

THE MONARCH'S STORY  
**BECOMING A WARRIOR**  
TRANSLATED BY MOOSE TYLER  
FROM THE HISTORICAL SCROLLS OF THE AMAZON WARRIORS



## The First Lesson

The Great Mother had blessed the day with a brilliant blue sky and a light, southerly breeze. Keeping the clouds at bay, She had allowed the sun to reign overhead unobstructed since first light, which was why so many had taken refuge at Terra's Tea House, the oldest, most peaceful and prestigious place one could dine at in Themiscia. Nestled in the heart of the island, protected on one side by a small waterfall trickling from the top of a curved rock wall and, on the other, by a thick curtain of moss hanging from the trees, Terra's was a delightful escape on a hot afternoon, if you could find a seat.

Wanje sat at a table away from the waterfall with the sun behind her. Her silver hair was knotted in a low ponytail. Some said Wanje had the same hair color as the Great Mother, but Wanje said it was a result of age. She was, after all, Themiscia's oldest resident. Though, seeing her olive skin and youthful face haloed in sunlight, one would never guess.

Across from Wanje sat Amaria, an awkward girl with long, unkempt hair, braided and brown as the earth. She wore a tan tunic with a simple belt. The smudges of dust on her face and arms made her skin look darker than it was. She tugged at the neckline of the cloth wrapped around her body. The fabric felt itchy. She adjusted the material around her waist and placed her hands in her lap. The dirt under her nails was thick, so she sat on her hands.

Wanje smiled. "Is this your first time wearing a tunic?"

Amaria stopped fidgeting. "No, I wear them a lot. Mother makes me, but I'd be more comfortable in a fighting kilt."

Amaria adjusted the garb again and looked down. Sweat streaks stained the cloth. Whenever she was nervous, her palms would sweat. In competitions, she carried a small satchel of dirt in case she needed a better grip on her weapons, but this wasn't competition. This was Quest Training, the last stage a warrior went through before taking her shield and joining the ranks of the queen's army. This was what she had been training for all her life.

Wanje picked up a canter of water and topped off Amaria's glass. "If you've worn many tunics, why does one make you uncomfortable now?"

"I don't know. I can't move as freely, and my feet get tangled if I walk too fast."

Wanje filled her own glass and set the canter down. "Yet, you're sitting. Mobility isn't a factor." She took a sip.

Amaria gulped until her glass was empty. The tunic and starting Quest Training weren't the only things that made her palms sweat. Although Amaria and Wanje shared Zeus's blood, Amaria had never thought of her, or any other sage for that matter, as a sister. They were teachers, elder priestesses who spoke the divine tongue. They were interpreters for the Great Mother, and Wanje was the most respected of them all.

Telsa was a sage, but that was different. She and Amaria were sisters by mother and by Zeus, and she was younger. She hadn't predicted the birth of two queens, survived three wars, or witnessed the deaths of thousands of citizens and warriors like Wanje had. Telsa hadn't even had her first vision yet.

To Amaria, Wanje had been training warriors since Hera was a child. She had trained the queen, Olivia, and Janus, the three Amaria respected most. Olivia always placed at the Genesis Games, and Janus was the most graceful sliver rider Amaria had ever seen.

Wanje had also taught Amaria's older sister, Sakina, and was training her best friend, Penelope. There was no one on the island she wanted to impress more than Wanje, not even the queen.

Amaria tugged at the tunic's neckline. "I want to do well in my lessons and make you proud, but the tightness of the cloth makes it difficult to breathe."

Wanje set her water glass down and studied Amaria for a few heartbeats before speaking. "You're giving me too much power, I'm afraid."

A girl approached carrying a bowl of fruit, plates, teacups, a ceramic pot, and a kettle of water on a tray. She set the fruit bowl and plates on the table.

Wanje smiled at her before looking at Amaria. "So, you think a tunic will make me proud?"

The girl took herbs from the pot, tossed a pinch into each cup, and tipped the kettle. She moved like tree sap. She glanced at Amaria.

“Do you think I would have thought less of you had you worn a kilt or even came without cloth?” asked Wanje. “After all, it is a warm day.”

The girl giggled as she set the cups and kettle on the table. The steam swirled around Amaria’s face. She felt sweat beads take post on her brow.

The girl bowed to Wanje. “Will that be all, ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The girl hurried off to tend to another table. Amaria watched her approach Lethivia and Roslyn, two middle-ranked warriors sitting closer to the waterfall. A heartbeat passed before they looked at Amaria and laughed. Amaria refocused on Wanje.

“I would say you are more concerned with the opinion of others. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Amaria was confused. She didn’t know if Wanje was asking a question or stating an opinion. “I suppose,” she muttered. She glanced at Lethivia and Roslyn. They had resumed their drinking game.

She sat up straighter. Her mind wasn’t working fast enough. She hadn’t eaten much at morning dine. She looked at the fruit on the table, and her stomach whined.

Wanje motioned to the bowl. “Please, keep your energy.”

Amaria made an effort not to rush. She picked up a few pieces as delicately as her fingers would allow and put them on the plate in front of her.

Wanje smiled. “Enjoy the day, Amaria. Not all of our lessons will be this relaxing.”

The sage stretched back in her chair, and the sun washed across Amaria’s face. The juices from the fruit were sweet on her tongue, and she chewed slowly. The tunic seemed to fit more loosely now.

“Pathenia tells me you’ve been training hard this cycle. She says most days a pillaged pantry is her only indication you’ve been home.”

Wanje frequently invited Amaria’s mother to the sacred pools for talks and tea.

Amaria finished chewing before answering. “Yes, ma’am. I’ve doubled my runs and climbs.”

“I hope the extra effort hasn’t interfered with your lessons.”

“No, ma’am. It’s actually helped.”

“Desh tells me you were the top student in Combat and one of the top in Riding.”

A grin spread across Amaria’s face. She knew she was better in Combat Training than any other warrior taking the shield and had been since she had started training the first full moon after her third birthday. In the beginning, her lessons were basic. Sticks and bows were the first weapons she learned, but by her fourth cycle, Amaria was training with sheathed blades. Most warriors started Blade Training at five, some at six. Now that Amaria was fourteen and had started Quest Training, there wasn’t a weapon she hadn’t mastered. Being one of the top students in Riding, however, was unexpected. Though she had been handling horses since before General Studies, it wasn’t until her eighth cycle that she blossomed in the saddle.

She forgot her manners, and her hand darted to the fruit bowl. She grabbed another piece and chucked it into her mouth. “In Riding, really?”

Wanje reached into the bowl. Her movement was graceful, fluid. “This surprises you?”

Amaria stopped mid-chew and swallowed, remembering her manners again. “Sort of. In Riding, not Combat.” She reached for more fruit.

“Explain.”

“Well, I feel a horse is letting me sit on her back. It’s her decision, not mine.” Amaria chewed fast and swallowed hard. “You know?”

Wanje shrugged.

Amaria refilled her glass and put the canter down. “With blades and the bow, I make the decisions. No one else.” She took a drink.

“Surely your opponent has a say in the matter.”

“Only if they’re faster or stronger.”

“And is there no one faster or stronger than you?”

Amaria put the glass down. “Not many.”

“Some might disagree with you.”

Amaria tossed another piece of fruit in her mouth. “Not many.”

“Just those who profited last Genesis from your loss. I heard a lot of arrowheads changed hands that day.”

