

# A Sense of Wonder by Ed Straker

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By Ed Straker with assistance, love, caffeine and Tylenol from his better half Amelia  
To our favorite bovine, Moo

In memory of my wife's beloved actor George Victor 'Ed' Bishop. Without his talent, Commander Straker would be dull. My sincere gratitude to his daughter Jessica who recognized Amelia's genuine affection for their Dad, and now treats her as if she was his daughter too.

Special eternal thanks to A. Berglund for his suggestions and advice on Straker's gear and thanks to beta Nancy Hickman for helpfully abusing our work ;)

Thanks to Deborah Rorabaugh for lending us Straker's shoulder injury

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Caution: non-canon, contains adult language, sexual situations, graphic violence

Set in present day. Straker is somewhere in his early fifties. His actual age is classified.

Angst, suspense, humor.

**Alec Freeman is in the mess of his life, and Ed Straker risks both his neck and his job to save him.  
In doing so, Straker regains his sense of wonder.**

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## **Part One: STRAKER**

## Chapter One: The Licorice Stick

Straker ignored the steady rumbling of the corrugated steel floor of the aircraft, or was that just his accelerated heartbeat from his position at thirty two thousand feet in the air? He watched the doors as they opened, ominously forming a maw through which he would soar into the unknown, and he waited for the go light to come on. Mere minutes now before the stupidity he was determined to engage in. Being shorter, skinnier and less strong than most men had been a hindrance all of his life, Straker mused. Straker compensated for it with speed and mental sharpness. The SAS squad leader and his team, all casual drinking friends of Alec Freeman, had mockingly dubbed Straker the Licorice Stick.

Apt enough he thought, considering he was swaddled from head to toe in a protective black thermal flight suit, weighed down with a miniature camera, oxygen mask and tank, Global Positioning Unit, wrist mounted altimeter, compass, thermal imaging-night vision goggles, knapsack full of survival gear, chest pack which comfortably held his shoulder holster, presently disassembled Glock, three extra magazines of ammo , binoculars, canteen, military entrench tool, combat knife, flashlight and a standard first aid kit containing ampules of a Shado drug the FDA wouldn't have heard of and Henderson would never learn was missing from medical centre because it didn't exist yet in the first place. Possibly even a partridge in a pear tree, all which added an extra fifty pounds to his weight of one hundred and fifty-five. He wore his burnished silver dog tags, and a worn Army issue map of the world strapped to his arm encased in a weatherproof pouch. It had belonged to his late mother, one of the only mementos she had kept to remind her of his late father. He brought it along for good luck. They had tormented him about that map too. Was he still living in the Middle Ages? Did he believe that he'd find dragons? Straker didn't find it that amusing.

They'd insisted he be equipped with a weightier pack because of his lean physique. His aerodynamic chute, suitable for the jump he was about to make was strapped to his back. His platinum hair was concealed by the ballistic helmet. He was beginning to feel as if he should put in a requisition to the SAS for a Batmobile.

*Nah, he thought. I always preferred Superman when as a kid I did manage to smuggle a few comic books past my parents. Damn it, I'm scared. Ah, so that's why, isn't it Straker? Yeah the last time you did this was in Vietnam. I left NASA behind temporarily and volunteered for active duty. I bailed out of a beat-up RF 4C not even equipped with a water gun for defense, into two years of regimented torture in a prisoner of war camp. The infamous Hotel Hanoi. My sortie was supposed to be a milk run, but it introduced me to hell, and how fragile the body and mind can be when it's beaten and broken on a daily basis, and all you've got for comfort is the code of conduct. Okay, Straker, that's enough. Yeah you don't know what awaits you. Yeah, you have butterflies in your stomach. Stop acting like the greenhorn these men are amusing themselves by thinking you are. They don't know you're a full bird. You showed up in civilian clothing, and their orders were to get you anywhere you wanted and they resent following orders from a stranger. You're not what they say. You knew the risk involved. You're tougher than that. You have to be.*

*For Alec.*

*Alec. My God! Alec. Afraid. He was so terrified of never getting out of there.*

*Alec as a combat pilot dodged anti-aircraft flak at unnerving speeds in the past, and he deals with organ robbing aliens as easily as swatting a fly but that moron Henderson locks Alec up on a ward of Mayland Hospital we rarely need to use, thank God. Our operatives are mentally tough. They have to deal with the same kind of bloody carnage our serious crime investigators in New Scotland Yard deal with. An eviscerated body robbed of its major organs by aliens wasn't a pleasant sight. Often the victims were children.*

*Alec? His second in command? Insanity? Mental breakdown? Possible alien brainwashing? Pure bullshit!*

Ed recalled his conversation with Alec.

"Ed for Christ's sake, I saw and experienced what I saw and experienced. You've got to believe me. I'm not compromised by the aliens!"

"Alec, take it easy. I read the report and I believe it. Even if you *were* compromised, you'd never turn on us. I've said it before. I may be Shado's Commander but you're Shado's heart, its strength, its foundation. This isn't about you. It's Henderson and his IAC yes men still testing me after all these years, hoping I'll finally crack so he can pink slip me. After all, I'm older now. I'm going to prove that after I was chosen as Shado Commander all those years ago my decision to make you my first recruit was my finest decision of all. Rest easy, Alec. Enjoy the nurses. Leave it to me. I intend to duplicate your little civilian ride, prove you were right, and get you the hell out of here."

Alec had gawked at a deceptively calm looking Straker.

"Ed, no you can't... he'll never-you just can't disappear-you can't use our aircraft-"

"You're stuttering, Colonel Freeman. Probably a symptom from all that whiskey you put away. Besides, I have a free holiday you're always nagging me to take. Lake can mind the store; give her something to do between touching up her makeup. Besides, I need to reassure your SAS drinking pals that you're all right. You know those guys that jump out of planes just because they're bored? I can't use Shado aircraft or equipment or personnel, no. So I'll just borrow their SAS toys. I haven't needed to pull strings with our Aegis security system for a long time. I'm overdue. I created Aegis just for situations like this. Under Aegis, no top brass will be able to refuse me."

Finally the relieved grin that Straker had hoped for appeared.

"Ed, I've always known you were crazy. I can't say I enjoy being your newest excuse for it. I don't like that you'll be risking your neck just for me."

"Don't give me that crud, Alec. You've got driving me nuts down to a science and you love it. My guess is that you take hints from General Henderson when I'm not looking."

"How are you going to get past Jackson? He's the head squirrel in the nut house here, remember?"

It was Straker's turn now to grin. Alec had frowned.

"Okay. I've seen that scheming look of yours before, Ed. I know that very few of your grins aren't tactical in nature. What are you playing at now?"

"I don't intend to try to get past him. Take care, Alec. Don't worry. Wish me luck."

"Good luck? That won't be enough. Ed, that movie executive chair of yours has made a permanent indentation on your absence of a rear end. You sure you can still find the guts to hurl yourself out of a metal monster with wings?" Alec teased without real mirth.

Straker narrowed his eyes.

"Both of us may be older but I was jumping from planes before you were out of nappies, amateur. Don't you forget it." Straker scowled dramatically, with a trace of a humorous sparkle in his sharp blue eyes. The Commander had laid a hand for a meaningful fraction of a second on Alec's shoulder, and then Straker disappeared out the door without a farewell to evade further questioning.

