

1

THE FIRST TIME LARRY thought about smuggling Bjorn out of the hospital, he cursed to himself.

This was his heart talking, not his head, for his heart ran wild with ideas.

Much like a mechanical sixth sense, the cardiac monitor's slow and persistent beeps prophesied the imminent future. A future Larry didn't want to accept. His middle-aged face was lined as though old stories could trample his courage, even the ones he held in esteem, and he cautiously eyeballed the empty corridor before turning to the weakened man. The idea of death had unleashed a whirl of emotions in him, and he clutched the bed's guardrail to shield himself against the jeopardy of Bjorn's condition. The stillness of the ICU room—with its white walls and gray paneling—had soaked up his partner's remaining strength, and the man lay comatose with his tongue jutting from the corner of his mouth. Its blue tint reminded him of the lapis stones that had been mined in Persia and meticulously shaved and buffed before being embedded into the headbands and necklaces he had worn as a child.

For nearly a week, Larry had paced the hospital's corridors hoping to ferret out a miracle, but none had come. The antibiotics had been useless in fending off the microscopic organisms that had invaded the fissure at the base of Bjorn's skull. It was a small fracture—no longer than a centimeter—but large enough to immobilize the full-grown man. Amplifying the bleakness of Bjorn's physical state, the injury had been Larry's fault, all by accident, of course. But no matter, it was the one thing he wanted to rectify, solve in any way he could. The smell of antiseptic—slightly bitter with a hint of lavender—and the barrage of the florescent hallway lighting reminded him of this, and he checked Bjorn's pulse on the display screen before caressing his brow.

Abruptly, Bjorn's voice whispered in his head. *Promise me, don't let them lock me in some hospital staring at the ceiling, waiting to die.* The man had uttered those words gazing out over a recreational lake a few weeks prior—just days before the accident. He had made it clear that he wanted to be out in nature *where life meets death head on* when he finally let go. At the time, Larry hadn't given much thought to the statement. It was the kind of thing one says leisurely in hopes that these kinds of predicaments never come true. That said, Larry wanted to honor Bjorn's request, and beyond all else, repay his debt by doing something remarkable for him, something miraculous. Inciting a tone that was encouraging, he muttered, "Stay with me, buddy. I'm gonna get you out of here."

Nodding softly to himself, he reviewed his escape plan. What he was about to do was irresponsible and foolish, and for all practical purposes, illegal. Sneaking a dying man out of a medical facility would have consequences for sure, but it was the only thing he knew to do. And it all depended on how quickly

he could get to the city's historic landmark, to the same site where he had cowered from defending his partner just weeks before.

He stroked Bjorn's unresponsive arm then swelled with a flare of indebtedness. At forty-seven, Larry had spent most of his life struggling to fit in. The trauma of being separated from his mothers at an early age and then ousted into a strange land where he had to assimilate to its radical customs and beliefs—not to mention his ongoing fear of relationships—had forced him to detach from himself. Disconnect from all that he essentially was. When Bjorn had come into the picture, he had given Larry's solitary life meaning. Their short time together wasn't the ideal romance, but it had been significant and real, and showed Larry that he, too, could be loved—if he just opened his heart.

And that he did. He roused images of lying forehead to forehead in bed, hypnotized in Bjorn's lovesick stare as they whispered silly, indulgent things to each other—things sugary and gooey and nonsensical, except to the romantic ear. Leaning away purposefully to contain his emotions, he pinched at his colorful clothes, the magical attire his mothers had given him. Having embodied a modern-day hero in these extraordinary garments, he had saved lives. Not as many as he had wanted, but for the ones he had protected, this must've meant something, he reasoned. The appreciation he held toward his early life triggered one of his fondest memories, the murmuring of iron trolley wheels grinding over sand and gravel.

The wagon, filled with luxury fabrics, footwear and jewelry, cooking oils, wood crafts and candles, exotic fruits and berries, and a whole lot more, would come twice a month to his village. Over dirt trails, across streams, up mountainsides, through tall,

olive-green grass, a designated pair of women would take turns hauling the cart until they reached the next town or hamlet. There, they would take rest, and before going any further, they'd hand out the items without charge. Everything in his motherland had been free. There were no markets or stores of any kind, and no one paid for anything. The idea of it would've been foolish, taken out of some farfetched fantasy with radical ideologies of greed. If a neighbor ever needed anything, all she had to do was ask.

But that had been many years ago and was difficult for Larry to recall now. Despite everything he'd done in his life *and* what he was about to do, he examined how he had ended up like this, scurrying to find the ideal place where he could be with his lover one last time. He unplugged the wires connected to the monitor and gently removed the remaining intravenous lines and catheters. If he were careful enough, they'd soon be outside, away from the fake lights and machines that kept the man alive, away from the smells of pain that polluted the hallways, and into the open air of Central Park. Before he scooped Bjorn into his arms, another thought pressed at him, as if searching for validation.