Amaria felt the tunic tighten around her body, and a knot crashed into the pit of her stomach. The sensation felt much like how it felt leaping off Mesha Cliff, after her feet had left the ground and her body hung suspended in air, high above the sea, weightless for one whole heartbeat before the earth yanked her down. Only that was for fun, on purpose. This was a drop Amaria hadn't planned for. She had lost the final match in Hand-to-Hand Combat last Genesis Games to Zora, a snake in the belly show-off whom Amaria despised. It was Amaria's first loss in Hand-to-Hand since she started competing in the event. She had won ten crowns in a row, and though it had been nearly a cycle since the defeat, the reminder of it tasted as bitter on her tongue as the day Zora had been crowned victor. Amaria felt the match had been judged unfairly. Zora had delivered the winning strike while her foot was outside the circle, something that should have been caught by the judges. Regardless, Amaria knew better than to let her guard down. Zora was a cheater, and now Amaria had a mark on an otherwise untarnished record and one less crown for her wall.

“I am sure you will fare better this Genesis,” said Wanje.

Amaria choked down the fruit. “Yes, ma'am.”

Wanje ate another piece as Amaria fiddled with a loose thread on her tunic. The chatter from the other guests filled her ears, and the hum went uninterrupted for several heartbeats. She felt confused again. This wasn't how she had imagined her first lesson in Quest Training to be. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but it certainly wasn't eating fruit in a tunic at Terra's Tea House.

“What about your other lessons?” asked Wanje.

Besides Combat and Riding, Sea Training and Religion were the only other studies Amaria was required to take. Sea Training wasn't bad when it was in the water. The workouts were tedious, but she was a good swimmer and excelled. On the sliver, she was average at best, but she loved the challenge of staying on the wood, especially during the rain season. Sea Training was more torturous when on land because it usually involved making various watercraft and learning numbers and reading signs from the tide. Despite her distaste for numbers and lack of patience for the tide, any lesson in Sea Training was better than Religion.

Religion had been interesting when Amaria was in General Studies. There were a lot of stories and songs about the Great Mother, and there wasn't much reading. When reading was required, the parchment had big pictures on it and hardly any writing. Since Amaria had started Warrior Training, Religion had become all scroll reading, but not the big picture kind. These were long and almost all writing. They made her eyes cross, and she frequently lost her place which was why she rarely read them when they were assigned.

“I liked Sea Training,” said Amaria. “I got better on the sliver, but I don't think I'll ever fully understand the sea.”

“That's an unobtainable goal. No one fully understands the sea, except the Great Mother.”

Amaria nodded and nibbled on a piece of fruit.

“What did Sakina tell you about Quest Training?”

Amaria looked around for something to wipe her hands. Wanje offered her a cloth.

“Thank you.” She dried her fingers and put it next to her plate. “She said it's difficult and told me to be honest because you already know the truth.”

Amaria felt confident that she hadn't lied. Her sister had said those things, but if she was right, and Wanje did know the truth, she would know that Sakina had said more.

Wanje picked up her teacup and blew across the top. “What else did she say?”

Amaria picked up her water glass and took a long drink. Sakina had hated Quest Training. Each night she cursed the arrival of her fifteenth birthday before falling asleep. Amaria tried to help her find the sun in her training, but whether it was how boring learning patrol routes was or how pointless and redundant lessons were, Sakina always found the clouds. Amaria eventually stopped trying to help and

just listened and wondered if other warriors felt the same. Amaria had six full moons until her fifteenth birthday, and never once had she complained about becoming a warrior. There was no greater honor.

Wanje set her cup down. “Surely she gave you more advice than that. You are, after all, sisters. Truer than any.”

There were plenty of sisters by mother in Themiscia. It was common among citizens. Among warriors, several had them, but none were also sisters by Zeus. There had only been ten sisters by mother and Zeus in Themiscia’s history, all of which had died during the wars of the ancestors. Four generations passed before the boat brought Amaria’s mother to the island carrying Sakina on her hip, Amaria on her back, and Telsa in her womb. Amaria had been told how special she and her sisters were ever since she could remember, and she was constantly compared to the ones that came before. It made her feel like a new painting in the galleries at the artists’ camp.

Amaria cleared her throat. “She said the climb to Mesha Cliff before first light was her favorite way to start lessons, but that she didn’t get to climb it much in training.”

“Part of what separates Quest Training from Warrior Training is learning new terrain. How could you protect citizens and your queen otherwise?”

Amaria nodded. “I don’t need Sakina’s help understanding that taking the shield will be difficult. I do wish she had warned me about the first lesson. I was expecting something more – physical.”

Wanje smiled. “Sakina’s first lesson was at the archery range.”

“What?” Amaria shouted. A few patrons at the surrounding tables looked at her. She looked at Wanje and lowered her voice. “I don’t understand. Why is my lesson here?”

“Because, like your sister, patience is your biggest challenge.”

Amaria felt like she had been tricked, like the time she had paid an arrowhead during the Great Harvest to see the two-tailed bottom skimmer that was just a regular skimmer whose tail had been pierced by another skimmer’s barb. The archery range would have been a much better first lesson. No one there would have been wearing a tunic.

Amaria picked up her teacup and took a sip. It tasted like rusted metal. She set it down. “Do you think Sakina and I share many of the same attributes?”

“Very few. I would say you have more in common with me.”

Amaria grew suspicious. “How so?”

“For one, we both care for the Great Mother.”

Amaria rolled her eyes. “Everyone cares about the Great Mother.”

“Not everyone.”

Amaria tried to think of one Themiscian who didn’t care about the Great Mother but couldn’t. “Like who?”

“Some say that men don’t care for Her.”

Amaria hadn’t considered men as an option. She had seen them in some of the paintings and murals in the galleries and had read about them in the war parchments she was tested on, but Amaria had never seen a man in the flesh, at least not that she could remember.

Wanje took two arrowheads from a pouch fastened to her belt and tossed them on the table. “Let’s walk. The fruit has made us heavy.”

Amaria felt the sweat slide off her elbows. She hadn’t noticed, but the sun had changed position. It was now the hottest part of the day.

Wanje stood and walked towards the waterfall. Amaria tried to follow, but her chair was pulled in too tight. She had done that on purpose to avoid dropping anything on her tunic. She scooted it back, and the legs caught on the lip of the rocks. She stumbled but regained balance and eased herself out of the jam. She moved slow to keep her feet from tangling in the cloth and joined her teacher by the waterfall.

“We won’t walk too far,” said Wanje. She took one side of her tunic and lifted it slightly as she crossed from the cobblestones to the rough terrain of the forest floor.

Amaria tried to move too fast, and her legs got tangled. After she gained control of her stride, she caught up to Wanje and walked stumble-free for twenty-two heartbeats.



Savage Huntress was the first store Amaria and Wanje came to on the path. Amaria slowed her pace and eyed the pieces displayed out front. The owner, Sylvia, had finished two new shields, three bows, and a sheath, since last Amaria was there. The round shield with talons circling the rim caught her eye.

Wanje admired the pieces from a distance. “See anything you like?”

Amaria nodded. “I can always find something beastly at Savage Huntress.”