Straker knew they hadn't directly exchanged a word about the odds but both of them knew the score. It didn't feel right to Alec to sit there while Straker flew solo with no backup and no return policy based entirely on Alec's crazy report after he'd gone missing for days on personal holiday in the Greek Archipelago. An ex-RAF mate of Alec who ran a private air charter business had agreed to be Alec's transportation on what he'd considered a ruddy foolish expedition. Straker had spoken to him by phone about what he remembered but Alec's ex- RAF friend hadn't paid much to Alec's elderly companion and all he had contributed was the location of the jump. Alec had noted his misgivings about it all in the report, and had wondered why he felt sorry for that ancient Army vet his mates had joked about. Why had he agreed to tandem jump with a stranger to a location that more than likely only existed in the man's head? Ed remembered from the report that the man that Alec had described simply had disappeared, so Alec couldn't even back up what he'd experienced with his presence. Ed read it all in Alec's face.

*The doubt. The unspoken plea. The fear. I've never seen Alec that scared. I didn't even know he was capable of fear. That frightens me the most of all.*

He could hear them through his earphones still making jokes at his expense. Due to the loud rumbling of

the plane, the men could only communicate over their radios. It was time.

"You ready, Yank? Or do you want me to hold your hand a bit longer?" the jump master asked him.

"I'm ready for my evening stroll. There is one thing I wanted to clear up, Jump Master Berglund. You suggested among other insults that I was only making this HAHO jump so some girl would be impressed enough to agree to a date with me."

"Are you going to finally admit it, Licorice Stick?"

"I was going to tell you I didn't need to. I've enjoyed your wife in my bed for some time now and she considers me quite an improvement over you. After sex she often speaks to me of your, shall we say...*shortcomings*?"

Straker turned on his equipment and dropped over the edge of the maw.

## **Chapter Two: Never Forget The Batteries!**

If the elevation temperature hadn't been well below zero, and he wasn't dropping at approximately 160 miles per hour after checking wind direction and adjusting the parachute reins to follow it, Straker thought he would feel exhilarated. Once you dropped, it didn't seem as if you were dropping at all, which was why you had to concentrate solely on your altimeter if you wanted a chance at staying alive. Death was approaching you second by second. Even with the high tech ballistic helmet, if you hit the ground like a missile your skin and bones and blood would be breakfast porridge when you landed.

*That was assuming you were even lucky enough to be still breathing before you bought the farm, Straker thought ruefully.*

Training won out, he was feeling more comfortable away from the SAS team, and their exaggerations had hurt him more than he wanted to admit. Sure they were good natured, and the best of the best but they got under his skin all the same. At least he had gotten in the final word.

*I gave up everything to do my job but they just thought I'm some American show-off. Rank and its privileges may be thin icing on the cake, but the cake is still sweet. I earned my eagles on my shoulder boards and every last medal on my chest. I never realized until now how naked I feel without rank. Alec is right. Maybe I have been warming my ass on my executive chair too long. Oh for Christ's sake Straker! You allowed them to get to you that much? Okay, I did. At least they never knew it. For once I was grateful for Alec's absence. He would have known right away and told them to cut it out and being mollycoddled in front of them is the last thing I wanted.*

Straker smiled at a sudden memory.

*Commander Straker doesn't have to take that kind of stuff from anyone. How well I remember that incident we code named Kill Straker. What I remember most of all was the fury in Alec's voice when he said it to Foster. Alec was right; I should have knocked Foster into line. Talk about fury? Younger? Fitter? This old guy named Straker that you thought wasn't as tough as you saved your lily white ass and I gambled to do it with guts, skill and live ammo, Foster. So much for your faith in youth and muscle. Will power wins out every time.*

He chuckled to himself. Then his mood grew sour again.

*Good old terra firma. Earth. Generally beautiful at this elevation, and magnificent from space. I'm not a tourist sightseeing with a camera around my neck collecting stuff for my scrapbook. I'm here to find that island Alec landed on, and all I can see as I get closer is water, water and more water. Jesus Christ, what if Alec's ex-RAF pilot was wrong in estimating the latitude and longitude? The GPS tells me these are the closest coordinates. So why aren't I-?*

"Christ! Oh God, no." he gasped aloud, his words garbled by the oxygen mask he wore. The GPS had gone deader than a goldfish too long out of its tank.

*Stop it! Panic won't help. You read all this in Alec's report. Everything cuts out, just like he said. Now find that-no! Not the thermal imager too, stay on, damn you! Stop that infernal blinking out! Did the damn SAS forget to put in the batteries or something? Wait. THERE!*

An island. Where nothing at all was supposed to exist but the ocean, he thought in triumph. Buildings. Trees. Rocks. Flora. He even thought he saw a gull swooping down for a midnight snack of an unfortunate fish.

*Heat signatures moving mysteriously in the night. Too small to be people? Animals then? It didn't matter at this point. It was THERE. Unmistakably there! The most beautiful sight in the world.*

He changed position and aimed right for it.

*It meant renewed hope that he'd clear Alec Freeman, and that was what really mattered.*

Straker smiled beneath the oxygen mask. It was a warm smile from his heart.

*Nothing tactical there, Alec. Unless you consider years of loyalty and friendship and yeah, the occasional yelling at one another tactical, the Shado Commander mused humorously. We're like an old*

*married couple. We can't live with one another, but we can't live apart. When I held that letter of resignation in my hand, which we both knew meant the end; I was reduced to nothing more than goo. Thank God it didn't come to that. Not that I couldn't function without you. I just wouldn't want to. I need you. If Henderson ever kicks you out, I'm following you. I think you know it, Alec.*

*All right. All right! Enough of this sentimentality. Put on the coffee and break out the biscuits, no, cookies. I'm getting too British; I spend too much time around them. I'm about to knock on your door. No, stop blinking, you damn overpriced piece of crap goggles. I said stop blinking! No, not the altimeter too, no damn it! NO!*

Then Straker was dead. At least he felt like it. His elation crumbled like a discarded piece of used tin foil.

*Nothing. Nothing at all. Black. Blind. I can't see anything. I'm totally blind. Everything cut out. Nothing's working. Was this in the report? My God, I can't recall. I can't even THINK! I'm blind! Jesus Christ I'm going to die. Will I see mother? When Croxley put that gun muzzle on my neck, I heard Alec's plea for my life, remembered her beautiful face believing I'd die. At least if I died now, maybe I'd go home. I remember what love felt like back when life was oh so very simple. No responsibilities. No loneliness. No pain from a woman who once shared your bed in joy, and finally hated you so much she couldn't stand to see your face ever again. No sorrow for a lost child, your only son. All the people you would have gladly given your life for, all gone. Can I go back? Will it be like that when I die? Will I suffer? Mother, I'm not going to make it. I'm so scared!*

Anger distorted his features, as reason borne of training and his own indomitable soul kicked in.

"You selfish cowardly son of a bitch! Have you forgotten Alec Freeman just like that? You don't have the right to call yourself Commander! Yes, its pitch black. Millions of blind people live that way. They survive. They live! It isn't your time yet. You aren't a boy who needs his mother, you're a man. Ask yourself what you still have, Commander Straker!" Straker snapped at himself aloud although he could barely hear his own words as the wind whipped fiercely at him, as if to punish him for his moment of despair.

*Wait. That's it! I can still hear! Okay, Straker he told himself. Listen as if your life depends on it, because by God, it does. LISTEN!*

And he heard it. My God he actually heard it, he realized.

The music of surf crashing against rocks. Faint, but there. Something else occurred to him. He pulled his oxygen mask off and it dangled away from his face. He took in a few gasps of air. He realized he might be dropping close enough to the island to breathe normally. He risked precious seconds in blind descent and waited for the symptoms of crippling anoxia. None came.

"You're breathing normally, Straker." he said, unwelcome tears in his eyes.

*Sorry Mother. Not this time. I'm in a hurry. Got to go be a hero and save my best friend. I blame all the Superman comics I read as a kid.*

He ejected the knapsack full of supplies that had been strapped to his chute pack. Seconds after that, he was barely able to make out land, and he dropped and rolled, rolled for his life. He yelled as his arm hit solid rock and the resulting burning sensation made its way up into his left shoulder, a souvenir of bullets from the Vietnamese during an escape attempt from a P.O.W. camp had weakened it and he'd lost some use of his arm. The injury had required several surgeries to weld the shattered clavicle together.

