweet. I'm just glad she found someone who's going to appreciate just how wonderful she is."

"The appreciation of her is a guarantee, the getting used to her father - well that's going to take some time."

Patrick turned his head and wondered what all the laughing was about. The closer they got to Washington, the more strongly he felt that his life as he knew it was coming to an end. Everything he'd tried so hard to keep hidden was about to come back to haunt him.

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The eastern seaboard came into sight out of the window Bebo had her head resting against and it finally sank in that she would be seeing Annie before too long. A question formed in her heart and she wondered if the blonde would feel the same way about her once she heard all the things she had done to get out of there alive. Most importantly, she wondered if she could still love someone who had failed her own father and caused his death?

That too was starting to sink in, the fact he was gone. Arthur deserved so many more years, especially if he had found someone to love. Blue eyes looked to the paper in her hand and the name Junis had written down for her. *Greg Petkus*. The first name, though common, had been the same one Arthur had uttered before he died. The last name though, was not a very common one and the princess already doubted it was a coincidence that it happened to be Emelda's last name as well. Maybe it was a way of the priestess letting her know things would eventually be all right and the pain of the last week would fade.

Wisps of clouds and the lights of whatever city they were flying over blurred as Bebo tried to piece together what she knew of Emelda's life outside of what she knew for fact. For as long as she had memory, the wise woman had been the head of the temple close to the palace. Aside from that, the tired royal realized she didn't know much. *That's rather selfish of me, to never have asked about her family*, she thought. Whenever they had sat and talked together, the conversations had always been about the princess and her life.

"Max, do you know anything about Emelda's family?"

The guard opened her eyes and rotated her head to the side. "Where'd that question come from?"

"It boggles the mind what pops into my head at times, but I just now thought I have no clue how to answer that except for her job description."

"Then you'd do a better job than me if anyone asks. My mom said she spends most of her time with her duties at the temple and doesn't really know what she does outside that. If anyone in the kingdom knows anything about her it would be you since mom also said she's never seen her take more time than she does with you, not even with your mother Audrey when she was going through her training. Either you're a slow learner or she really likes you." Max paused a second and punched her friend in her arm. "I go with the slow witted part of that equation."

"You're such a big help. Keep it up and I'll have you assigned to sifting sand in Grazel when we get home."

Before the two friends could trade anymore barbs, a flight crewmember came through the aisle telling everyone to buckle up and to make sure they had their patients strapped down tight for the landing. They were approaching the base and they were a couple of hours ahead of schedule.

When the man went back to the cabin, Bebo unbuckled her seatbelt and moved to where Patrick and Brian were lying. "You feeling all right, big guy?"

Brian looked like he was resting comfortably after the medics had given him a good dose of

painkillers, but his eyes were still warm when they looked up at her. "I'll bet I'm flying higher than this bucket."

"Yeah well, it's better than feeling like you got hit in the chest by a big tree. I want you to hang in there and I promise I'll come by soon to see you." She put her hand in his and squeezed his fingers not wanting him to move if he didn't have to.

"Thanks for everything, Bebo. You may be a girl who can kick my ass, but I want my daddy to meet you anyway. He'll be glad to shake the hand of the person responsible for bringing me home."

"Anytime, lieutenant. It would be my honor." With one more squeeze she turned and looked down on Patrick.

"I know everyone else is grateful but it still doesn't mean I owe you anything, especially my blessings. You think long and hard about what I said to you about Titus and my daughter." He stopped talking when Brian turned his head and gave him a disgusted look. "Just go back to where you belong, girl, and leave me and my family alone."

"Can I ask you something first? I promise to leave you alone after that." Patrick expelled a long breath and nodded his head. "What happened to you to make you this way? I'm just curious since that's a whole lot of hate you carry around with you all the time. Doesn't it make you tired?"

"Fuck off, highness. You and your kind think you're so much better than men, well you aren't."

There was no use in trying to reach him, she saw that and hoped Annie was willing to see that as well and accept it. "Good luck to you, general. I'll leave you to your rest."

"You'll leave a lot more than that before I'm done."

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Philip was standing next to his car when the plane came to a stop. The crew started unloading equipment right away as the stairs were brought along side for the passengers. He was anxious to get a full report of what had happened so he could get back to his boss with the news of a successful mission. The Amazons came off first and relief washed through him when he saw Bebo safe and moving toward him. That much he knew already but it never hurt to see living proof instead of just reading it in some report.

"Welcome home."

"More like welcome back. My home is still a little bit further away and if you'll excuse me that's where I'm headed." She kept walking to the hanger where they had left their vehicles.

"We have to debrief you before you can go, Bebo, you know that."

She stopped and slowly turned around. "What I know is, you asked me for a favor, and even though it cost me more than I'd ever be willing to pay, I did it. I'm done and I'm going home."

"I'm sorry about what happened, but you know procedure as well as I do. We have to get the information while it's still fresh in your head."

"I say this with the greatest of respect, Philip, but fuck you and fuck procedure." Behind the Secretary they were unloading Patrick's gurney. "Take the information from him since I'm sure his story will vary from mine anyway and your people will take it for the truth." The grieving receded a little and the anger came pouring out. "If you want to keep me you're going to have to arrest me, and good luck to you ever getting me to do another thing for you if that's the way you decide to play it."

"Bebo, we're friends, there's no reason for this."