Savage Huntress was her favorite shop. Sometimes, when she wasn’t training, she would loiter outside and pester Sylvia to give her a sneak peek at her latest creations. There were other weapon makers on the island, but if Amaria had a choice, hers was Savage Huntress. Never once did a Savage Huntress bow break while taking aim. The blades rarely needed sharpening and felt lighter during combat. She had never used one of Sylvia’s shields, but Amaria suspected there would be no complaints about those either.

“But, I’ll have to save my arrowheads if I’m to afford any of these,” she said, “or ask the Sacred Peacock to leave one by the hearth because Mother goes to Bows and Blades.”

“Bows and Blades makes fine weapons.”

“Yes, they’re fine, but the ones from Savage Huntress look better.” Amaria thought about her statement. Vanity was a sin. “Everyone thinks so, even Mother. She just doesn’t say so. She only goes to Bows and Blades because it’s cheaper.”

“Pathenia is a practical woman. I suspect she’s been that way all her life, even before she was banished.” Wanje moved away from the storefront and continued along the path.

Wanje waited at the top of a steep incline, and Amaria dropped the blade she was fiddling with and scurried after her. She stumbled to gain footing.

“Pick up one end and lift to the knees,” Wanje instructed.

Amaria looked up to see Wanje displaying the proper way to lift a tunic when scaling a treacherous slope. She imitated the technique and found it slightly easier to move. She thought climbing would be even easier if she could hike up both sides of the cloth and tie it off above the knee, but that would be uncivilized, so she used Wanje’s example instead and made it up the hill.

Wanje started walking again. “Do you remember the journey here?”

Amaria paused to steady her breath. “No, but Sakina does. I was too young, but she was strong enough to walk part of the way.”

“So, you remember nothing?”

Wanje’s stride was long, and Amaria fell behind again. “Well sometimes, when I dream, I think I’m remembering, but I’m not sure.”

The sage fondled the dangling leaves on the branches that hung low across the path. She plucked one and put it in her mouth. “Tell me about the dreams.”

“It’s not much. I’m just rocking, like I’m in a boat in shallow water. There are fingers twisting weeds from the sea.” Amaria considered whether or not she was accurately describing the dream but decided there was no better way. “And, it’s always hot, but it gets hottest right before I wake up.”

She felt foolish. It was common knowledge that a sage’s vision came in dream form, and afterwards, it’s said that their bodies are so hot a bird’s egg can be cooked on their skin. Her dreams weren’t like that. They woke up speaking the divine tongue, but she just woke up with a sweaty backside.

Amaria scratched her head. “I’m not sure if that’s a memory, or if it’s just part of the story. Mother said she carried me in a pouch on her back.”

Wanje ate another leaf and continued walking. “What else happened in your story?”

“Athena touched my head and Mother’s stomach.” She thought some more. “The boat ride was long, but I don’t remember all that. I’ve just heard Sakina and Mother say so.”

They approached a small clearing with two benches, and Wanje took a seat. Amaria said a prayer thanking the Great Mother for the reprieve. She hurried over and plopped down.

“The journey is long,” said Wanje. “I was just a child myself when I took it.”

Amaria was curious about the trip to the island. She knew how it happened and why, but only from stories. She knew there were other worlds and, for a short while, she had lived in one, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not remember a single detail of her life before Themiscia.

She scooted back on the bench. “Do you remember it?”

“Yes, I do. It is my most vivid memory.”

Amaria thought about the first time she rode a horse and a sliver, and about her quests through the Valley of Sand and the Great Ravine, and the taste of lasting berries, and the feel of her mother’s touch, and the smell of their home during Genesis and the Great Harvest. As memories filled her mind, she wondered if she would ever be able to pick just one as her most vivid.

“Amaria, do you know why you must take the shield?”

“To protect the tribe,” she recited quickly.

“Yes, but do you know why you must protect the tribe?”

“In Combat Training, Desh told us there will be another war, potentially the biggest we’ve ever seen.”

Amaria had memorized everything she was taught in Combat Training. There had been three wars and a lot of women were killed, including queens. There hadn’t been a war in many moons, and the talk was that peace was creating complacency among the warriors.

“Another war is coming,” said Wanje. “It is as certain as the tide, but you must understand why there will be war to understand your role in it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As you know, your bloodline makes you special. You are here because Zeus took your mother for his collection, and Hera was jealous. Plain and simple.” Wanje shifted her position on the bench. “Your sole purpose is to protect the queen and citizens because citizens are not strong enough to fight men, and it will be men, has always been men, who will try to conquer this tribe. Some say Hera guides them here, gives them aid and that our suffering is for her entertainment, like a play.”

Amaria felt her stomach churn and saliva filled her mouth. She spat the excess into the trees, which she instantly regretted. She looked at Wanje. Her face seemed less than pleased. Amaria looked at the ground. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

Wanje waited four heartbeats before continuing. “Hera does have great power over us. We’re not purely divine. The mortal blood in our veins makes us weaker, and we can all die.” Her voice was calm, almost serene as she spoke. “But, Hera is not without weakness. Hers is vanity and jealousy of the Great Mother. She is a predictable opponent.”

“How can we defeat Hera, Wanje? She’s stronger than us.”

“All women are equal in the Great Mother’s eyes.”

Amaria had always been taught that all women were equal in the Great Mother’s eyes, but if that were really true, citizens wouldn’t need protection from men and warriors would be as strong as Hera.

Wanje put her hands in her lap. “The Great Mother has blessed us all so that life can flourish. Hera has simply kept some of us from receiving Her gift. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Amaria didn’t think of the ability to give life as a gift. Gifts were things like fighting blades or beaded bands or even a new tunic. She knew she was supposed to thank the Great Mother for giving her a womb, but she often forgot to include that in her prayers. Giving life was something she couldn’t comprehend. Amaria’s mother had told her that she wouldn’t fully understand the Great Mother’s gift until after her womb had opened.

Wanje reached down and picked up a lizard scurrying under the leaves. She rubbed her thumb down its back. “Hera is a wicked one, though, I will say.” The lizard squirmed for a few heartbeats before gripping Wanje’s finger and relaxing under her touch. “She has surrounded us with creatures who use the Great Mother’s gift. It’s cruel really.” Wanje set it on the ground.

Amaria watched it dart into the thick before looking at Wanje. “Why doesn’t the Great Mother protect us from Hera?”

“She does. She is wise and knows of Her daughter’s sins. That’s why She gave us another gift.”

Maybe it was a weapon, an indestructible blade, or impenetrable cloth, or incurable poison to dip arrowheads in.

“Knowledge,” said Wanje.

Disappointment washed over Amaria. She wondered why all the Great Mother’s gifts were things she couldn’t hold in her hands.

Wanje smiled. “What were you expecting, a divine fighting blade?”

“No. Maybe.”

Wanje laughed. “Knowledge is more powerful than a blade, Amaria.”

Amaria shrugged. Her blade could be pretty powerful.

“A blade is only effective because you know how to use it. You know how to strike, where to strike, and most of all, when to strike. Without knowledge, your blade is more hazardous to you than your opponent.”

Amaria thought about the first time she used a sword without its sheath. She was klutzy, and when the exercise was over, she had cuts on her legs and arms and had severed several braids of her hair. “I see your point.”

“The Great Mother has shown us things, divine things, through visions and the life around us. Do you know how She creates life?”

Amaria knew how creation happened, but her understanding was based solely on observations she had while watching animals. To her, the act happened fast and often seemed violent, forced.