Straker ignored the physical misery, detached the chute harness. He buried the chute with the entrench tool from the chest pack under the clarity of his flashlight, which he'd clipped to his helmet. It was set on low beam; he didn't want to announce his presence just yet to any possible enemy. Besides, there was a minuscule amount of natural light from the moon and brilliance of stars in the sky. Ordinarily it was a beautiful sight to behold. However, all Straker could think of now was had he landed a few feet in the wrong direction, he would have sunk to the bottom of the deep ocean under all that extra weight he carried.

Straker rather doubted that search and rescue would have found him.

*After all, this location doesn't exist. No Shado car, Mobile, London Transport bus or taxi service either.*

*Maybe he could hitchhike home on a seagull? Professional courtesy between a real bird and a full bird? Obvious from their shrill cries, there were plenty of gulls around.*

*Very funny, Straker. Enough humor. Find the damn knapsack. I'll have my Ed Straker escaped death celebration party delayed until later. Jesus, what is that sweet odor? Oh shit. Jackson's drug! NOW.*

Now the Shado Commander tried to recall what Jackson had told him about it as he rapidly tore the chest pack off, ignoring the growing stinging in his arm, not nearly severe enough to mean he'd broken it, but he was in for some bruising, he guessed.

*I like abstract art, but not when my arm is most likely so bruised it looks like a drip painting by Jackson Pollock. Christ! Did I just lose even more use of my arm? God forbid. Where's Jackson when I need him?*

That had been one hell of a conversation with Jackson.

\* \* \*

He had left Alec's room and as he had predicted, Dr. Douglas Jackson stood there. Straker had shot him his most poisonous look. Doctor Jackson could have allowed Alec to remain home under guard as Alec had requested. Instead Jackson kowtowed to General Henderson's wishes and locked him up here.

*By God, I'm going to make both of them regret it.*

"Commander."

*Fuck you, Jackson.*

That was what Straker remembered he wanted to say. Straker hadn't. Yet.

"Doctor." Straker greeted him in a crisp tone.

*Alec would have called it my grab your ass with both hands and kiss it goodbye tone. Alec has heard it enough when I'm pissed as hell at him.*

Straker waited. He would have waited forever.

"I wondered if we could have a few words in my office here, Commander. So that we may discuss Colonel Alec Freeman's condition."

*That damn hissing voice, syllables stretched out on a medieval torture rack Straker recalled. Like a snake in a bespoke business suit from Savile Row. Look, Commander I'm just like you, normal. Not lethal at all. Yeah right. Jackson always uses that damn voice, sounding like Peter Lorre with an overbite and a cape, to shake people up. Not this time. I'm changing the rules of your little head games. I hope you enjoy holy water. I'm about to dump a Thames River full on your head.*

"Home advantage, Doctor? Your milieu? Your home turf? Not a chance. Not this time, Doctor. You're forgetting rank. Don't ever make that mistake twice. Show up in **my** office in ten minutes. Don't be late."

Straker had spun on an immaculate brown Chelsea boot heel the exact color of his Nehru jacket and jumpsuit and was gone.

Straker remembered he had finished all the necessary preparations to leave, made all the phone calls, when Jackson buzzed his Shado office to be let in. The Commander waited a whole deliberately spiteful minute, and then he slammed the door switch. Jackson came in, smiling. Straker didn't need to look at him, but sensed it.

"Have you found fault with me concerning my recommendations for Colonel Freeman?" Jackson asked unnecessarily.

"Sit down Jackson."

The blazing temperature of Straker's voice would have taken down even a Yeti.

Straker locked the door. He picked up the phone.

"Miss Ealand, I'm down below with Dr. Jackson. Tell control centre and the studio personnel I'm not to be interrupted for anything with the exception of the apocalypse complete with four horsemen for at least fifteen minutes. Tell Colonel Lake her free time just ran out. She is to report back for taking over command in my absence immediately. I'm taking a week's leave. Understood?"

Straker smiled to himself as he fiddled to open the first aid kit he'd taken from his chest pack. His thick protective gloves made the action awkward. Miss Ealand had predictably just wished him good luck. She

knew the last thing he'd ever do was take leave with Alec Freeman still stuck in Mayland Hospital's version of Bedlam. She believed Alec too.

Straker hung up. Now Straker disemboweled Jackson with a steady look from his pair of laser-like blue eyes.

"Jackson, I imagine you just heard the official word is that I'm taking a week off. Colonel Lake will be instructed to put h.q. and Moonbase on yellow alert. A precaution in the event the aliens get frisky while I'm gone." Straker got up from his chair, and walked around, his back to the Polish doctor.

"And?"

Straker spun around to face Jackson.

"**And**, you know perfectly well I am **not** taking a week off. I'm going to duplicate Colonel Freeman's little trip, based on everything he wrote in the report and I'll do it without relying on Shado resources. I intend to prove General James Henderson wrong. So the only question is are you now going to go running off to General Henderson and tell him?"

Jackson smiled.

*A viper's smile, Straker coldly concluded.*

"And if I do?"

"Henderson will have his long awaited chance to kick me out of Shado. Alec Freeman will be court martialed, and his psychological profile read in court. He'll either be shot or given the amnesia drug. Knowing Henderson, Alec will be shot. A good, honest man will be humiliated by being labeled as a nutcase then killed in cold blood. And for what? For telling the truth? Because Alec Freeman *is* telling the truth, damn it!" Straker sat and slammed both palms on his desk to illustrate his unwavering belief in Alec..

"Colonel Freeman simply related what he himself believes to be true under the influence of our truth drugs, and you know that, Commander. There still exists the possibility that he was brainwashed. I know your long, close personal friendship with Colonel Freeman makes this difficult. I concluded that you would do this, but I have told no one of my conclusions. I believe you know that Colonel Freeman could be wrong; he could be inventing this nonsense to escape the trauma of being captured by the aliens. You are doing something extremely foolhardy, Commander. Your importance to our organization cannot be accurately estimated-

*Buttering me up, huh? He thinks that's going to work on me? Damn him! He just crossed a line!*

"Fuck you, Jackson."

There, he'd said it. Jackson actually looked stunned. Straker had savored every moment of it, even though that elevation of disrespect might get him canned, senior rank or no senior rank. He'd describe Jackson's reaction later to Alec, whom he knew would relish every word.

"No more games, Doctor. I know the risk involved. The aliens may have taken a pawn in Alec but are really after the most strategic piece to achieve checkmate. In this case, me. I know that. But just you know **THIS**. Henderson will never get another operative of Alec Freeman's superior capabilities and his influence on the morale of personnel. There isn't a soul in Shado that doesn't like Alec, hell there isn't a soul in London that doesn't like him. Henderson is a fool. He'll be killing an innocent man. If I do this and I endanger the organization because I made a fatal error, **so...be...it**. Because long before the aliens try to do anything to me, I'll put a bullet in my brain. If I do somehow come back with proof, and I find out my friend Alec is already dead, I will immediately resign. Henderson can worry about finding the right man or woman for my job and it won't be easy. I'll put that bullet in my brain no matter what. You might recall I am a crack shot. I won't miss. And Henderson and his IAC will never find my body to put on fake loving display, count on it."

Jackson looked thoughtful.

Straker gave him a look of steel under which even Superman himself would wither.