"You're right, and as my friend you should've known better." The guards followed her without saying a word and threw their gear in the back of the SUV glad they were getting out of there.

The house was dark downstairs when they pulled in, but Denise was waiting for them in the foyer when Bebo opened the door and stepped in. "Welcome back, highness."

"It's good to be here," said Bebo accepting the hug the woman offered.

"Would you like me to go up and wake the Lady Paddio for you?"

"I'd rather do that myself thank you, since that's all I've thought about for days now." Bebo left them all smiling as she took the steps two at a time up to her bedroom.

"Annie and the queen may never forgive Philip for not telling them you all were coming home tonight." Denise went out with a few other staff members to help unload all the gear from the vehicles.

"I think he thought he would be forgiven for the good surprise or he figured we'd be another day or so telling them what happened. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and go with the surprise choice," said Bear.

Upstairs, the door opened silently and Bebo slipped in and closed it just as quietly behind her. Annie was sleeping curled up on her side with her hands under her chin. The tall woman wanted nothing more than to go over there and kiss her but she was glued in place just studying the beautiful relaxed features. All of the ugliness she'd faced in the days before that moment receded to the back of her mind as she looked at the woman she loved.

With careful steps she finally moved closer and started to strip away her clothes. Seeing that Annie was wearing a nightgown, Bebo got out a pair of pajama bottoms and a fresh t-shirt. Dressed, she got in bed and pressed herself to Annie's back then buried her face in the blonde hair that smelled like mint. It was the nicest reward she could have hoped for, to come home to

Annie and feel her at last.

"Oh God, Bebo," whispered Annie, in the grip of another dream of her missing partner.

"I'm right here, love." Bebo pulled her closer and kissed the back of her neck. She could tell the woman was still sleeping but it pleased her to no end that the dream she was having was of her. "You dream away and I'll be here to look over you for the rest of time."

The soft voice at the edges of her consciousness didn't match the seductive words from her dream lover and Annie struggled to get her eyes open. When she did, she was again disappointed when her first thoughts were that Reggie had come back to keep her company. "Could you back it up and give me some room here," she said in a gruff voice. She didn't mind her sister sleeping with her but the bed was more than big enough.

"Okay, but I thought you'd be happy to see me." Bebo watched the shoulders hitch together in surprise before Annie rolled over and looked at her. "Does this mean the honeymoon's over before it really got started?"

"You're home!" She got partly tangled in the sheet and her gown but she threw herself into the tall woman's arms and started crying.

"It's okay, love, I'm here and I'm not going anywhere for awhile to come." She pulled back the blonde head and kissed Annie hello, tasting the salt of her tears as she did.

There would be time later to talk about everything but the princess wanted to savor this moment for all that it was. She pulled Annie closer until the petite woman was lying on top of her so that she could enjoy every inch of her. For her part, Annie pulled her closer by sinking her hands into the sides of Bebo's hair not wanting her to break the kiss.

When breathing became necessary, the blonde pulled away and looked down on the subject of her longing. "I love you and I've missed you so much."

"It's good to be missed, but it's so much nicer to be home. I just thank the goddess you're here."

Annie pulled up further and started to run her hands over Bebo's body looking for any type of injuries. "Are you all right?"

"I promised you in one piece and that's what I delivered. Tomorrow, after I've kissed you as many times as I've thought about it since I left, you can go visit my second promise to you. Your father's been transferred to Bethesda for his injuries, but don't worry, he'll be fine after some time to heal." She pulled Annie back down and rolled them over. "I love you so much, Annie," the low voice whispered before Bebo's lips reclaimed Annie's.

Big hands did their own mapping and Bebo tried to tamp down her excitement wanting to slowly reacquaint herself with the body she was sure she'd never get enough of. "Wait," said Annie. Thinking her advances weren't what Annie wanted, Bebo rolled over and moved away from her.



"No, honey, I just want to take this off." She sat up and drew the nightgown up and over her head. "Did you lock the door?" The question got her a nod of the dark head and a smile. "Good."

Annie moved and knelt next to Bebo on the bed and pulled the blankets back. With sure fingers she pulled the drawstring of the royal's pants and loosened them. "I know we have plenty to talk about, but tonight can we make it just about you and me?"

A quick pull and Bebo's shirt hit the floor and she lifted her butt to get the pants off. "I didn't want you to think I just want you for your body."

The laugh sounded sultry even to Annie's own ears as she moved to reclaim her spot on Bebo. "Right this second I want you to want me for whatever reason you want, just as long as you want me." She lowered her head and licked the puckered nipple with a slow wet tongue liking the moan it garnered in return. "I've been dreaming of you ever since you left this bed all those lonely nights ago." Annie pushed her thigh between Bebo's and felt the first stirrings of passion building in her body when the hard muscled appendage pressed against her center as Bebo mirrored her actions.

"What did you dream about?" asked Bebo. She rolled them over again but held most of her weight up so she could look down into the green eyes.

"I dreamed of you over me like this making love to me, taking me places only you know how to find." It was getting harder to string words together as Bebo pressed into her with more pressure. The dream had already made her wet, and she was now starting to paint Bebo's thigh. With one hand pressed flat on the bed next to the blonde head, Bebo lowered the other one until her fingers found the core of Annie's passion. "Right there, baby."