“Not really,” she admitted.

“The Great Mother gives part of Herself to Her antithesis.”

“Oh.”

The explanation hadn’t alleviated her confusion. Her forehead crinkled as she tried to conjure a mental picture. She knew the opposite of life was death, and she had seen death happen naturally all around her. She thought about the bear cub she had found with its belly ripped out but shook the image from her mind.

“From the heartbeat the Great Mother carves us from Her womb, we’re dying. That’s why She gave us Her gift. To receive it, all women must sacrifice.”

“That’s why we bleed.”

“Yes. Until we bleed, females are as big as males physically, if not bigger, but after the womb opens, our growth slows because our bodies are preparing for the sacrifice. This is the way it has been since the beginning, and that is how it will be until the Great Mother dies.”

Amaria was taken off guard. “What? What do you mean *dies*?”

“Does *die* have a meaning I’m unaware of? A popular phrase among the youth, perhaps? It’s so hard for me to keep track at my age.”

“I mean, how? No one’s powerful enough to kill the Great Mother.”

“Some believe men are.”

“Men can’t kill the Great Mother. She’s their creator. Even if they could, why would they?”

Wanje shifted her position on the bench again. “There are things I will never understand about the Great Mother no matter how many blessings She bestows on me, but I’ll try to explain what I know the best I can in a way that’s easiest for you to understand.”

Amaria leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, bracing herself for a sermon. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“How many wheels does it take to chisel stone arrow tips?”

The question surprised Amaria. She looked at Wanje and shrugged. “Depends on how many you’re making.”

“A barrel’s worth.”

“Black stone or red?”

“Good question.”

Amaria smiled. “Thank you.”

Wanje nodded.



She waited a few heartbeats, but Wanje didn't speak. Amaria shrugged. "At least two for red and four, maybe five, for black stone."

"Yes. Nicely done."

Amaria smiled again. It wasn't a hard a question, and she had no idea what it had to do with why men wanted to kill the Great Mother, but the praise was like healing cream for her pride.

"And for metal tips?"

Amaria hesitated. Some teachers asked trick questions, and she wondered if Wanje was one of those teachers. There was only one way to find out. "You don't use stone to make metal tips."

"Why not?"

"You use fire."

"Yes, but why?"

"Because metal is stronger than stone."

"Let's say you had no choice but to use stone."

"It would chip apart, depending on the strength of the metal and how delicate the hand."

"Exactly."

Amaria normally felt smart after she had answered teachers' questions correctly, but with Wanje, the more questions she got right, the more confused she became.

"Wanje, what does making metal and stone tips have to do with why men want to kill the Great Mother?"

"When the Great Mother carves life from Her womb, parts of the blade – parts of Her antithesis – chip off and are absorbed by Her creation."

"So, I have pieces of Her antithesis in me?"

"Yes."

"But, I don't want to kill the Great Mother."

"No, but you have killed things and are trained to do so."

"That's different."

"The ability to kill whether for nourishment, protection, hate, fear, or training is a gift from Her antithesis."

"Trees have the antithesis's gift?"

Wanje smiled. "Yes, though I'll admit their threat is minimal."

"And the little yellow flowers in Rolling Hills, watch out for those." Amaria giggled at her joke.

Wanje didn't laugh. "Some creations come from a softer part of the Great Mother's womb. Men come from the hardest. More of the dagger breaks off in the reaping. Of all Her creations, they are most like Her antithesis."

Amaria thought about the drawings she had seen of men. Many of them were painted with jagged teeth, and she imagined them snarling and snapping at the Great Mother like wolves. In Amaria's vision, the Great Mother was calm with glowing blonde hair and green eyes, green as the leaves of the forest during the rain season.

"What happens if the Great Mother dies?"

"It will be long and slow, but everything She created will die as well. Life cannot exist without Her."

Amaria wondered how Wanje could be so calm. "Well, well, that's the most foolish thing I've ever heard. Why would you want to destroy life?"

"It's not in the antithesis's nature to create it."

Amaria's mind was like the steam cave she went to after a difficult training session. She tried to think of something to say but couldn't find any words. All she found was anger snapping and snarling inside her. She was the wolf protecting the Great Mother. She tightened her fists.

Wanje put her hand on Amaria's back. "You can sense danger. Not many warriors are mature enough to grasp the true threat men pose this early in their training."

Amaria's fists were clenched, but the idea that Wanje thought she was mature caused some tension to subside.

“Now,” said Wanje, “how you act on those instincts, well, that will define your character as a warrior.”

“I feel mad.” She couldn’t think of a better word. “I want to fire my bow.” She tugged the neckline of her tunic to loosen the fabric’s grip.

“You can channel your anger when that day comes, but first you will have to make a decision that will affect the entire tribe.”

For a few heartbeats Amaria felt like the tunic was going to choke her out. What did she have to decide? She wasn’t a warrior. She was only training to become one. She couldn’t imagine having any decision to make that would have an impact on the entire tribe. She yanked at the cloth again until she heard a rip. Her mother wouldn’t be happy. Amaria sat on her hands. “What decision?”

“You must decide what you believe about men.”

She had never been asked her opinion of men before. In General Studies, she had been taught about their anatomy during a quick lesson that also included the anatomy of mountain cats, bottom skimmers, and sea snakes. In Themiscian History, she had been told about the cruel acts they had committed during the wars of the ancestors, and in Combat Training, she was told that if she ever saw a man, she had one of two courses of action. She could alert reinforcements and track for other men, or she could kill, alert reinforcements, and track for other men.

“I suppose I would alert reinforcements and track the area.”

Wanje laughed. “Not what you would do if you *saw* a man, what you believe about men.”

Amaria had always received high praise from her teachers, but so far, in her first lesson with Wanje, she was struggling to answer what felt more and more like test questions.

“What am I supposed to believe, Wanje?”

“This isn’t a test, Amaria.”

“Feels like it.”

Wanje smiled but said nothing.

Amaria twisted her braids with her fingers and thought for a few heartbeats. “I’d probably kill and then alert reinforcements.”

Wanje laughed again, and Amaria’s cheeks burned.

“Only you can make the choice, Amaria, but like some, you can believe that men will overpower the Great Mother and She will die. Others think that, with education, they will fall into balance with Her as they were before. Many believe that they want to make the Great Mother a slave and that the intention is to control creation, not destroy it, and few think men are too feeble-minded to cause any real harm.”

“I will kill any man who tries to hurt the Great Mother.”

“You don’t have to decide today, but you must remember that we can’t destroy men entirely, despite the frequent suggestion at council meetings. If we do, we risk killing the Great Mother ourselves.”

“What are we supposed to do, make men slaves?”

“Some have suggested that, but the queen is against it.”

For the first time in her life, Amaria was thankful she was not yet a warrior and wouldn’t be asked her opinion on tribal matters until she was.

“Do not concern yourself too much with things that have yet to transpire. You need to know about the dangers, but you must not be crippled by confusion and fear.”

Amaria nodded.

“Your job right now is to prepare to take your shield, and my job is to prepare you. You must be strong in body and mind, if you’re going to survive the quest.”

Amaria nodded again. She felt worn out, like she’d been treading water in the lagoon all day. “Wanje?”

“Yes?”

“I thought you said this lesson was going to be relaxing.”