What impetus, what unforeseen event, had set his unusual life into motion? For all he knew, his journey had begun long before his earliest memories, in an unspecified location, with an unnamed father and mother—the two biological parents he had never known. As such, it had begun with an infant.

Strapped to a bundle of twigs.

And tossed out to sea.

2

IN THE GLARE OF the midday sun, Hippa surveyed the empty horizon, which flickered in a faint hue of ultramarine. The shriek of a seagull ruptured her concentration, and she leaned forward to inspect the flailing crustacean she clutched between her fingers. Deeming the markings on its underbelly as wide and round—and ultimately undesirable—she tossed the crab back into the lagoon and jabbed her hands into the water in hopes of snagging a male.

The gales were unusually strong this early in the afternoon, as if the inlet waters needed to expel any discomfort from the heat. She brushed her hair away from her shoulders, allowing a gust of wind to cool her naked torso, and then turned toward the banded chalk cliffs that shouldered the island with hefty slabs of sedimentary rock. Behind them were woodlands in rich shades of green that ran upward into two merging mountain ranges. These mountains concealed the spirited metropolis at the center of the island. Its warm equatorial climate offered sunshine throughout the day and cooler rain showers in the

evenings, stabilizing the weather year-round. It was a paradise hidden from the outer world.

Wading waist-deep in the cove was Dora, who untangled crustaceans before gently stuffing them into a sack made of goatskin. The two companions were of the same ilk, each born and raised on the island, an island inhabited exclusively by women—warrior women—whose lifespans extended thousands of years.

Many centuries before, this nation of Amazons had opposed the ruling of man, and as one skirmish led to another, they ended up in a bloody battle against the immortal Alcides and his barbarian horde. With little trust left in a world afflicted by the opposite sex, the women abandoned their motherland and resettled here—a secluded island void of conflict and beyond the reach of menfolk.

Unexpectedly, Hippa's leg brushed an object floating inside a batch of reed grass. She nudged it away before studying it a short while. The object, a bundle of linen, twigs, and shivers of driftwood that had been tied together with twine, was attached to four airtight jugs. The jugs resembled glass in some artificial way, and from this, Hippa knew the heap was not Amazonian.

When she touched the top of the bundle, it moved. Hastily, she unwrapped the twine and unfolded the cloth. Two puffy eyes, small like a doll's, blinked slowly in the sun's glare. Hippa held the clammy baby out in front of her. A darkened umbilical cord stuck out from its belly, and she reasoned it was a newborn, at most a couple of days old. When the infant wobbled in her arms and drew up its legs, she noticed the child's genitalia.

Her reaction was quick and without deliberation. "*Mala Daia!*" she cursed, and threw the baby out into the lagoon. She

jabbed her hands into the water and frantically washed them clean.

“No, Hippa!” Dora shrieked. Hurtling through the waves, she raced to retrieve the child before it sank. First holding the infant out with both hands to let the water drain off, she then lowered it to her chest. As if it had just been pushed out of the womb for a second time, it screeched in an arrhythmic fashion, and its cry spurred Dora to shield it in her arms. Her voice softened. “We can’t kill it.”

Hippa threw her sack over her shoulder and turned to the shoreline. “It has the forbidden.”

Dora drew the infant out in front of her to inspect its crotch. Her voice rose to baby talk. “But he’s wet. And frail.”

Hippa was Dora’s elder by two hundred years, but both women appeared similar in age, an age ripe for childbearing. Because of this gap in years, Hippa outranked her partner and governed the decisions they made; yet she rarely decided anything without consulting with Dora first. But this was not one of those times. She spun around, and with words that came bullishly, she commanded, “Drown him.”

The baby wiggled in Dora’s arms. “I can’t do—”

Hippa reached for her partner’s arm but then withdrew, careful not to lay her hand on the infant, whose skin seemed grisly, grotty to the touch. “Stop using that ridiculous baby voice. Men are dangerous. That’s their destiny in life. We cannot disobey a law that’s over three thousand years old.”

Dora squeezed the child against her breasts. Hippa knew that the woman couldn’t destroy something so helpless, and it would be just like her to question why it had made it to the island and whether its fate lay in her arms.

Dora spoke with a wounded look on her face. "But it's not fair."

"Not fair?" Hippa pursed her lips in agitation. "Unfair, my great Gaea!"

Dora drew the goatskin sack close to her. A crab climbed out of its opening and, pressing its back legs against the buoyant leather casing, thrashed its claws into the air—its only defense against its oversized captor. Dora glanced at Hippa and then back at the crab, and using her free hand to diffuse her agitation, she brushed the creature back into the water. "Don't use that tone with me."