"Now, let me guess. You think my ability to command is *already* impaired by my current psychological condition, don't you Doctor? Forget it, Jackson. I've never felt so much determination and sense of sanity in my life. I've sacrificed everything I cared about out of my obsession with duty, you know that, and what has it

gotten me? I care about Alec, yes, yes. I'm not turning my back on a man I'd be privileged to have as a brother, and you know damn well Alec wouldn't turn his back on me. If Henderson has Alec killed, and I bet the old bastard doesn't have the guts to do it himself, believe me. If Henderson has it done, one bullet will kill *two* good men. Now what's it going to be, Jackson? The right thing or the thing you know way deep down is right? You spared our ex-operative Foster back when we suspected him to be a traitor, and Alec is fifty times the man Foster was and you know it. What's it to be?" Straker demanded.

The viper smiled again.

"Commander. You surprise me. I have never had someone say fuck you to me quite like that. Oh, I have been called names before. One grows accustomed to such insults as a psychiatrist and interrogator. You say fuck you quite eloquently. I suggest we go into my home turf in medical centre, isn't that the phrase you used? After all, you will need to be vaccinated for your trip. I also have a secret research drug I've been privately working on since you were affected by the moon rock. I developed it to reverse any hallucinatory psychosis causing drug the aliens, island inhabitants or anyone else may use on you and it performed satisfactorily in the lab. I based it on the drug we used to open your mind after your experience with what we code named Timelash. You may find it useful. You understand there is considerable risk involved in its use. It has never been tested on a human subject. If you do find the island he describes in the report, and come back mentally or physically impaired as a result of this drug, Colonel Freeman is liable to put a bullet in *my* brain. Although he doesn't quite match your expertise with small arms, I don't find that reassuring."

Jackson smiled again, more human this time.

Straker found his voice with difficulty.

"Thank you, Doctor." He said formally.

"I assure you I will say nothing to the General for a week; I will give you an opportunity to succeed. I will also give you a drug to take with you that will painlessly but instantly kill you. It is easily concealed. You may not have free access to your Glock if things go horribly awry."

"How charming," Straker said, grim.

"Good luck, Commander."

"Thank you Doctor. Let's hope I don't need it."

\* \* \*

Now, suspecting that the odor on the island might be what Jackson had warned him about, Straker finally managed to open the kit, took out the ampule full of the anti-psychotic anti-hallucinatory drug, screwed it onto the syringe, and without bothering to remove his suit or swab himself with alcohol, he jabbed it directly into his forearm muscle through the fabric, clenching his teeth at the pain. He put everything away, lie back, waiting. Nothing happened. He noticed by the low flashlight beam that he was resting against a slope covered with flowers. On his long taxi ride to the SAS air base he'd studied the flora and fauna of Greece in the possibility that he'd need to survive off the land. The Harlington Straker Studios tea lady wouldn't volunteer to come out here, even if he was her boss. Seen up close, the flowers were cliff roses, known for their lovely scent.

*Common here. So much for moon rocks and deadly alien gases. I'm hungry. Nothing gets the appetite going like nearly killing yourself by jumping in total darkness from sickening heights to get to a location that doesn't exist. Now there's an idea to develop into a restaurant jingle. My people will call your people.*

*All right, Straker, stop being silly, it isn't a good sign. You're out here all alone, teetering on the edge of shock; you've had a rough time. Take a few bites of a protein bar and then grab a couple of hours of much needed sleep. Jackson's concoction doesn't seem to have done me any harm. Might take a couple aspirin, too. Head's starting to kill me, hopefully just ordinary stress. I just need to take some photographs; I can look for the knapsack later. I'm exhausted.*

After cranking up the iso or international standards organization which in clearer terms meant the camera's sensitivity to light, enlarging the aperture and slowing down the shutter speed to better his chances he managed only a few photographs before he stowed it back in his pack. Straker momentarily pinched his

nose in a characteristic action which Alec had seen too often and knew meant Straker was facing an often debilitating migraine. Straker nibbled the bar daintily to preserve it for as long as he could, then carefully put it away, swallowed the aspirin dry to save the water supply in his canteen, and set his Swiss made Certina wristwatch to wake him in three hours. He'd asked the Shado tech team to add an alarm function to his faithful Swiss made timepiece which Alec had given him after Shado was finally built. It appeared to still be working despite the failure of most of his other equipment, which was odd. He relocated to a crevice in the rock slope, dug out a foxhole with the entrench tool, and camouflaged it with rocks, leaves and twigs, turned off his flashlight once he was done. Exhausted and arm aching even more badly now, he figured he'd concealed himself as well as he could then he soon fell asleep under the blanket of stars.

## Chapter Three: Dear Girl

Commander Straker had slept longer than he'd intended, he saw by his wristwatch that it was past nine am London time. The island had come vividly to life. Birds were chirping soprano melodies and soaring purposefully in the clear blue skies, wild rabbits chased one another to a rhythm of romance only they could hear, bullfrogs were croaking a bass line while kaleidoscope colored butterflies were flitting around merrily as they inspected him, and now and then something with long iridescent wings whizzed past his aquiline nose at Mach speed as tympani.

Unfortunately, as soon as Straker moved, fresh arm pain seized him with jagged teeth. Well, there was only one thing to do he reasoned. He would have to see just how badly he'd injured the arm from his less than perfect landing, and treat it.

However, hunger won out over pain. It all would have to wait until he ate a minuscule piece of the protein bar, pretending it was steak and eggs and toast with his usual double sweet, light coffee. He followed it down with water from the canteen. He stripped down after removing his gloves and yeah, the arm injury was totally an old-fashioned Technicolor film presentation. It had swelled to the size of a tree trunk. He injected himself with 4 cc of morphine from the first aid kit, and then wrapped the arm firmly with gauze and tape. Once that painful business was finished, he used an alcohol wipe to clean the sweat off his face and hands. Slipping his gloves back on, he realized shaving would have to wait until he found the knapsack, although he hated the feel of fine pale prickly hairs sprouting on his face. He was able to move about now with relative ease thanks to the morphine, and he strapped the combat knife to one leg. He quickly assembled his Glock 17 which he'd broken down to take up less room in the chest pack. He pulled the slide back and chambered the first round of his magazine. The feel of the semi-automatic sidearm in his shoulder holster made him feel less naked to the world. He took additional photographs. Now to find the knapsack without being spotted in clear daylight.

*Yet another of your miracles to perform, Straker. The technology they used to block out the fact that this island even exists, advanced enough to sabotage my equipment no doubt would also raise an alarm. So how much time do I have before they make me a prisoner? Alec had written that the inhabitants hadn't been all that receptive to his presence at first, had taken him prisoner and might have killed him were it not for his charm and his companion, who was already dying and didn't seem to have any idea where he was. Alec suspected the man might be senile. The inhabitants all seemed to have known him, lending weight to the man's insistence that he get there and he knew where he was going. Once he was there, he had shown even clearer signs of dementia and Alec couldn't recall anything more than that. Alec doesn't even know how he got home to London. I don't like it.*

*Where are these people hiding and who are they? What do they want? Christ that sounds all too familiar.*

Straker finally spotted the knapsack, and groaned. He surmised it had been ripped open savagely by some animal and now everything in it was scattered, ruined and wedged deep in mud.

*I'll just call it a loss for the SAS but there go my water purification tablets, flares, MRE's and a razor among other things. Damn lousy luck. Wait, what the hell was that?*

Straker took immediate cover behind a rock formation, and waited. He'd heard the distant tinkling of a bell.

To his surprise in a few seconds he saw a herd of deer pass by. There were several of them, cavorting and nibbling grass as they moved along. One of them, larger than the others, wore a gold bell around its neck.

That one stopped, and looked in his direction in what Straker guessed was curiosity. The others marched past it more or less as a group. The decorated one came closer, seemingly tame and now Straker was clearly within its field of vision. He spoke softly to it.