Wanje's laugh was hearty and natural. It rolled from the pit of her stomach and hit the air in a burst. "No lesson in Quest Training is relaxing, Amaria. I just said that so you'd forget about your tunic."

Amaria smiled sheepishly, but she liked the sound of her teacher's laugh. If she couldn't be a smart student, she'd settle for funny.

Wanje got serious again. "I hope our conversation hasn't altered your excitement about this stage of your training."

"No. It's just a lot to think about at once."

"Yes, it is, but there's plenty to look forward to."

Amaria was distracted. What she looked forward to most was getting out of the tunic.

"You'll witness council meetings, attend the fires, take part in the talk, and after you've completed your quest, you'll be a warrior."

Amaria sat up straighter.

"You have much to look forward to, but for now, look forward to a warm plate and a comfortable bed. The lesson is over. I will see you tomorrow at the top of Mesha Cliff by first light." Wanje stood and walked to the main path.

Amaria stood and bowed.

"Wear anything you like," said Wanje.

Amaria thanked the Great Mother quietly.

"Take the southern route and bring one weapon." The sage turned and disappeared through the trees.

Amaria sat down on the bench. She felt anxious. Bits of the lesson played out in her mind. Up until now, the point of her training had always been clear. Hit this target. Build that watercraft. Memorize these facts. Master those climbs. As she reflected on her first lesson in Quest Training, she wasn't sure what she had learned and worse, how she had fared. All she knew was that she was supposed to form an opinion about something she could barely comprehend. She felt empty and disappointed, like she'd been waiting all cycle for the Sacred Peacock to leave a feast of venison, bear steaks, and sweet rolls by the hearth only to wake Genesis morning to a few berries and dried figs. Her stomach growled. She looked at the sky. The sun would soon retire.

"Great Mother!"

She sprang to her feet. She couldn't linger in disappointment another heartbeat. She needed food, and evening dine would end at last light. There were other places to go after that, but it would cost her. If she wanted a free meal, she'd have to get moving, which meant she'd be stuck in her cumbersome garb a little longer.

She cursed before hiking up both sides of the cloth and tying it off above her knees. "Never wearing a tunic again," she vowed, as she tromped down the path towards the common area.



No one went hungry in Themiscia. The farmers, harvesters, and game tenders were among the hardest working citizens on the island. Not only were they responsible for the meals served in the common area and to the queen and warriors, but they also provided the resources for the businesses and stocked the rations for the Reserve. When Amaria had studied Game and Farming in General Studies, she admired their system. It took an army of citizens to operate yet ran as smooth as a well-oiled bow.

The common area was near the citizens' quarters in the north just on the edge of the Farmlands. It was surrounded on three sides by a thatched wall and protected overhead by a thin white cloth. The space that butted against the Farmlands was open to allow for ventilation. Otherwise, the combination of smoke and heat from the fire pits, bodies, talk, and stares would make dining difficult to endure due to the threat of suffocation.

Normally, Amaria finished her lessons early enough to make it to the common area by the start of group dine, but since she had been giving herself extra workouts in preparation for the next Genesis Games, she often ate later. At first, she worried that she was missing out on tastier options, but she soon realized a smaller plate was the only drawback to dining in the common area closer to last light. It was quieter, and she could relax and talk with her friends without a lot of stares and chatter from close-by tables.

As Amaria approached, she saw Elle and Camille exit through the archway. Though they were younger than Amaria in cycles, Camille was a formidable opponent in climbing, and Elle could dominate on the sliver.

Elle looked up and whistled loudly. "Fierce warrior, make way," she shouted as Amaria walked over.

Camille chimed in, twirling her tongue loudly and yelping the war cry.

Amaria was glad the traffic around the common area was thin. Otherwise, her cheeks would have burned with embarrassment.

"What are you wearing?" Camille asked when Amaria got closer.

Elle grasped Amaria's forearm formerly. "Great Mother, I wish I had your legs."

"Thank you, Sister." Amaria looked at Camille. "They haven't told you?"

"Told me what?"

"This is what they make you wear in Quest Training."

Camille smirked. "We just saw Penelope, and she's not wearing that."

"That's because her lesson was at first light."

Camille looked at Elle. Elle shrugged. Camille looked at Amaria. "Really?"

"Really."

"Well, I guess we've survived worse," she snickered.

"The tunic's only half the horror."

Camille stopped laughing. Her eyes widened as if she'd finally gotten a horse to full sprint only to look up and see the edge of the Great Ravine.

Amaria kept a serious face and stared back for a few heartbeats before cracking a smile.

"Suckling."

Elle laughed, and she and Amaria clapped hands.

Camille seemed slightly relieved. "So, we don't have to wear that?"

Elle punched Camille's arm. "Forget the tunic."

"Thank you," said Amaria. "So, who else is still in there?"

Zora was her primary concern, with Amaria's mother a close second.

"It's pretty cleared out," said Elle. "We're headed for a night run. You interested?"

Amaria loved night runs. They were best when the moon was in its crescent. Sitting on the sliver far out in the water, the talk was always entertaining, and the view of the eastern shore was magical. Fires dotted the island like orange stars in the sky.

She reached out and grasped Elle's forearm. "Can't tonight. Next time." She grasped Camille's. "I'll send you the tunic, since you like it so much."

Camille smiled. "That's okay."

They walked to the main path, and Amaria moved towards the archway. "Watch out for bottom skimmers," she said. "They love dangling legs. Great Mother be with you."

Elle raised her fist but kept walking. "Barb to your heart."

Amaria waved. "Pierce you, too," she shouted before walking through the archway.

Inside the common area, the torches had been lit and the smell of cooked meat, though faint, seasoned the air. Amaria's stomach growled as she followed the scent. Elle was right; the place had cleared out. Only a handful of stragglers were still getting their plate and, by the looks of it, most of the activity at the tables and around the stalls were just citizens cleaning up and preparing for morning dine. Amaria saw Penelope sitting at the usual table, hunkered over a plate. She was easy to spot no matter how small or large the crowd. Her skin was the color of sheep's milk squeezed fresh from the utter, and her hair was like wild fire, though now it was slicked back and tied in a knot at the base of her neck. In training, she had to cover herself with clay to better camouflage.

Penelope looked up and saw Amaria. She smiled and waved before giving an inquisitive look as she took in the tunic. Amaria ignored her and moved towards the main food stall. She grabbed a plate and walked to the serving table.

The entire common area was managed by Sheila, an island-born thick around the middle. She kept her grey, curly hair, what little she had left, covered with a blue scarf. The tips of her fingers, what few she had left, were stained red.

She whirled around. "Amaria! I was starting to worry."

Amaria smiled. "Sorry I'm late, Sheila. Is there anything left?"

"Not much, but I'll see what I can scrounge up." She walked to the back of the stall. "I tell you, Amaria, you keep doing all these extra swims and climbs, and you're going to miss out on more than just food."

"It wasn't extra workouts. It was Quest Training with Wanje."

"Today was the day?"

"Yes. Remember, I told you at morning dine."

Sheila waddled to the front. "I feed so many faces, Dear. All the plates look the same." She stopped to catch her breath before continuing. "I'm afraid there's nothing left."

Amaria's hopes crashed. She would have to either pay for a leg later or go to bed with nothing in her stomach except for whatever was left at the bottom of the greens and fruit bowls. She forced a smile. "That's okay."