The bundle seemed to grow under Bebo's fingers and she took her time wetting her fingers before she dipped into Annie's center. Two small hands grabbed her butt and pulled her closer as Bebo started to go in. "I love you," the princess whispered before she surrendered to Annie's body. With her fingers buried inside of her lover, and her thumb applying the right pressure to the hard bundle of want, Bebo ground into the thigh between her legs and followed Annie to the release they both needed.

It came sooner than they both planned but neither of them could help it. As the tremors took over Annie moved her hands to Bebo's back and tried to push her down so she could feel all of her. The moaning in her ear and the way their bodies moved so in tune with each other intensified the feeling at the end as the orgasm made the walls of her sex clamp together trying to hold the fingers in place.

When they were both spent, Bebo leaned down and kissed her long and soft, as Annie held her hand by the wrist to keep it in place. "No, I don't want you to move it yet. Let me just enjoy the fact you're home."

"I'm glad to be here, especially with you."

The talk she'd had with Boden that day in the garden came back to Annie when she heard the want in Bebo's voice. It wasn't a need for more sex, but for the intimacy that can only be found with the person you loved. She allowed Bebo to roll onto her back and reclaim her hand, wanting to be able to cuddle up next to her.

Annie draped her leg over the lower part of Bebo's body and looked at the beautiful face that looked tired. "Can I tell you something?"

"Anything but goodbye."

"Goodbye will never be a word that'll exist between us, love, don't worry about that. I just wanted you to know that I realize what a tough time you had out there and you maybe faced things you weren't prepared for up here," she tapped her finger to the tall woman's temple. "Or in here," she moved her hand and placed it over Bebo's heart. "If you want to talk about it and need help trying to find peace, I'm here. I'll listen, I'll hold you, and I'll love you until you feel better."

"Arthur's dead."

She pressed a kiss to the top of Bebo's head and tried to fight back the tears. "I know, love, and I'm so sorry. I was looking forward to getting to know him better."

"He died to save me," the sobs came and Bebo could do nothing to stop them. "He...he said...that I had a girl waiting at home for me."

Annie was sure this show of emotions was the first Bebo had allowed herself since it happened and she just held her as tight as she could and rocked her. "He was right, and I owe him my own life for the price he paid. It's a debt I can never repay, because if I'd lost you, I don't know what I would have done."

"I should've seen it coming though. I should've been able to save him."

"Honey, look at me." She moved her hands to cup Bebo's cheeks and held her face so that she'd have to focus on her. "Sometimes things happen for their own set of reasons and we can question them until we are old and gray but it doesn't make the answers come any easier. If you want to know what I think, I think you did save him."

"He's dead, didn't you hear me?"

"If whatever he saved you from had killed you, how do you think that would've affected him? How do you think he would've gone on knowing he did nothing?" The question wasn't fair but Annie wanted her to see the truth and let go of the guilt before it became a burden too great for even Bebo's shoulders to bear. "He loved you and he wanted you to have a life. A life that I'm so glad is still here so I can share it. Grieve for the man he was, love, but don't step into the grave with him when he gave you the opportunity to go on."

"Bear told me the same thing on the way back."

The tears were still falling but they had slowed and Annie smiled. "Then you're lucky to have such wise women at your side. I won't lie to you and tell you the pain will be easy to get over, but I'll be here with you to help you see that it will eventually fade. Tomorrow we'll even light a candle in his honor to Artemis, at the small altar in the garden."

"Who told you about that?" They both relaxed and enjoyed the feel of skin touching skin when Annie lowered her head and rested it on Bebo's shoulder. "Did the girls in the house give you a couple of Amazon lessons when I left?"

"Actually your mothers and mine did a really good job of showing Reggie and me the ropes."

The warm glow from their lovemaking dissipated and Bebo looked at Annie's face to see if she was kidding. "My mothers are here?"

"Is that a problem? I thought you liked them?" Annie ran her hand over Bebo's chest trying to get her to relax again.

"I love them both but Boden would kick my ass if she found me in here with you. Laine and Bekka made her suffer through months of chaperones before she got to even see my mother's navel, so she's a stickler for the rules of courtship."

"That was then, honey, and this is now. I bet your mom knows the world's a different place."

"You don't understand. She figures if she made it through, then so can everyone else."

"Well you can forget it, you aren't going anywhere tonight or any other night as long as we're in the same house."

"Annie, it's not a matter of not wanting you, the way I want you should be more than apparent by now. It's that I don't want other people thinking less of you because I can't control myself. Though their not being here before wasn't an excuse, I should've known better."

The blonde moved so that she was lying over Bebo again and started to run her fingers along the strong jaw. "Then why did you?" Without stopping the movement of her fingers, Annie moved her thigh between Bebo's again.

"Because I could no more resist you than I could stop breathing." The urge to make love to the petite woman was starting again. "I don't think the day will ever come that I could."

"Good answer, warrior mine."

The moonlight streamed through the window and the young love grew stronger as the bond between Bebo and Annie strengthened through their passion. As Emelda had foretold, the princess had found her path and her strength for the future. Now it was time to face what needed to be done to fulfill the rest of the vision.

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Bebo kissed Annie's hand and left her at the door of the dining room. The audience she'd requested with Doris had been granted and the woman was waiting for her in the garden. They had enjoyed their reunion well into the morning, stopping to talk about what had happened while they were apart. It came as a shock to Bebo that Dothan Cyr, a woman she had heard mentioned before, was actually Doris Paddio. In the end it was a pleasant surprise that would make her life much easier.