"Don't be scared, little guy. I'm no hunter. I get my occasional meal of venison from Waitrose groceries store not from the twin barrels of a rifle. No, shoo! Don't come closer! Your friends will miss you. Go away.

I'm not all that interesting-what the hell?"

It had abruptly dropped on its side, and lay motionless on the grass, silent.

*Dead? But I heard no shot. Deer run when they sense danger. It deliberately came near me, looked directly at me. This has to be a trap. They killed it, hoping I'd feel sorry for it, try to help it. Damn it, it may have been killed, died because of me. They're going to find me sooner or later, and I need to make that happen. I don't have much time to figure out a means to free Alec. Okay. I'm tired of this game of cat and mouse. Let the mouse make the first move, trap or no trap. I don't have incisors for nothing.*

He approached it cautiously, examined its pelt. No bruises, no wounds anywhere that he could see. He laid his hand on its belly, stroked it gently, felt a frantic heartbeat with relief.

*Bleeding heart Straker. Friend to animals. That's what they call me, he chuckled to himself.*

Suddenly Straker felt an eerie tingling sensation and heard a humming, pulled his hand away like the deer had caught on fire. The animal shimmered, transformed.

*If ever I needed Jackson's drug to work, it's now. This can't be real!*

In the animal's place was a pretty girl. She had golden hair styled in a complicated looking braid down her back and almond shaped blue eyes, light bronze skin. Ten, eleven years old, he guessed. She was wearing a short white and silver tunic that looked to be made from silk and the bell around her neck drew attention to her blossoming cleavage. Her delicate feet were clad in gold sandals with matching straps that reached her knees. Leather straps on her back held a quiver full of arrows, and a bow. Straker found himself wondering about his sanity. She began crying. It was then that he realized she was absolutely horrified.

"PLEASE! Please don't hurt me, please don't rape me! I just was surprised to see you, I didn't mean any harm."

"Why do you think I'd do those things to you? No, never mind that, did you just change from a deer to a girl? Is this some sort of illusion? I'm not going to harm you, just ask you some questions. Do you recognize the name Alec Freeman?" Straker sat on a rock and crooked his finger invitingly toward himself.

She hesitated for a moment and then sat beside him. Straker smiled.

"We called him Alexander. He didn't like it much. He told us no one else would come, that we'd be safe. So the Queen allowed him to go home."

*She's not telling me everything. I just know it. She's frightened. Was what I just witnessed part of the hallucinations? I've got to find out.*

"You did something to Alec, and now he doesn't remember much. I came here to find out what happened to him. I came here alone. Who is in charge here?"

The girl eagerly studied his face for a while.

"The Queen, but I haven't seen her often. I'm not like my sisters. They are warriors. I didn't come from the same tribe they did. To be truthful I don't know where I'm from. I like animals. I can look like them when I want, and I can understand their language and they listen to me and do what I say. I don't like killing like some of them do. I never use my bow and arrows unless I'm in real danger. I hear my sisters talk about how awful man's world is. They say that men are deceitful and warlike, that they use women's bodies carelessly for their own satisfaction. They aren't to be trusted. But..."

"But what?" Straker smiled again.

"You're different. You came to see if I was hurt. I think I fainted when I realized you were real. You cared about me. You touched me so gently to revive me. And..."

"Yes?" Against his better judgement he was starting to like her.

"And you're awfully pretty for a man." she said shyly. "I didn't think the other man was pretty. Alexander I mean."

"Alec? Looks don't matter, a person's character does. His face is pockmarked from a bout of smallpox when he was a kid about your age. He's a good man, he's pretty much the only person in the world I trust, and I have to help him. That's why I came here."

"You're nicer to look at than that man who died too."

"Wait, this man who died, did he come here with Alec?"

"Yes. That's why our Queen allowed him to go back. He'd brought the man here because like the Queen said, Alexander had a noble heart. But the man he brought was terribly, terribly old and the healers said he didn't want to live anymore. He just wanted to see the island one last time, and he did, but he was so sick he didn't remember why. This Alec thought a lot of you, said you were a hero in some war, you're his friend?"

"He's my best friend. Yes."

"Are you Ed?"

"Why do you ask?" he said, surprised.

"Alexander kept saying Ed will never believe this. He said Ed would love it here. He said you were brought up in a fancy college to appreciate something called mythology. He said in his world, we were all just make believe."

"Your sisters you mention. Are they your sisters by blood, or did you call them that because you feel a kinship with them?"

"They found me as a baby, they rescued me. They told me later they assumed my mother had left me for dead. They are my only family now. You are Ed, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right. My name is Ed Straker. What's yours?" he asked.

"Anaki. I like you. Can we be friends?"

"I think we should take things slowly, make use of oulledr time to get to know one another. I have to know if what I witnessed was real. You transformed from an animal into a girl. That's not possible where I come from except by trickery. How did you do it?"

Anaki shrugged. "I tried to teach my sisters to do it, but they never learned. They think I come from another land. I just always was able to do it. You don't believe me?"

"You stated you can talk to animals. Can you make them do anything you want?" Straker inquired.

"They trust me, yes. Why?"

"See that gull circling ahead? Make it land in front of me."

Anaki jumped up, and within minutes the bird settled in front of Straker with a shriek. Straker suddenly grabbed it with gloved hands.

"No! Don't hurt it." Anaki cried.

"Calm down, Anaki sweetheart. I just need to see if it's real. You could have been deceiving me. My God, it seems real enough. All right little guy, go do what you were born to do! Fly!" Straker released the bird with a chuckle. "Anaki, when I was a little younger than you, I'd watch all the birds in Boston, where I grew up. They inspired me to fly. Since I didn't have wings, I joined the Air Force. I have a military background, like Alec. We're both retired Colonels in the military. You said your sisters were warriors. Are they part of an army?"

"Colonel. I have heard that term before, Ed." Anaki said thoughtfully. "The man who died was a Colonel too I think."

"Do you remember his name?"

"They carved it on his gravestone, I don't remember it, I didn't go near him because I was afraid of him, and didn't like him even back when he was young and came here often. I remember Alec said the man served in World War 1, and he wasn't sure how he'd managed to stay alive. My sisters are all immortal. Once they become a certain age, if they remain here on the island they stop aging. I am still growing; I am not yet a woman."

"Your sisters, do they call themselves Amazons?" Straker asked her, disbelievingly.

*World War One? That's impossible! Alec's report said he was old, yeah but that old?*

"Yes, of course. They have been here for thousands of years, Ed. They were given this island by the gods."

*It can't be. They have to be some eccentric group of women who just use the term, some matriarchal society that's somehow hidden itself away, led by someone calling herself a Queen. Or has it really*

*happened? Am I actually among Amazons? Anaki transformed, and she brought that bird. She couldn't have guessed what I'd ask for as proof. It can't be movie magic. If this is true, it's fantastic beyond belief. Alec stated in the report they were Amazons, but he found the idea ridiculous. Alec never had any interest in the mythology of Greece. He did it out of compassion for the man he brought here. That man is my key to all this. This isn't a scheme from the aliens. But how to prove it? I've got to meet these so called Amazons. Why does the very idea of them being real make my heart race? I have to come up with a solution. Hell, my arm hurts pretty badly right now, morphine wore off. It makes it hard to think.*

"Why are you rubbing your arm, Ed?"

"I injured it when I hit land. I'll be all right."

"No. You were concerned for me, I am concerned for you. You are pale, you are not well. You do not look as if you have had enough food and water. You need to see our healers. I will take you to them."

"**NO!** You will do nothing of the kind. Anaki, step away from him. Now."

Straker turned to see a group of women of various ages and heights, dressed in bronzed breastplates and animal skins, holding shields, and armed with swords and daggers strapped to their leather chest straps. Some held spears or were armed like Anaki, with bows and arrows. One tall woman was completely cloaked in what might have been dark wool, her face concealed by a hood. All of them seemed to have the bodies of athletes.