"There was only this." Sheila pulled a plate from behind her back and set it on the table. It was piled high with roasted snake strips, sizzled greens, sweet rolls, chunks of yellow fruit on a bed of water rinds, and a side of Sheila's red sauce, which made almost everything taste better. "Get your own drink," she said.

Amaria felt like she had died and met the Great Mother. "Sheila!"

"And you thought I forgot?"

"This looks divine."

"You don't have long to enjoy." She took the empty plate from Amaria. "They're cupping the torches soon."

Amaria picked up the full plate. "Thank you."

Sheila nodded before waddling away.

Amaria stopped by another table and grabbed two cups of water before making her way to Penelope. When she sat down, she realized she had forgotten a cloth.

Penelope handed her one. "I got two."

"Thanks." Amaria set it next to her plate. "This looks good. That Sheila."

"Yes, she's the sweetest on the vine. Now, let's talk about the bigger issue. What in Great Mother's name are you wearing?"

Amaria dipped a snake strip into the sauce, blew on the end, and took a bite. It was seasoned to perfection. She closed her eyes and chewed slowly before swallowing. She dipped again and repeated the process.

Penelope waited for Amaria to enjoy two more bites before pressing. "Is this a new style?"

Amaria belched before tasting the sizzled greens, yellow fruit, and a sweet roll. Her cheeks bulged.

Penelope leaned back and smiled. Her eyes were as green as the thick vines growing in the mountain terrain of the northwest. The color was dazzling. "We'll come back to the tunic later," she said. "So?"

Amaria took a drink and wiped her hands before picking up another snake strip and dousing it in sauce.

Penelope leaned forward. "How did it go?"

Amaria ate the strip and some sizzled greens. She picked up a water rind and gnawed on the end.

"You didn't do well."

Amaria stopped mid-chew. "Who said that?"

"It's just the talk."

Amaria put the water rind down. Her lesson with Wanje hadn't ended more than a few heartbeats ago, and already there was talk. Big news traveled fast in Themiscia. "What talk?"

"Your talk."

She hadn't told anyone about her lesson. Penelope, Sheila, Elle, and Camille were the only ones she'd seen since it had ended. As much as Amaria respected Elle and Camille's loyalty and discretion, she would have never confided in them about how poorly she felt she had done in her lesson. "What do you mean, *your talk*?"

"Had you done well, you would be talking my ears off about every twist and turn of the lesson because that's all you've been talking about for a hundred moons."

Amaria looked down at the remains on her plate.

"But, you're not talking my ears off, which tells me you didn't do well. Or at least, you think you didn't do well."

"I don't know how I did. Everything happened so fast. One heartbeat, I'm at Terra's—"

"—And you wore that?"

Amaria glared at Penelope.

Penelope fought back a smile. "Sorry. Go on."

"The next heartbeat, I'm in a clearing listening to a story about the Great Mother cutting creations from Her womb. They really should have taught us that in Religion."

"They did."

"What? When?"

Penelope laughed. "Clearly you didn't read the last two scrolls."

"Of course not. There was no test. I thought that was just suggested reading."

Penelope laughed again. "The first scroll was a congratulatory message, but the second was about the antithesis's dagger. Interesting, but hard to follow."

"Well, I got the Wanje version. Did she talk about men with you?"

Penelope hesitated before answering. "Let's focus on you, then I'll tell you about me."

Amaria looked at Penelope for a few heartbeats. Her lesson had gone well. She looked tired but seemed at ease.

"That was it," said Amaria. "Oh, except at the end. I ripped my tunic and fashioned a satchel out of it to parade around in."

Penelope covered her mouth to hide the laugh. "It's not that bad."

Amaria picked up a sweet roll, pinched off a piece, and ate it. "Sure. Now, tell me some good news. Your lesson went well?"

Penelope looked down at her plate and nodded. "Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Wanje took me to the far northeast checkpoint."

The far northeast checkpoint was beyond the Great Ravine on the edge of the Reserve. Amaria had never seen it. She had only been to the northeast checkpoint and just once. It was where she had started her quest through the Great Ravine. All warriors were taken there on the eve of their eighth birthday and left to survive with nothing but three lasting berries and their instincts.

“Great Mother, P! What did it look like?”

“To the east, it looks just like it does from the northeast checkpoint, but to the west—” Penelope closed her eyes and shook her head. “I don’t have the words. It’s bigger than I thought it would be.”

Amaria couldn’t help but feel jealous. All she did for her first lesson was eat fruit and drink tea.

“We rode all the way to the Beltline.”

“You rode horses?”

Penelope nodded. “Only to the Beltline. We crossed over and walked through the Farmlands from there.”

Amaria ate another pinch of sweet roll but barely tasted the honey on her tongue.

“Terra’s sounds a lot better,” said Penelope. “I’ve got blistered heels.”

“No. Your lesson was better. That’s beastly that you saw the northeastern ridge.”

“Wanje said I probably wouldn’t be stationed there, but she wanted me to see it.”

Amaria had found the sun in her lesson. Penelope would likely be stationed in the southern waters. She was remarkable on the sliver, much better than Amaria. With a bit more training, she might even give Janus a run for her arrowheads in competition, but on a horse, she wasn’t a strong rider. Only the best riders were assigned to the north. Amaria had always hoped she’d get posted there after she took the shield. It was a higher rank, and she would have a horse. Until Wanje said otherwise, there was still a chance she could get assigned to her dream post.

“Sorry, P.”

“I’m not. You can keep those mountains and trees and clearings and cliffs. My sliver is my horse. The sea, my terrain.”

Amaria laughed. “I’m putting that on a sign for you for Genesis.”

“Include, *ride with P.*” Penelope stopped laughing. “Wait, I’m not competing.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Penelope wasn’t competing in the Genesis Games this cycle because she had no heartbeats to train. Her mother had become too sick and needed nearly constant care.

“How’s she doing?”

Penelope pushed her plate aside. “She was asleep when I got back from the Reserve, which was a blessing. I needed to wash the cleaning cloths and get healing cream for her sores. Gilda was supposed to bring more sleeping tea. Her breathing is better though. I think the herbs are helping.”

“Great Mother be with her.”

“Thank you. You going on the night run with Ellamille?”

“Who?”

“Ellamille. I really do worry for them. I don’t know what they’ll do if they get stationed apart.”

Amaria laughed. “Ellamille?” She laughed harder.

“That’s not mine. Ursula came up with that one.”

Leave it to Ursula to come up with something like Ellamille. “Where is she anyway? I miss her face.”

Penelope shrugged. “We crossed paths after I brought Mother her plate. She had something or other she was late for. You know Urs. She said she’d see us at group dine and told me to tell you happy first council meeting. Can you believe it’s tomorrow?”

Amaria shook her head. “I can’t. Sakina says they’re boring.”

“Sakina just likes tart berries. It’s going to be divine. Are you going to wear this satchel you’ve concocted? I pray you do.”

Amaria chucked a piece of rind at Penelope, but she deflected it. “No,” said Amaria. “I will be in my best fighting kilt. Thank you.”

The light dimmed. Amaria looked around and saw citizens cupping the torches.

A girl hurried over to their table and scooped up Penelope’s plate. “Finished?”

Amaria snagged the last sweet roll before she snatched up her plate and took it away. Penelope stood up and stretched. “Looks like they’re kicking us out.”

Amaria stood and gobbled down the roll as she and Penelope walked to the archway. They passed the main stall. Sheila sat on a stool rubbing her foot as her assistants finished cleaning.