Before she got two feet away from her, Annie pulled her back by her belt and pressed up against her back. "No matter what, you're marrying me right?"

"They'll have to club me over the head and lock me away somewhere for that not to happen. Don't worry, sweetheart. Like I told you last night, I have to do this, but because your mother is an Amazon by birth, it's her permission I have to get." Bebo turned around and kissed the woman as further assurance. "I love you."

"Ahem," Kip cleared her throat to pull them apart. "Highness, Lady Dothan is waiting." Without discussion the royal guard had been assigned to Annie that morning after they had stepped out of the bedroom. The fact it was her mother's personal guard assured Bebo that it was lucky they had shared the night they had and Kip hadn't drug her out by the hair before she got anywhere near her betrothed.

"Thank you, captain." Bebo moved back a respectable distance and kissed Annie's hand again before walking away.

The forlorn looking blonde sat looking up at the sky as Bebo approached. It had surprised her that Doris hadn't rushed to Patrick's side, but then she had asked to speak with Bebo before she left. "Good morning, Mrs. Paddio."

"Highness, I'm sorry I didn't hear you coming," Doris jumped up and bowed.

"Please sit and please call me Bebo. I know we have a few things to discuss between us but I'd like for us to be friends." The brunette waved to Doris' chair and smiled. "Can I pour you more tea?"

Doris nodded her head and took a seat. "I'm sorry we didn't get to talk before you left. In a way I've been dreading the truth of my past, not because I was ashamed of it, but because there was no real reason for having kept it from my girls. When I saw Annie with you I thought you could make it easier for me."

There was nothing like skipping the preliminaries that would have just taken up valuable time. Her forthrightness made Bebo comfortable. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you needed me, but hopefully my mothers were a good substitution." Audrey had given her daughter the brief version of what had happened after welcoming her home earlier that morning.

"Audrey was a good friend then and she has grown to be a very forgiving woman. I don't know too many people who'd be so kind to someone who has turned her back on her family." The woman lowered her head to keep from looking Bebo in the eye and stared at the tea in the cup in her hand looked like it held the mysteries of the universe.

"You know what I've found just recently?" Bebo moved from her chair and went to kneel in front of Doris, putting her fingers under the woman's chin in an effort to make her look up. With eyes shiny from unshed tears Doris shook her head. "Love makes us do things we thought we never would think ourselves capable of. If Annie asked me to stroll down Pennsylvania Avenue in my underwear, I think I'd have a hard time saying no."

A laugh bubbled up from Doris' chest without too much effort and she felt better knowing Bebo wasn't going to hold her decision against her. "You're being kind."

"No, I'm being honest. You love Patrick and no one is going to hold that against you. Sometimes we do the best we can and the rest of the world just has to accept that."

The comment was incredibly simple but it made sense to her. As a reward, Doris leaned forward and kissed the young woman's cheek. "My daughter is a lucky woman to have found you."

"At the risk of sounding like a greeting card, I'm the lucky one. I want to ask you for your blessing, Dothan. In Annie I've found the person I want to spend my life with and I want more than anything to join with her."

"I know..." Bebo pressed her fingers to Doris' mouth before the woman could say another word.

"I also want to be honest. When I found your husband I asked him that very same question and he said no. His wish is to see Annie go through with her original plans and marry Captain Walker."

"And if I tell you the same thing?"

"If that happens and you decide to stand with him, then I'll ask Annie to follow her heart because I value her happiness above my own. I know what my family means to me, and what it would mean to my life for me to be without them. There's no way I could ask her to make that sacrifice for me no matter how much I love her." Bebo leaned back and sat on her feet. Patrick had been right and his wife wasn't going to go against him on this.

"You have my blessings, highness. I couldn't ask for a better partner for my child than someone who's willing to put my daughter's welfare ahead of everything else. Perhaps if I'd listened to my mother long ago I would've saved all of us a lot of pain."

From the back of the house, Annie watched the two share a long hug and pumped her fist in the air in relief. She knew her father would probably never come around but it would have hurt if her mother had voiced the same objections. Doris spotted her and waved Annie over to join them.

"Congratulations, Annie," said Doris pulling her daughter into the hug she was sharing with Bebo.

"Thanks, mom, and thanks for your blessing."

"You'll always have that, sweetheart, but there's a few other things we have to discuss."

Sitting together holding hands, Annie and Bebo faced Doris to finish the talk that had started days before between mother and daughter. Before they could get to why Doris had made the decisions she had, there was one thing she wanted to know.

"How is he?" The one thing she knew for sure was that her husband was most probably furious because she had yet to make an appearance.

"The men that captured them broke both his legs right above the knees. As horrible as that sounds it was better than them smashing a little lower. If it had been the knees he'd never walk again. With his injuries he'll be in pain for awhile but he'll make a full recovery." Bebo put her arm around Annie as if to shield her from the pain of hearing the truth. "What he won't recover from is his hatred of me."

"I can't speak for Patrick but I want you to hold your judgment of him until I talk to him." With her daughter studying her, Doris seemed to be gathering strength. "There are a few things we have to get straight between he and I, and then with you and Reggie. I want to see him to give him the choice of telling you himself or me doing it for him. Either way you all deserve the truth."

"Mom, what are you talking about?"