Hippa pulled away, allowing the sun to cast light onto her torso. She stood tall. Her skin, darkened from the years of being outdoors, drew out the green in her eyes. These eyes, narrow and upturned, made her look defiant and distrusting, but her hearty, square-shaped smile lent her the charisma needed for military leadership. Dora adored this smile and, in private quarters, would touch her lover's lips, sometimes pulling at them to peek at her partner's perfectly lined teeth.

Hippa spoke softly. "Sorry, my love. I just don't understand. You think it's *unfair* to have a man on the island? The law forbids it. You know this a thousand times over, yet you think it's—"

"Not unfair if a man were here, but it's not fair to us, Hippa, that we can never have a child. A child to hold in our arms, a child to suckle us and to raise under the guidance of Hera and Athena." Her eyes begged for Hippa's understanding. "A child to call our own."

The truth was, the island had few children. In recent years, conflict in the outer world had made it difficult for Amazons to leave their homeland in order to procreate. Or, on the rare

occasion—and with stringent approval of the island’s governing council—to adopt a child. Either option would be enticing for these female inhabitants whose routine, repetitive lives and barren wombs ached for any resemblance of life. A wiggle in their bellies or a tug at their umbilical cords would suffice.

This pained Hippa, for her suffering wasn’t without reason or aim. Gritting her teeth, she looked toward their home. She knew their *hestola* well. She was adept at stepping over the floorboards needing repair and was no stranger to the cracks in the terracotta bathtub. She could tell the precise time of day by the angle of the sunlight that poured through the windows. But what she wasn’t acquainted with was the sound of a baby’s cry, the grasp of its miniature fingers, its crankiness when fighting to stay awake, and the commitment needed to bring such a frail being into the protective web of their home. She had longed for a child for many decades now, and to share this with Dora would be one of life’s greatest treasures. But she had to honor the island’s most sacred statute, the one every Amazon swore by.

She was also well acquainted with Dora’s compassion for living things. How this female warrior could ever fight in battle was beyond her; she’d probably hand out *Evadne* lilies, the flowers of peace, to her opponents. Turning to her partner, she spoke again, her voice soft. “Don’t I suckle you enough?”

Her failed attempt at humor didn’t sit well with her partner, but Dora hinted a smile, knowing Hippa was trying to understand. After being espoused for nearly two thousand years, the intimacy they had shared as young lovers had dwindled, and in its place came an understanding without words.

The baby cooed.

Dora’s arms relaxed around the child. She wasn’t tall, but her slim build created an illusion that she was. Like the dahlia florets

that bloomed large and round in the late summer months, her calves hovered robust over her thin ankles. Hippa found the unusual feature alluring, and for some unknown reason, a testament to her partner's submissive nature. In contrast to these ample features, her nose was narrow and straight, and appeared to reinforce the woman's self-assurance. Dora was no push-over.

Her lips puckered, and using her baby voice again, she said, "Oh look, he just—" Then, fumbling to hold the child in one position, she stiffened before shoving it into Hippa's arms. "You drown him then!"

Hippa shoved the baby back as if it held a thousand plagues, and an uncomfortable silence burrowed itself between the two women. Hippa stared at Dora hoping it would entice her to change her mind, but from the way Dora held her eyes shut, Hippa knew she was praying. She was with no doubt begging the gods to prevent her from submerging the baby in the shoreline waters. And with that, she was also imploring them to let her keep it in her arms forever.

But the gods rarely grant two wishes.

Hippa knew it would shatter Dora's heart if she killed the infant, and wanting to relinquish any regret she'd have in deciding, she compromised. "Okay, it's stated that no *man* is allowed on the island. I guess a baby, male though it is, isn't a man yet. You can take the child back home until we can devise a plan—one that's consistent with the mandates of the council, and the queen, if it comes to that."

The smell of morning dew lured the two women out on the veranda. Holding the infant over her shoulder, Dora patted it gently on its back, aiming for a burp. One night was enough for her attachment to the child to grow steadfast, and the decision to take the baby home had raised her spirits, and with this, had restored her thirst for Hippa. After the child had been nursed with a mixture of goat's milk and *herasian* powder, essential to replenishing the body with nutrients, it had slept undisturbed during the night. As the hours had passed well into the morning, a spark had ignited between the women, and they soon found their bodies naked and woven together. The way wedded Amazons should be.

Swaying back and forth in the garden, their neighbor welcomed the sun with the graceful dance of *Neaera*, an Amazonian prayer for warmth and order to accompany the day.