“Cecile,” she shouted, “if you forget to hang the cloths again tonight, I’ll have you chopping greens tomorrow the old way.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cecile said before hurrying off.

Amaria waved. “Thanks again, Sheila.”

Penelope smiled. “Yes, thank you. It was divine.”

Sheila switched feet. “Yeah, yeah,” she muttered.

Outside the common area, the torches had been lit, and the sounds of nighttime activity from more populated parts of the island could be heard in the distance.

“When is your next lesson?” asked Penelope.

“First light. You?”

“After midday’s horn.”

“Wonder if we’ll have any at night.”

“Bekos has most of hers then, so maybe.”

“If I were Bekos I’d have mine at night, too. Zora’s painful to look at in full light.”

Penelope laughed. “Now, Amaria. She’s our sister.”

Amaria rolled her eyes.

Penelope stopped laughing. “She is, and she’d be really pretty if it wasn’t for—”

“—Her face?”

Penelope pursed her lips to force back a smile. “I was going to say heart.”

“So, that’s two things that make her ugly.”

“Zora’s not ugly, Amaria.”

“So now you’re a fan?”

“I didn’t say that. She’s ugly because she’s weak in character, not because she lacks beauty. No warrior is ugly, and you’re a fool if you think so. Even you. Wash the dirt off your face, put on a proper tunic, and you’re as stunning as the queen.”

Amaria laughed. She had seen her reflection in weapons, shields, water, drawings, and a horse’s eye, but from what she could tell, the queen was far prettier, though Penelope did have a point.

“Okay, so Zora’s pretty on the outside.” Amaria made a face. “Happy?”

“That didn’t taste too bad, did it?”

Though she didn’t always like it, she respected Penelope’s honesty. Amaria shook her head. “Like lasting berries plucked too soon.”

“Well, it’s best to swallow them and move on.”

“Or spit them in the trees.”

Penelope laughed. “We always have our choices.”

“You sound like a sage.”

Penelope bowed. “May the Great Mother bestow Her blessings on you for saying so.”

“I’m just praying for a good night’s sleep and a better tomorrow.”

“Then so shall it be.” She linked her arm through Amaria’s and pulled her away from the common area and towards the main path, “but first, let’s walk to Honeys and load up on sweet crawlies, so our dreams will be divine.”

“I didn’t bring any arrowheads.”

“Of course you didn’t, which is why it is my treat in honor of the end of the beginning of our last stage before becoming warriors.”

Amaria smiled. “Thanks, P.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s go get stuffed.”





When Amaria entered her house, the smell of softening cream was thick in the air. Her mother was always rubbing it on her elbows, hands, ankles, and knees. She used so much that she had a standing order at Scented Goddess. It was one of the few luxuries she allowed herself. She said it was her secret weapon when others commented on how well she was aging and asked for tips.

From the entryway, Amaria did a quick scan of the formal sitting and dining area before focusing on the main target. Her mother sat alone by the hearth in the small chair that faced the entryway. Though it was warm inside and the fire was burning, she wore an evening robe and had a cloth wrap around her head. She was too informally dressed for anyone other than Fi, Gypsus, or possibly Olympia, her closest friend. Anyone else and Amaria's mother would have been wearing a tunic of some sort, how fancy depended on the company. She picked up a tea cup from the table beside her and took a sip.

Amaria stepped out of the entryway. "Before you say anything about the tunic, let me explain. I must have snagged it at Terra's or something, and there's all those hills and trees. Wanje's surprisingly fast for how old she is." Amaria laughed.

Her mother didn't. She took another drink of tea.

Amaria adjusted her stance. "It ripped again when I sat on the bench. The lesson ran so late, and I didn't have a mending kit."

Her mother snorted a laugh before setting her cup down. "You? Mend?"

"Yes." Amaria looked down. She wasn't sure where the mending kit was let alone how to use what was inside.

"This I must see."

"I can't. My next lesson is at first light at Mesha Cliff, and I still haven't picked a weapon."

"This decision takes all night?"

"There's a lot to consider, and I need to be comfortable. Not like today. Today was a mess. Look at me."

"I'm looking."

"I didn't even need to wear this. Wanje didn't care, and there were others wearing fighting kilts."

"Well, why did you wear it? Especially that one. You have better tunics, Amaria."

"Sakina told me I'd draw too much attention if I didn't and said this tunic looked best."

"I think Sakina was having some fun with you."

"Agreed, but I can't worry about that now. I have to decide on a weapon, another thing I'm not happy with Sakina about. Had she not—"

Her mother's eyes darted to something behind her and to the left. Amaria turned. Sakina stood in the dining area holding a bundle of firewood. She wore a long yellow fighting kilt and black chest piece, and her hair was styled in its usual manner.

Others frequently changed how they looked. Penelope had five or so ways she wore her hair, depending on the occasion, and one never knew what to expect from Ursula. In Amaria's family, however, everyone preferred consistency. Her mother kept her hair shorter. It was dark brown with a few grey curls on the left side. Telsa's hair was the color of honey, and she kept it slicked back and in a single braid down her back. Amaria's braids, which she tied back in training, sprang out of her head and hung to the middle of her back like drooping tree branches. Sakina's hair was lighter than Amaria's in color, but instead of having a lot of braids, she had two wrapped tight around her head. She was a climber, and the style kept branches and twigs from snagging as much.

Sakina smiled. "Had Sakina not done what?"

"Your sister came to wish you a happy first lesson, Amaria."

Sakina walked out of the dining area. She was shorter and thinner than Amaria, but what she lacked in physical power she made up for with a sharp tongue.

She crossed to the hearth. “Happy first lesson, Sister. Consider doing your chores my gift.” She set the wood down, smiled, and looked at Amaria from head to toe. “An artist should paint your portrait. This spectacle must live on.”

Amaria blushed, but before she could utter a comeback, Sakina had sat down and moved on to another subject. “What’s this about climbing Mesha Cliff at first light?”

Part of what made Sakina a good climber was how quiet she could be. She had clearly been listening, undetected, to the conversation for several heartbeats. She leaned back. “I’m jealous. That climb’s view at first light, I’ll be blessed if I get to see anything half as divine in my day.”

Though Amaria wanted nothing more than to take off the tunic and chuck it in the fire, she sat on the bench next to the hearth. She looked at their mother. Her head was leaned back, and her eyes were closed. Amaria looked at Sakina. “Do you have patrols tomorrow?”

Sakina stood up and walked into the dining area. “Yes, early. I’ll have a few heartbeats to spare before the council meeting.” She returned carrying a fruit bowl and sat down. “Need me to help you pick out something to wear?”

“Because this was such a good suggestion?”

Sakina laughed. “I’m sorry.” She extended the bowl to Amaria.

Amaria declined. She was full from the sweet crawlies.

Sakina took the bowl back. “As much as I would never wear anything but a tunic to Terra’s, and Mother wouldn’t either—,” She ate a piece of fruit. “—I really should have taken your preference into consideration. It was not my intention to trick you.” She ate another piece before setting the bowl on the table beside the chair. “In my defense, I only suggested a tunic. I never said to wear it like that. I mean, what have you done to it?”

“Enough about the tunic, Sakina,” said Mother, her eyes still closed.