"When I sat with you and Reggie the other day, I told you I'd share with you my part in what happened. Your father also shares some of the responsibility in this but I want to give him the chance to tell you for himself." Doris stood up and put her hand up to keep Bebo in her seat. "You two have a good morning together and celebrate your good news. Annie, could you tell your sister what we talked about when she comes home from school? I'm off to see your father so I'd like for all of you to make time for me later on tonight."

"Whatever you want, mom." They watched her go and then looked at each other. "Do you have any idea what she's talking about?"

"Not a clue, but I bet I know who does."

"Your mother?" Annie asked referring to Audrey.

"The one and only. If Audrey doesn't know, then we'll have to wait your mother out."

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There was a pigeon on the windowsill and it was more interesting to look at than the television mounted on the wall. Not for the first time in his life, Patrick Paddio felt alone. He exhaled a long sigh and wondered why now, as he was coming to the end of his career, this would happen to him? He had worked long and hard to run from so many things but now it looked like he hadn't run far or fast enough.

"Patrick?"

Her voice pulled his attention away from the bird and to what faced him. Years of being together gave him some idea of why she had stayed away so he wanted to hurt her before Doris got the opportunity to inflict any pain on him. "I arrived last night and this is the first time you had an opportunity to come and see me? Your concern is touching."

"If my being here is bothering you I'll be happy to leave." She walked in and closed the door behind her glad to see he was the only one in the room. They didn't need an audience for their talk. "But before I go I want to let you know I told the girls everything about my family." She sat in the lime green chair close to the bed and folded her hands over her lap.

"Why? I thought we'd both agreed it was best to keep that from them. What purpose is it going to serve having them know now, except to warp their way of thinking about things they shouldn't even be considering?" His hands clutched at the blanket covering him as if to keep him from lashing out and hitting her. "What good is it to make decisions together if you break them without talking to me about it first?"

"Because we didn't decide, did we? You decided and I was expected to go along with it, but that's not how we're going to spend the rest of our lives together. I'm not one of your men, Patrick, and I'm tired of just following orders."

"They're my children, Doris," he said the name with a bit of sarcasm.

"They're our children, and it's about time their mother started acting like the woman her parents raised her to be."

The laugh was equally sarcastic and he threw his head back in disgust. "That wasn't raising a family, it was a perversion those bitches cooked up as normal. I won't have it happen to my daughter." He was screaming by the time he was done and Doris didn't recognize the man he'd become.

"What's wrong with you?" Her face was a mask of horror as if she'd just woken from a bad dream and found that most of her life was a waste. "Annie's happy for once. You should see them together; it reminds me of when we first met. What happened to the young man who thought I was someone worthy of his time and attention?"

"I don't want to see them together, and I made myself clear in that jungle. I don't want that unnatural beast anywhere near Annie."

"Does it matter at all what Annie wants?"

"The one thing I'm sure of is that Bebo won't go through with this without my blessing so I guess this is a mute argument. We'll be fine when all this is over and she goes back to that island and the rest of her kind." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, a small smile playing on his lips.

"In Amazon society, the birth mother of any child is the parent who holds the ultimate decision on matters such as this." She stood up and walked to the side of his bed. "That would be me," she pointed to her chest, "And I gave Bebo my blessing when she asked. I'm sure her asking you was just a courtesy on her part."

He grabbed her hand when she let it drop to her side and squeezed her wrist uncomfortably.

"Don't you go against me on this, Doris. You go back there and tell them you spoke hastily and without authority. You have the right to take back your blessing. Just tell them you spoke without discussing it with me first."

"My name is Dothan, and I won't. She's happy and Bebo is the one who makes her that way. I'm not going to deny Annie the chance of living a good life."

He squeezed harder and tried to pull her closer. "You remember what I told you when we started this. It's either them or me. You choose."

"This time I pick my children and my family. I love you, and a part of me always will, but I won't live a lie anymore." She pulled free of his hold and started for the door then remembering the other reason she had come. "One more thing," he looked at her and she saw nothing of the man she once loved. Something had changed in the weeks since the Amazons had arrived to train with his unit, but he hadn't wanted to say what it was. "I promised them I'd tell them the whole truth."

"You wouldn't dare," he threatened.

"I just want to know if you want to tell them or should I?"

He was stuck on the bed. If he hadn't been he would have gone after her so all he could do was throw the plastic cup by his bed at her head. "Neither one of us will tell them, you hear me. I strictly forbid it."

"You won't tell them?"

"No, and I'm telling you now that I forbid you to open your mouth about it."

"Then it's up to me," she started for the door again and this time she didn't stop until she was in the hallway. "Goodbye, Patrick."

"Doris, you come back here, now!" His screaming brought one of the male nurses with a shot of



sedative. "Get away from me and go and get my wife back here," Patrick demanded. A moment later all his protests died away as the darkness overtook him.

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With Audrey and Bo's blessing, the girls went out in search of the man whose name Junis had written down. Surprisingly, Greg Petkus lived not too far from Annie and Reggie in Arlington. Both Annie and Bebo noticed the look the queen and her consort exchanged when she told them about her talk with the general on the flight home. The queen's eyes had closed at the mention of Greg's name but she said nothing. Something about the set of her mother's shoulders made Bebo not want to press the issue.

"Is it just me, or do you feel like we've stepped into a great big mystery with no end in sight?" Annie leaned back against her lover and ran her fingers over the arm holding her in place.

"It's actually starting to aggravate the patience right out of me. I know both my moms know what's going on with your mother, and now this guy makes mama give off some weird vibes."