Soon everyone would know their secret, Hippa reasoned. *You can't keep a crying, whining, cooing infant hidden from these women whose ears can hear a cobra slithering through the grass.*

Spotting the child, their neighbor broke the ritual and bounced over to the women. "She's adorable," she said with a throaty laugh, and called out, "Come, everybody, it's a baby!"

As her comrades bolted to the veranda, Dora held the swathed infant out for everyone to see. Envisioning the baby being passed around in a frantic display of affection—one that could reveal its unforgivable flaw—Hippa stood as a barrier to the women scampering to their porch.

One Amazon cheered, "My ears do not fail me! I did hear a baby's cry last night."

"Ah, she's adorable."

"Where did you get—"

“We *found* her,” Dora interjected. “At the shoreline of *Kopas Ylefos*, near the pomegranate trees. On the far side of the lagoon.”

Another woman added, “The council will need to know. Every inhabitant must report an infant.”

Hippa stepped out in front. “We have every intention of informing the High Council, but the needs of the child come first.”

“What are you going to name her?”

The group looked at the two women, who had been so focused on providing for the infant that they hadn’t thought of naming it. Hippa pictured it tied to a bundle of twigs from the laurel tree—a mountain tree whose leaves had garnished the heads of the esteemed Amazonian champions in war and games throughout the ages.

“Lau—” she said with a voice of uncertainty. Her gaze met briefly with Dora’s and then slid away. “Lauri.”

“*Crowned with laurels*,” someone said confidently, then added, “Lauri also means *hidden* in ancient Hittite.”

More women came oohing and aahing over the child, allowing Dora to soak in the attention, but Hippa walked inside, away from the chaos. Her thoughts turned to her daily military drills. “I need to get to the training,” she mumbled, reassuring herself that it was safe to leave.

In the bedroom, she squeezed the shoulder straps of her chiton, hoping its grip would hold in the water welling in her eyes. It was wrong to disguise the child. Ultimately, she could lose Dora if they weren’t careful, and if not sentenced to death, they would be imprisoned for the rest of their lives. Gulping air, she pulled herself together, straightened her posture, and wiped her eyes clear. She tugged at the shoulder straps again, and her

chiton fell to the floor. She reached for her headgear and put it on, not forgetting to tighten the leather straps of her headdress parallel to her brow. She added her armbands and shin guards and marched to the doorway, only to freeze there.

In contrast to the warmth that Dora offered, the armor lay cold and lifeless next to her skin, and the thought of losing her partner tore at her being. Dora wasn't perfect—nor was she—but the woman was decent, compassionate, true. Even if they didn't share the same interests, she was attentive and inquisitive, always ready to take in Hippa's concerns. Her unwavering affection was also present in her touch—in the way she massaged Hippa's neck to console her. Dora's eagerness to please her partner made Hippa love her all the more, and it was this kind of sisterhood she never wanted to forego.

She turned around, took off the gear, and flopped on the bed. Reaching for her mate's mulberry silk scarf—the one set aside for ceremonies—she pictured how Dora had attentively nurtured the infant through the night. The thing was tiny, helpless and feeble, yet forbidden. How could something so insignificant be so threatening to their future, to the future of the island? The thought of this was outlandish. Implausible. And yet, it was the law.

She would need to tell the council, even if Dora disapproved. Hiding this kind of secret would bring them nothing but doom. Death by sword would be their judgment, or if the council were lenient, they'd each be confined to a cell with little sunlight and left all alone. Without Dora's solace—or anyone else's, for that matter—she'd wither away in misery, and the odor of her own rotting skin would be the continuous reminder of her betrayal. Betrayal to her fellow sisters.

Hippa twisted upright again. Imprisonment with no means to train for combat and no means to comfort Dora through the endless years of immortality would be the torture she wouldn't be able to endure. She wanted to scream that it was all a lie, that the baby was forbidden, and by doing so, the law could run its course. But remembering how enjoyable the past night with Dora had been, she held back from revealing anything.

She drew Dora's scarf over her face. The texture was comforting and freeing to her soul. And it was with this sensation that she made her final decision. A decision that would foretell her destiny, and with it, Dora's and the child's. Her desire to please her partner had outweighed her obedience to the law. And although this made her feel disingenuous, a fraud to her kinfolk, it was for Dora's happiness that she neglected to reveal the truth.

As time passed—each day toppling in on the other—the two mothers became overattentive in protecting the child, sheltering her away from other Amazons, and most importantly, always keeping her clothed. Eventually, Hippa grew fond of the youngster that Dora loosened in her embrace and placed into her arms. By helping her partner with the daily routines centered on providing for the child, she soon welcomed Lauri into her life.

And by doing so, she began to claim *her*, defend *her*, and love *her* as her very own.