“I’m just saying I feel bad is all. I should have told you that nicer fighting kilts, though not as common, are acceptable for the midday crowd at Terra’s.”

“And the late night, too,” added Mother.

“Yes, the late night, too.”

Amaria rubbed the back of her neck. Though she hadn’t done anything physical all day her muscles felt tight and her eyes, heavy. “Well now I know, and I thank you, Sister, for your concern.”

Sakina smiled. “Let me make it up to you.”

Amaria shook her head.

“Yes, Amaria. Let me help.”

“There’s nothing to help with.”

“What do you need?”

“I don’t need anything except a good night’s rest.”

Mother stood up and took her cup to the dining area. “She needs help choosing a weapon.”

Sakina shrugged. “Okay, so what are you thinking? You could always go with the bow.”

Amaria looked at her for a few heartbeats. The bow was the obvious choice. Picking it would be predictable, and she was fairly certain Wanje had asked her to choose one weapon for a reason.

Sakina ate another piece of fruit. “This should be easy. You have so many to choose from.”

“Yet, I keep thinking about the gold-tipped blade.”

The gold-tipped blade was one of two weapons Sakina had taken with her when she moved to the warriors’ camp. The other was the half spear made from red cane that the Sacred Peacock had left her on the Genesis she had won the crown for Terrain Climbing, the only event she ever competed in. The spear was the perfect size, weight, and weapon for a climber, which was why Amaria didn’t ask if the Sacred Peacock had accidentally mixed up the gifts. She had gotten an inkpot, bound parchment, and a piece of leather for her forearm that carried up to four small daggers. The gifts were nice enough, but the red cane spear was a jewel. Sakina even used her own arrowheads to buy a pouch for it from Bows and Blades. Amaria kept her thoughts about the quality of the leather crafting to herself because Sakina never used her arrowheads to buy anything for utility. She would drain her purse on tunics and beads, but she was stubbornly stingy when it came to weaponry.

Sakina stopped chewing and looked at Amaria. “I don’t know why you’re thinking of that toy blade when it’s mine. I paid good arrowheads for it, though I did get quite the bargain.”

Sakina had won the blade in a game of chance at the Harvest Festival three cycles ago. The game was simple. Pay two arrowheads, pick up a shell, and win the prize etched on the other side. The loot had been strung from a pole staked in the ground next to the table. Most of the items were for children, things like toy animals and wood shields too thin to stop a thorn bush branch, but when Amaria and Sakina walked by, Amaria spied the gold-tipped blade among the useless junk. She emptied her purse trying to win it but instead got four toy snakes, three balls, and a shield before running out of arrowheads. She begged Sakina to loan her more and promised to pay back double, but Sakina said she only had two to spare and had decided that she wanted to give the game a go. Amaria watched in disbelief as she turned over the shell, and the gamekeeper handed her the gold-tipped blade.

Sakina never used it after that, or questioned its whereabouts, or threatened to rack Amaria’s knuckles if she touched it like she did with the red cane spear. Amaria had always assumed that when Sakina moved to the warriors’ camp she would leave it in the weapon cabinet.

Amaria forced a laugh. “Yes, and what is the blade now, a jewelry stand?”

Sakina glared at Amaria. “It’s actually perfect for the details I’ve been working on. Thanks for breaking it in.”

The top of Amaria’s ears burned. “My pleasure, Sister. I know blades aren’t really your thing.”

They locked eyes for a few heartbeats before Sakina broke the silence. “You think I don’t know how to use a blade?”

“Not that well.”

Sakina sat back and crossed her arms. “Oh really?”

Mother shouted from the dining area. “Enough, Amaria. Just take the sword above the hearth and be done with it.” She walked into the main room. “It was a nice prize, and you haven’t used it once, not even to practice. It just hangs there collecting dust.”

Sakina smirked. “That’s wasteful, Amaria.”

“Sakina,” Mother snapped as she sat down in her chair.

Sakina rolled her eyes but kept quiet as Amaria removed the swords from the wall. She had been so devastated about losing the crown in Hand-to-Hand Combat to Zora at the last Genesis Games that, when she was presented the reward for winning Horse and Bows at the awards ceremony, she barely noticed the gift. On that day, she had smiled and said thank you to be polite, but deep down she would have forfeited the trophy in a heartbeat for one more round with Zora.

Now, as she examined the blades closer, she thought the designs were beautiful, but the handles were awkward, which was why it had become a decorative piece that visitors commented on when her mother entertained.

Amaria looked at the handles. One side was covered with glass stones, and the other was flat and smooth. She didn’t know the maker, but she doubted they were from Savage Huntress. Sylvia would have never crafted such ugly and impractical sword handles.

“Wanje said only one weapon,” said Amaria.

“The two join at the base and tip to make one,” said Mother.

Sakina chimed in. “Yeah, don’t you ever look at your weapons?”

Mother glared at Sakina. “Quiet.”

Amaria snapped the blades together, and the swords became one. She tested the weight, swinging it in circles, first with her right hand before switching to the left. “The handle is thicker than I prefer, and it’s heavy. It’ll be harder to climb.”

Mother stood up. “Well, Amaria, you can moan about what you can’t control, or you can take advantage of the things you can. It’s your choice. I’ve had a long day. I’m going to bed.” She pulled Sakina to her feet and hugged her. “I’ll see you tomorrow at your fitting, and I’ll make sure your armor is delivered to the chamber.”

Amaria lowered the sword. “Oh yeah, your armor ceremony.”

Sakina smiled. “Thanks for remembering.”

Sakina was being awarded her armor at the council meeting, which was a significant passage for all warriors. It meant that they were being promoted to a higher rank and were no longer the sucklings of the army. That role would soon be filled by Amaria and the others training to take the shield.

Amaria set the sword on the ledge of the hearth. "Who's doing the armor?"

Mother gave Amaria a hug next. "Gwen," she said, "but Sylvia's searing the design."

"Now who's jealous," gushed Amaria. "I bet she'll do a lovely job."

"Probably," said Sakina. "I should be on my way, as well. It's getting late. Goodnight, Mother. I'll see you after midday's horn."

Mother walked to her room. "Great Mother be with you both. Rest well." She got to the doorway and turned around. "And Amaria, take care of the hearth before going to bed."

She pulled the curtain closed, and Amaria cursed under her breath.

Sakina walked to the entry. "Great Mother be with you, Sister."

Amaria followed her outside. "I'm excited to see your armor. Truly."

"I pray you wear that tunic to the council meeting."

Amaria nodded. "Penelope prays for the same."

"Then I shall pray that our prayers have been heard." Sakina walked away from the house. "Better take care of these, too." She cupped one of the torches but left the other six lit. "Blessings for your lesson tomorrow." She turned out of the yard and was out of sight before Amaria could say anything else.

Amaria cupped the other torches, ran to the bathing pool, peeled off the tunic, and jumped in to wash off her sweat and grime. After she was clean, she rubbed her mother's softening cream on her elbows and knees, wrapped the drying cloth around her, and went inside to smolder the hearth, tidy her room, set out her clothes, say a quick prayer, and hopefully, with the Great Mother's blessing, have a peaceful sleep. Tomorrow was on its way, and hers would start before the bird's crow, if she was going to make it to the top of Mesha Cliff by first light.

*The Monarch's Story has been translated  
from seven historical scrolls of the Amazon Warriors.  
Becoming a Warrior is the third in the collection.*