"Well if we don't find any answers with Mr. Petkus, then I say we sit them all down and demand answers tonight." With a turn of her head Annie studied the two women riding in the front seat. Kip had given them their privacy for the ride but that was about it. "Do you think we can ditch my shadow any time soon?"

"What's the matter, love? Feeling a bit hemmed in already?"

"What I'm feeling is like I want you to kiss me and I don't want an audience." She turned and put her hand at the center of Bebo's chest. "It's not fair. We just got together and I don't like having someone else dictate to us when we can see each other."

"You can kiss me now," said Bebo with a smile. She pressed her hand to the side of Annie's face and lowered her head. No sooner had their lips met than the car stopped.

"Highness, the address you requested," said Kip.

Annie kept her lips pressed to Bebo's for one second longer. "You were saying about now, highness."

The princess laughed and put their foreheads together. "I'm sure I'll think of something before the situation gets desperate."

They stepped out of the car and looked at the modest home with an incredible garden. Bebo could tell even though most of the plants had no foliage because of the weather. In the spring and summer she could just imagine how beautiful the place must look. Her second thought was of her father. Did he have the opportunity to spend time out here cutting grass and pruning with Greg?

"It's going to be fine, honey. I'm sure he'll really appreciate your coming and telling him." Annie took her hand and pulled her to the front door. From the time Bebo had gotten back she'd been really good about being upbeat except for the breakdown the night before. "I'm sure Arthur would appreciate it too, having it come from you, I mean, and not some stranger."

"I am a stranger to him," said Bebo pointing to the house.

"But you won't be when we leave. You better than anyone can understand his feelings for Arthur."

Kip did turn away this time as Bebo kissed Annie not wanting to intrude on the intimate moment. "Thank you for coming with me, Annie."

"I know you're bigger than I am and can fight like no one I've ever seen, but it's my job to protect and stand by you too. You aren't alone anymore, ever." The declaration caused Bebo to grin and nod before ringing the bell.

"Can I help you?" The man who answered the door looked at them and focused on the taller of the two.

Annie couldn't take her eyes off him and wondered if Bebo saw the resemblance. "We're sorry to bother you, but we'd like to talk to you a minute if we could. I'm Bebo of Leon and this is Annie Paddio," said Bebo. She felt the blonde standing next to her sort of slump against her and wanted to get her inside before Annie fell on her face. "You okay, love?" Bebo asked softly when the man waved them in and led them to the den.

"I'm fine, just tired I guess." Her tone was normal but she had a death grip on Bebo's hand and wasn't about to let go. *Doesn't she see it?* The thought almost made it out of the blonde's mouth but she was in too much shock to verbalize anything.

When they arrived in the bright room the man stood at its center and looked to the ceiling as if they weren't there. He had his hands on his hips and he was blinking furiously. "Is he all right?" Greg finally looked at them and wasn't ashamed to hide his tears. "That's why you're here isn't it?"

"You don't want to know who we are?" asked Bebo.

"I know who you are, highness. Who you both are, but I need to know about Arthur before we get into anything else."

Something caught Bebo's eye before she answered. The frame on the mantle sat along side a lot of other ones with smiling faces, but it was out of place in her opinion because there was no reason for him to have it. She walked over and picked it up and looked at it so long Annie walked over and took it from her hand to see what it was. The little girl smiling at the camera was wearing ceremonial Amazon garb. If it was who Annie thought it was, she had never seen a more adorable child.

"Is this you?"

"It was taken at the ceremony the day she was inducted into the tribe," answered Greg for Annie. "Please, all that can wait. Could you tell me about Arthur?"

"Mr. Petkus, I'm sorry that you have to find out this way, but Arthur was killed in the line of duty two days ago." Annie pushed Bebo forward when it looked like the man was going to fall after listening to the princess' words. "I'm so sorry but he did make me promise to come and see you to deliver a message." Bebo put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. "He wanted me to tell you how much he loved you. His words were that he hadn't loved another person so much outside his family."

"Thank you, highness, that means so much to me and I'm glad you were there when it happened. I'm grateful he wasn't alone." He took a deep breath and tried to get his tears to stop. "You must think I'm a real piece of work," he laughed wryly but didn't let go of her. "I know what he was to you and here you are comforting me. It should be me offering comfort not the other way around."

"Mr. Petkus, we also know what Arthur meant to you so please don't think yourself weak because you're not taking this news well. I love Bebo and if something had happened to her I would lose my mind. We're here for you no matter what," said Annie. The man's shaking hadn't escaped her and she felt terrible that he felt he had to keep himself together because of their presence.

Her words made him fall into Bebo's arms and he just sobbed. Every time Arthur had gone out he knew this could be the outcome but it didn't matter, Greg would have never walked away from him. They were going to go to the embassy together to meet Bebo when he got back; it was all Arthur had talked about from the time he had heard she was coming. Greg was getting to meet her now, but this wasn't what he had planned.

"He talked about you all the time." He allowed himself to be led to the sofa where he sat between them. "The pride in his voice was hard to miss." The crying was starting to slow but it was still hard for them to understand what he was trying to say. "He even told me about you, Miss Paddio. I've actually waited so long to finally meet you as well, that it was funny Arthur was the one who told me about you."

"What do you mean? Bebo and I just met, so why'd you want to meet me before now?"