*Have I lost my mind? No, this is exactly what Alec reported. A group of powerful female warriors. Amazons? No. He just thought he'd drank bad whiskey.*

Straker rose to his feet slowly, clutching the wounded arm. A lethal sword aimed at his throat by one of the tallest, beastly looking women told him that the danger was real enough, no matter what the truth turned out to be.

## Chapter Four: Capture

"No, don't hurt him!" Anaki cried. "He was kind, he didn't hurt me."

"It's okay Anaki. I expected this. My name is Straker. I need to see your Queen, if she's the one in charge. I need to get my friend Alec Freeman out of the mess he's in. Something was done to him while he was here, and I intend to get to the bottom of it." Straker told them, painfully lowering his arm to his side.

"I am Galatea. I have sole authority here. If Queen Hippolyta wishes to speak to you, she will summon you. Now unless you want to die where you stand, you will turn over all your weapons to us. Is that understood?"

"Something ripped my knapsack apart, some animal that in all probability smelled the provisions in it and I need at least one weapon to be able to defend myself against whatever it was. You clearly don't understand. I will see your Queen one way or another. You have nothing to fear from me unless you try and stop me. I came to free Alec Freeman, your Queen called him Alexander. Nothing and no one will keep me from accomplishing that."

"This arrogant male thinks he can tell us what to do, my sisters. He is yet another foreign pig from far away. We know that no one else came with you, and you are right, we have nothing to fear. You on the other hand are asking to be shown discipline with the point of my sword. Men are not to be trusted. I would prefer to kill you outright, barbarian, because your kind long only for violence."

"Your Queen allowed Alec Freeman to go home. She said he had a noble heart. She's right. I intend to plead my case with her, because she sounds wise and fair. I always believed Amazons valued justice and were as intelligent and beautiful as they were powerful and wise. I see that I was wrong. As for being a fearful barbarian, I'm injured and not physically able to fight any or all of you. Anaki said there were healers among you. I ask you respectfully to let me see them." Straker told her.

"You have not heard a word I have said, as I expected. Anaki, you told him secrets that were not yours to tell. You owe us for saving your life, and this is the thanks we are given? You are not yet of age, you are foolish and your mind remains simple. I see that you have been influenced by his appearance. There are jewels in my sword blade which are pleasant to look at, and dazzle the eye. However, it remains deadly. Remember that, child."

"Anaki showed kindness to a stranger in trouble. That's all. I don't want- "Straker started to explain.

The woman swung her sword in an arc, and the blade cut deeply through the sleeve of Straker's flight suit and gashed his injured forearm. Straker stumbled to his knees from the impact and barely managed not to cry out from the mind numbing pain.

Galatea stared at him. His silence had disappointed her. Anaki started to cry.

"Have you lost your voice as well as your blood, intruder?" the Amazon Galatea said mockingly, returning her sword to its sheath. Straker grasped his arm tightly, feeling nauseous. It was rapidly becoming soaked with blood which seeped through his gloved fingers, and throbbed badly. Straker ignored his assailant on a hunch and looked directly at the Amazon that was cloaked.

"Clever. Yes, very good. A technique I've used myself. Let your company of compliant women poke and prod and attack me while you just watch to see if I'm a real threat or not. You, not Galatea are their leader, hidden underneath a hood. My name is Straker, and your friend over there may have severed an artery judging by how much blood is gushing out of my arm. I might be about to die because that woman Galatea refused to hear the truth and judged me based on hate. She accuses my gender of violence then she uses violence against me herself. Now, who the hell are you?"

The woman slowly dropped her hood. She frowned at him as if he was merely a moody, misbehaving child.

Straker stared at her. She was not pretty, or beautiful, or even attractive, he realized.

*She's spectacular.*

Masses of wavy black hair with a blue sheen fell to her shoulders. It was accentuated by a bronzed, v

shaped headband bearing a stylized eight pointed star which came to a point just shy of her eyebrows. Her eyes were heavily lashed without a trace of makeup, and deep brown in color. Her nose was perfectly shaped. Her lips were very full and deep pink. She wore a bronzed breastplate with what might have been an eagle design at its top edge, and a short skirt made of leather. She wore wedged heel boots that came up to her calves. Encircling her wrists were wide gold bracers, and leather strips protected her hands. She carried a shield and a sword. A gold loop of rope dangling at her side was attached to straps across her full breasts. For the first time, Straker truly believed he was among Amazons.

*No ordinary woman could be that stunning. Christ, getting dizzy. Damn it Straker no. Don't pass out. You do and you're likely never to wake up again. Stay alert, damn you!*

"I am Princess Diana of Themyscira, daughter of Queen Hippolyta. Your wound requires care, Straker. Anaki, take him to the healers at once. See that he is given food and drink."

Straker started to say something, but he keeled over and hit the ground, unconscious. Anaki scurried over to him, felt his chest, seemed relieved and looked imploringly at Diana.

"I cannot, Princess." Anaki explained tearfully. "Unless I change form."

Galatea laughed at Anaki.

"Little cowardly fool. You are no Amazon. Go play with your dolls."

Diana bared perfect gleaming white teeth. The other Amazons stepped away knowing and fearing her wrath, but Galatea was too busy mocking Straker to realize she was pissing Diana off.

"A single wound and he becomes useless. Fool! It is better that a man who is no man should bleed to death. He deserves no burial. We can throw his corpse into the ocean, he is suitable only for feeding the fish--"

Galatea went flying with one well-placed punch from Diana and was out cold.

"Galatea is to be refused her bed tonight. She can sleep in the mud," Diana snapped. Effortlessly, she lifted Straker as if he were some exquisite life sized doll and leaped off in a run, Anaki in deer form running behind her.

## **Part Two: DIANA**

## Chapter Five: Fate Of An Amazon

"What are his chances, Melina?" Diana inquired. "Will Straker die like the other did?"

"No, don't fear, my Princess. Gala's sword was poisoned but the will to live is strong in this one. I stopped the bleeding and treated his arm. It was badly gashed and swollen. He lost much blood and no doubt was in much pain but Anaki said he did not cry out when Gala's sword fell. Most remarkable. I felt it necessary to give him a larger dose of a pain relieving potion that sedates before I treated his arm. If he rests it will heal faster. I removed his clothing and belongings; do you wish to see them before they are taken away?"

"I have seen most of them before; I know the type of weapons their military carry. I will look at them briefly if you feel it necessary."

"My Princess, may I say something personal?"

"Speak your mind, Melina. I am no Amazon if I am not a defender of freedom and truth. I was not given my lasso for nothing. What is on your mind?" Diana smiled.

"I feel in my heart for your loss. I have been with my bedmate Ayris for a good thousand years; I cannot conceive of not watching the sun rise and fall without my love at my side. I do not understand your lover's god, but I hope that he went and joined him. I know very little of man, aside from their anatomy, learned from treating your lover after his plane crashed here. I am sorry he died, my Princess. I easily could have saved him but it was his choice to let go of life."

"He travelled all this way without knowing why, he didn't even know my name when he took his last breath. At least he died in my arms at his journey's end. I will never love again, Melina. My heart has been torn in two as if cut with a blade. The wounds of the heart are far worse than those we Amazons suffer in battle. How long will Straker sleep?"

"Through the night, well into the morning. He has fever as a result of the poison, so we must be very careful. I will take first watch."

"Galatea will pay for this. No. You have done enough; I will relieve your burden. I will watch him until morning and if his temperature rises I will call for you at once. My mother will reward you greatly for saving his life. Go with my sincere thanks."