"You don't know do you?" He looked at her and started crying again for a different reason. "I'm sorry, forget I said anything."

"Where's your kitchen, Mr. Petkus? I'll go and get you a glass of water," offered Bebo. She stood and left in the indicated direction thinking that maybe he would open up if it was just Annie. All these unfinished conversations were starting to get on her nerves.

Annie could see the frustration in Bebo from the way her shoulders looked tight. "Mr. Petkus, could I call you Greg?"

"Please do."

"I know this is a difficult time for you, but could you please tell me what you meant? Bebo and I are going through our own troubles, and I'm sure you know what Arthur was to her. If there's anything you could add to help me ease her pain, I'd sure appreciate it." She put her hands over his and cocked her head slightly to the side. "Please?"

"Annie, have you ever made a promise to someone you cared about?"

"I made the most important promise I could make just recently. Bebo and I are to be married."

"I'm sorry, I should be using your title. I didn't know."

She patted his hands and smiled. "It was like I said just recently. Arthur wouldn't have had time to tell you before he left." Not wanting to be steered away from their earlier topic she tried her best to guide him back to answering her questions. "Why do you think we should have met long ago?"

Greg's mouth opened, but before he could answer Kip stepped into the room and bowed slightly. "I'm sorry for the intrusion, highness, but there's a call for either you or Princess Bebo." Kip held up the phone to her.

"Excuse me, Greg." She took the call and just kept answering yes and okay. "Thanks, Kip," she handed the phone back to the guard. "If you're up to it, you've been summoned by the Queen of Amazonia and her Consort for a visit," she told Greg, but looking at Bebo standing behind him with a glass in her hand. The raised eyebrow over the expressive blue eyes meant that her partner was as surprised by the invitation as she was.

"That might be for the best," he said. "If you'll give me a few minutes I'll clean my face and grab my coat."

"What do you think, honey?" asked Annie.

"That I'm about to take a staff to anyone that doesn't start answering questions when we get home. I feel like there's a great story everyone but us has been privy to and I don't like it."

"I think you're right, and if that doesn't work, we'll sick Reggie on them."

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When they arrived back home, the staff informed them that the queen and her other guests were waiting in the great hall. Bebo led them to the south wing of the house that Annie had yet to visit, but Greg seemed to know the way. The blonde stopped and looked around before following

Bebo to where they were going to sit.

The walls were made of oak paneling and the floor was covered with large comfortable cushions and rugs. Along the only wall made of stone, there was a great fireplace that had several large logs ablaze in it heating up the room quite nicely. The only decorations hanging along the walls were different types of masks that probably held some meaning to the people in the room who had worn them Annie guessed.

She followed Bebo to where the queen sat and kissed the woman's cheek before sitting against her lover's sturdy frame. Close to them were Reggie and Dothan along with Bear and Kip. What shocked her a little was when Greg dropped to his knees before Audrey and kissed her hand.

"My queen, thank you for inviting me." He clasped arms with Boden next. "Warrior Boden, it's great to see you again." And his last stop before picking a seat was Dothan. "It's been a while, but you are as lovely as ever, Dothan. Your Annie is a delightful girl."

"Wait a minute," said Annie putting her hands up. "You two know each other?"

"Annie, if you're patient with us we promise to answer whatever questions you have before we leave here," said Audrey.

Denise and a few of the others came in with wine and snacks and the three youngest people there wanted to scream. "I'll pour, Denise, thank you," said Bebo in an attempt to hurry the proceedings along.

"Okay if that's true, my first question is, why do you look just like my father?" Reggie asked Greg. "Because I'm sure as hell not the only one in the room who sees it." She looked to her sister and Annie nodded. It had been the reason for her almost passing out when he had first opened his door to them.

"He looks like your father because he's his older brother," said Dothan. The fact her children knew nothing of their family's past made her sad because of all that was stolen from them. The Amazons were a noble people who cherished family and honor, and she had done everything possible to make sure they knew nothing of that. "I promised you earlier there was more to this story but it wasn't mine to tell. The rest of the tale was your father's to tell but he made it clear to me today he had no intention of ever opening his mouth."

Greg had taken the space next to his sister-in-law and put his hand over hers to offer comfort and strength as she faced the consequences of what she'd done in the name of love. "Would you like me to tell them?"

"Look I don't care who tells me as long as someone tells me," said Reggie in exasperation.

"Reggie, this can't be easy for anyone so lets give them a chance, okay?" Annie lifted her hand in invitation for Reggie to come and sit next to them. The younger blonde accepted and leaned against Bebo's other side. "She's right though, it doesn't matter who tells us but I'd really like to

know."

The only man amongst them took a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves so he could start talking. "How about I start at the beginning and I'll let your mother finish?"

"And I'll fill in the blanks between the two. From that I'm sure you'll understand all that's happened to bring us to this day," added Audrey.

"As you know, my name is Gregory Petkus. I'm the son of the high priestess, Emelda, of the Temple of Artemis, or I should say I'm her first born son. My brother Patrick was born a few years after me, the same year of the Consort Boden's birth. Until we were both twelve we studied on Amazonia and began our training in the warrior arts, but one of us excelled more than the other. I would've been a good fighter I guess, but my heart wasn't in it like Patrick's, and he thought it was a waste, or I should say he thought I was a waste for not wanting the same things he did. Overall I've never been the brother he wanted, or anyone he ever wanted to associate with."

His eyes, Bebo realized now when she thought back to that day in the tree with the general. It was her friend's Emelda's eyes she saw that day. Patrick had tried to hide from who he was but he still had much of the woman who gave him life in his features. "Emelda was joined?" asked the princess.

"My second mother died in an accident in the Argase Forest when we were still young. Mama never wanted to join again and devoted her life to the temple and us after her wife died. Right before I left was when it began. Patrick was starting to work with weapons and he felt ridiculed every time he had to face Boden in the arena. He didn't understand that some people have a better aptitude or different talents than others, and he started to grow angry." The memories seemed to take him for a long moment when he stopped talking and ran his hand through his hair. As much as he looked like their father, the sisters thought he was much more handsome because his face was more open and expressive. "He was angry at us, at the fact he was born to a society of women who he thought were better and stronger than him, and he was angry at me for not wanting to prove him right."

"About what?" asked Bebo.

"That a man is superior to women in the area of fighting. He tried to do that for years on the island and he was knocked down at every given chance by your mother."

"That might explain why he doesn't care for me too much. Had I known that, I might have gone about that first day of training a little differently," said Bebo almost to herself. The look on his face as she took Titus down with some well placed slaps wasn't admiration, it had been shock. His past humiliations must have come back to the forefront of his mind in a rush to see her fighting and beating those he'd trained to be the best.

"Yeah, it's almost funny looking at you now." Greg smiled at her and looked between Bebo and Boden.

"What's funny?" Annie asked him as she felt the arm around her tighten.

"Arthur may have provided the means for Bebo's conception but once again Boden cleared the field and won out on the final product didn't she?" He waved his hand between the two women. "The straight hair is the only difference."

"I didn't get a chance to ask you, but what is it you do?" Annie asked with a smile. She was starting to like this guy more and more.

"Like my mother Emelda, I'm a teacher. I'm a professor of Greek History at George Washington."

"No wonder you have such a good delivery of the facts," teased Reggie.

"Well thank you, but the fact I chose to follow my heart, as all Amazon children are encouraged to do, was another thing Patrick held against me. I not only didn't want to fight but I shared something in common with my mothers."

"You're gay," said Annie.

He nodded and fought back the feeling of hopelessness at having lost Arthur. "I had a fairly good life but when Arthur got transferred back here a couple of years ago, we met up one night by chance. It was the best thing that could've happened to me and I thought we'd be together forever, and in a way we will be. He'll be in my heart until I can see him again."

Bebo pressed the sisters closer to her and kissed the top of each blonde head. "You may have lost him, but you have gained the whole of your family back."

"She's right, you have," said Annie, as Reggie nodded.

Encouraged that they weren't angry, Dothan started on her part. "When I was working here I also by chance ran into someone from my past. The young dashing officer was so charming and polite that I fell in love and decided to give up my dreams for a life with your father. In the beginning I thought it was sweet that he didn't want me to work, or that he took up so much of my time that I had none left for my family, but then it became clear. He'd said he'd changed his name because of something for the service, and he didn't want to contact Greg because it would hurt his career - all the clues were there, I just didn't want to see them."

"As a way to punish those he thought had humiliated and wronged him, your father's anger made him remove all those things about his life he saw as inferior or wrong. Boden and I want to apologize for our part in all this and for keeping it from you, Bebo. Who could have guessed though that you'd bring us all back full circle so effortlessly?"

"Her comment makes sense now," said Bebo with a laugh.





"Well then lie in bed and count chobos until you are, but it's bed time," joked Bebo. She followed Annie and one of the nannies to the children's rooms, saving Shane for the last to be tucked in. "Sweet dreams, sprout, and I'll see you in the morning."

Annie had put the baby in her crib and had arranged the blankets around their two-year-old before joining her wife. This was one of her favorite times of day as she kissed them good night then stepped back to watch her little ones sleep. It was then Annie realized how quickly time passed and how big they got whether she was ready for it or not. "Good night, sweetheart," she said then delivered her last kiss.

"I love you, mama and mom."

"We love you too," they both said together with Bebo adding, "Now go to sleep."

They walked hand in hand to the balcony Bebo had told Annie about years before, and the blonde smiled when she heard the soft music playing. Her life had long ago become a fairytale, and if it was a dream, she prayed she never woke. Willingly she went into Bebo's arms as they started to sway to the music.

"I love you so much," she whispered up to her partner.

Bebo kissed her without missing a beat and ran her hand from her hip along the swollen breast to Annie's cheek. "I love you, highness, and all that you've given me."

Their path was going to be long, but it was a blessing Annie would savor every day they got to walk it. "Do you think Shane will get tired of me telling her that story?"

"My mother is still telling me her and mom's story and I'm not bored yet, so I don't think so."

"Then tomorrow I'll tell her the rest, and thank the goddess I'll have so many more chapters to add through the years thanks to you. But tonight..."

"What page do you want to add tonight, love?" Bebo's voice was teasing as it sounded softly in her ear before the lips moved down to kiss Annie's neck.

"Tonight I want to add to the parts I save for your ears only."

"Ah, those bedtime tales I'll definitely never get bored hearing."

From her window, Shane looked down and smiled at her two mothers. When Bebo scooped Annie up and carried her inside she heard the sounds of happiness as her mother Annie's laugh echoed through the palace. There was no doubt in her young mind, their story would continue.

*The End*

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