"Princess, I too value truth so before I go I must tell you what is on my mind. Your lover did not interest me, he was far too fond of his mirror, and Alexander had a good heart, his flirting made me laugh but his face resembled the bark from an old tree. This Straker embodies beauty itself even with his shoulder scars-

"I see. So you are not so ancient an Amazon to not appreciate a man's beauty when you see it, even preferring women as you do, Melina?" Diana chuckled as did Melina.

"To not appreciate beauty directly from the Gods in all its forms would be to not live, my Princess. "

Diana approached the curtained bed on which Straker lay. Melina watched with professional interest.

"Another military man from the sky. Such is my fate. I will make Galatea answer for poisoning her weapon. That is not the way of Themyscira. If she acts without my permission a second time, it is she who will feed the fish, immortal or not. "The princess told Melina.

"You will recall she dared to compete with you for the attention of the man you loved and was rejected in a harsh manner by him, and has never forgotten it. Galatea I find untrustworthy, and one who follows our laws only if they benefit her." Melina scowled. "She will feel my blade if she tries to hurt him again and no Amazon knows where and how to inflict suffering more than me."

Diana nodded in agreement and fiddled with a large globe until it lit up her surroundings, and then drew back the silken curtains surrounding the bed. Straker lay totally naked in a drugged sleep under a sheet of white silk edged in gold, and the fabric perfectly silhouetted his sleek, lightly muscled body. Diana on an impulse lifted the sheet. Melina laughed.

"I do not think he would welcome your curiosity, my Princess. He is an eyeful, is he not?"

"You are right. This man is impressive. "Diana said, amused. She dropped the sheet and impulsively

smoothed down Straker's unruly hair.

"How fine it feels to the touch. Go now. Good night, Melina."

"Good night, my Princess."

Diana sat for several minutes, looking at him.

*Now there's a man worthy of an Amazon's love. Quite a pity that it won't be me. He inspires me with a sense of wonder, as if I was still a child.*

"He truly was blessed by Aphrodite, my precious," a voice said softly behind her.

Diana let the curtains fall and went up to the bejeweled older woman, hugged her tightly.

"Mother! How long have you been standing there?" Diana scolded.

"Long enough to know you are fascinated by him, as I hoped you would be. Good. I brought him here by the will of the Gods. I allowed his instruments to fail except for his timepiece. His ordeal was a test of courage and he passed it like an Amazon. He pleases me."

"You did all that with magic from the Gods? Mother that is nonsense. Wait, it is nonsense, isn't it? Mother, why would you do such a thing?"

"You have been my greatest love. How long can a mother look into her child's eyes and heart and see such desolation?" the Queen said sadly.

"If I break so easily for a mere mortal I am no longer an Amazon. Tears hold no purpose. Love and men deceive."

"You never told me why you left man's world without him, daughter."

"Mother, he was merely in my bed to keep me warm. A fire could have done the same without repercussions. Now he is gone. One does not mourn the passing of the seasons."

"Diana. I am your mother but I am also your Queen. You will tell me all of it."

"Mother, must I really go over it all again? I was happy in his world. I was making a difference. There was so much to see and do. We were in love. After some time passed, he grew tired of me. His world praised me and called me Wonder Woman, and he became tired of being ordinary, his military war accomplishments lost in the larger shadow I cast. He hated the idea of losing his looks while I could stay immortal and beautiful as long as I visited the island often. He spoke too often of his inevitable death. I told him that I loved him no matter what age he was fated to be. One day I returned early to our apartment, I wanted to surprise him, cheer him up. I heard a strange woman's voice, and I searched until I found him in the bedroom in what had been our bed. He had shared his body with a stranger."

"I told you they did not deserve you. That man did not deserve you," the Queen said, taking her daughter's hand, furious.

"He said we were not married, that I had always refused marriage and I had no right to complain, that I did not own him and had always told him he didn't own me. He claimed I was always putting what I did first. How could I not, Mother? I had my duty as an Amazon to protect his world. I thought he understood that. He told me to leave. I did. Now, after all these years he comes back, and he does not even know me. He brings Alexander to the island, and this man Straker follows Alexander. If I had not loved on that fateful day my love crashed here, all this would not have happened. Our island would be a secret!"

"If you had *not* loved, had the capacity to love fully, you would not be my precious daughter."

"Oh mother."

Diana went tearfully into her mother's arms.

Straker began coughing.

"What? Mother, he is supposed to be fast asleep." Diana quickly wiped away tears and turned toward the bed. "How could he be resisting the sleeping potion he was given?"

"From what Alexander told me, he often is capable of doing things that he is not supposed to. Straker is not at all what he appears to be."

"That is not his true form?" Diana asked, baffled. Her mother chuckled.

"I hear from our little bird Anaki that he recognized you as the leader of our warriors." The Queen

smiled.

"He was perceptive, yes. It surprised me, because men dislike women more powerful than them, but he expressed neither surprise nor resentment. Mother, please tell me that he is not really a faun." Diana said in exasperation. The Queen laughed.

"He is physically as he appears. He is a perfect human male in the image of the Gods. Diana, I ask you this. Who else would recognize a leader but a leader?" Queen Hippolyta smiled. "He is one."

"He too holds the rank of Colonel according to Anaki; they are leaders in their armed forces." Diana shrugged.

"Alexander told me much more about him. He said that he had known him a long time, and he considered him a lost sheep, but one of the finest, if not the finest man he had ever known. He said it had taken him a long time to earn Straker's trust and every second had been worth it. Alexander also said that Straker had been close to his mother, and was grieving her on the day Alexander first met him. A man dedicated to his mother has a pure heart. Diana, I think you should go and soothe him."

"I will call for the healer Melina."

"The healer Melina is weary, and deserves her rest. You have many gifts given to you by the Gods, and you have lived among mortals. I am certain you will know just what to do to comfort him. Good night, my child."

## Chapter Six: A Rock and a Hard Place

Diana watched her mother go out, and then she went back to the Commander's side. She filled a goblet with fresh spring water that had been in a pitcher on a table alongside the bed. She was surprised to see that his eyes were half open, and he seemed weak, but awake.

*Such beautiful eyes this Straker has. I have never heard the likes of his voice either; even wounded he still sounded like Zeus's thunder.*

"Do you remember me?" Diana asked.

Straker faintly chuckled as a response. Diana scowled.

"What is so amusing?"

"You're seriously asking me that question? Is that water for me? I'm grateful for her care, but that healer woman knocked me out with something that made me sleep and took away pain, but it left my throat quite dry."

"It is for you, but first you will tell me why you laughed. I will give it to you then."

"So I'm to die of thirst because you feel insulted?" Straker snapped.

*My turn to test you. Damn, you're gorgeous. How could Alec not include you in the report? He must be slipping.*

"I did not say I felt insulted."

"Yeah, I know. You didn't have to. Your expression gave you away. Uh-where are my clothes?"

"They are with my sisters who are assigned to look after armor and garments we wear. They will be patched and cleaned. I will give you a tunic to wear, as I remember men are ashamed of their nude bodies."

Straker looked at her in resentment for a moment, and drew the sheet closer around him.

"I'm not ashamed; I'm just not used to being this vulnerable in front of a woman I don't know. Need I remind you I'm a captive here? To answer your earlier question, you're the most beautiful, no, that isn't adequate enough. You're the most spectacular looking woman I've ever seen. How could anyone forget you? Is Anaki all right? She didn't do anything wrong. I don't want her hurt because of me."

"Anaki will not be hurt, but Galatea will answer for injuring you without permission. So you think you can flatter me into getting what you want by telling me how beautiful I am? How typical of a man." She grinned.

Straker shook his head in seriousness.

"Let me see if I can put this in a way you will understand, even though you all have misgivings about men. Diana, I look at the ocean, I call it wet. I smell a rose, I call it sweet. I was answering your question honestly. That's all. If you were insulted, I apologize. May I have the water now? By the way is it permitted that I call you Diana, or shall I say Princess?"

Diana handed it to him thoughtfully, and watched him drink it down in two gulps.

"Diana is acceptable."

"Thanks. I had forgotten how good spring water tasted. I won't worry about it being drugged, if your people genuinely wanted me dead, you had plenty of opportunity already. Listen, what did your people do with my chest pack? The things in it are expensive."

*And don't even belong to me.*

"You realize you will not be given back your weapons? Why do you want it?"

"The last of my protein bar was in there, and I'm not at all sure when I ate last. I'm hungry. Will you permit me to eat?"

"Do you think I am so horrible that I would let you starve? That would be against your Geneva conventions."

Straker was astonished. Then he nodded.

"Did Alec tell you about it?"

"Yes but I have been to Man's world, I already knew of it. Sit back, rest. I will get your food."

"Thank you."

"You act as if you were my guest, not my prisoner."

Diana brought back the carefully wrapped bar from the pack, sniffed it, wrinkled her nose. "This is supposed to be your food?"

"Believe me Diana, compared to the meals ready to eat that I lost to the animal that ripped my knapsack open that thing tastes like it came from a four star restaurant." He gave a slight smile.

*Damn him to Hades! His smile, indescribable. Remember you are an Amazon. But it doesn't hurt to look.*

"You are not going to eat this. You will have a proper supper with me, if you feel strong enough to walk. I have much to ask you."

*I can be alone with him. Stop it, Diana. This is not a seduction. No more love, remember?*

"I can walk. Now you're responding as if you were my hostess, not my jailer." He countered with another smile. Diana frowned at him.

"You said your name was Straker. What does the prisoner prefer to be called?"

He scowled.

"Ed will do. Should I be suspicious of how decently you're treating a prisoner?" Straker said, irritated again.

"Must you constantly change the subject? I will call you Edward. Ed does not suit you. Stay here. I will get you something suitable to wear as well."

"I guess you wouldn't leave me my equipment? No, didn't think so." Straker watched her pick up his chest pack, along with the holster and Glock. "Be careful with those." he cautioned.

She scowled at him.

"Do not tell me what to do!"

"Treat my personal property with respect and I won't have to."

"You are impossible!" Diana told him.

"And you're impertinent. Run along now."

She bared her teeth at him.

He simply folded his arms as a response.

*Melina says my anger can topple mountains, but he isn't intimidated by it at all. Straker better not be a God in disguise, although he certainly looks and acts like one.*

He waited until she left. Straker then gingerly got up, held his aching head for a minute, and then examined his arm. It was wrapped in some sort of poultice and covered with a bandage. The Commander wrapped the sheet around his waist and threw the end over his shoulder with a crescent of a smile. He now resembled a Greek senator, helmet style hairstyle and all. Laurel leaves to complete the look were nowhere to be found.

*When in Rome. Arm seems okay. I feel a little hot. Damn, dizzy again. This is my opportunity to take a look around but she took my camera. If only I could get some video of Anaki transforming. Just don't consider this as a luxurious Greek holiday, Straker. Alec needs you. Remember that.*

\* \* \*

Diana returned with a tunic and cape and cursed when she realized Straker had gone.

*He can't escape without a plane. He didn't even look well. I have seen our artisans carve statues of the Gods out of marble that weren't so pale. So this is to be a battle of wits? Why do I think Mother deliberately is trying to bring us together? Does she think I am as fragile as a dragonfly's wings due to my loss? Where is that maddening fellow? I grow tired of these men!*

Straker had reluctantly sat on a bench to rest, pensively looking at a marble column.

*So peaceful here. I almost wish I didn't have to return home. Diana's captivating. But she has her duty and I have mine.*

Straker sighed.

"How did you become a Colonel in your military if you cannot follow orders? I told you to stay in the

bed," Diana said from behind him. Straker turned.

"Ah, you're back. Well, back when I was on active duty, I followed orders. After that, I rose in rank to Colonel and I found I preferred giving them to carrying them out. Is that thing for me? It looks a little big."

"What would you prefer to wear, Straker? A woman's breastplate?" Diana asked, amused.

"I probably would, yes. At least I wouldn't feel so vulnerable." Straker shivered. Diana sat next to him, deep in reverie.

*Why does the sight of him compel me to put my arms around him for comfort? Mother said his friend considered him a lost sheep. I think his friend was right. He seems so alone, but so determined at the same time. He puzzles me. Why must he be such a perfect specimen? I hate Mother sometimes!*

"You are not used to the low temperatures of the island at night. Put these on. I had them made for someone I thought I loved. He is dead now."

"Thanks. Wait, are you referring to the man Alec brought? Anaki said he was a Colonel too."

"He was a colonel in your Army Air Force in the Intelligence division. He did not want to live at such a great age. He died in my arms."

Straker blinked and tried not to react too strongly to that information as he dressed.

*Intelligence? He sounds too much like me! Is this a trap?*

"Even military men give up hope sometimes. You need to remember that even in his condition, he was determined to have Alec bring him here. Love is a great motivator."

"Love? Love is a poison from which there is no antidote. Let us talk no more about him," she said bitterly.

"Diana, I'm truly sorry for your loss," Straker said quietly.

"I need no pity or anything else from you! I am an Amazon," she shouted at him. He didn't react.

"Amazon or not, I can't help having compassion for you, not pity. I know to lose a love that way hurts more than any physical blow."

Diana looked at him curiously.

*He mirrors my words to Melina. How annoyingly odd he is.*

"Do you have a man or woman waiting for you back home?" Diana asked.

*Why do I hope he says no? Perhaps Alexander is his bed mate? No, Mother would have told me.*

"No. I was married briefly. We divorced. At the time I was holding down a difficult job, doing something I believed in. She didn't appreciate my sense of duty. She had custody of our son. He died as a result of an automobile accident. Alec put it rather well. He said I was young and in love with love, not her. She was pretty and vivacious, and I let my emotions get the best of me. I've accepted it now. But I admit I live with scars from my past."

Straker shivered again. She put her hand on his forehead.

"By the moons of Olympus! You are burning up. Come, I must call the healer."

"Diana, I don't feel so hot. Listen, you seem to have a kind heart. You must help me clear Alec. You must."

"My mother will hear you out tomorrow. Now you need to be seen to."

"Give me your word you'll help Alec. Give it to me and I'll go with you. I'll do anything you ask," Straker said urgently. "I will gladly give my life for his. Galatea can have me for a toy."

"Are you insane? Gala poisoned you. This nonsense you spew about giving yourself to someone as wicked as her is the result of the poison."

"That explains how awful I still feel. What kind of Amazon needs to poison their prey? That's ridiculous. Your hand feels cool," Straker added.

"The minute you touched down onto this island, you were my curse. Now come, or I will make you come," Diana threatened.

"What happened to the Geneva conventions? **HEY!** Put me down, damn it! Put me down right now, Diana."

"Galatea was right about one thing. I should feed you to the fish. Now you will-Edward! No, by all the Gods I will not lose two men in the same week!"

Straker had gone limp.

## Chapter Seven: Trouble

The sound of birds singing caused Straker to awaken from a deep sleep. The white haired woman who smiled at him warmly wore a purple toga cinched by a gold belt. She was much older than the other Amazons he'd seen, and she patted his hand.

"It is good to see your eyes open. For a while you were so sick we feared the Gods would claim you before your time, but you are a fighter." Melina smiled. "Here, Diana has decreed that you have breakfast. She would not admit it, but she has been worried about you."

"Who are you? No, wait. A better question would be do you intend to chop my other arm off." Straker narrowed his eyes at her.

Melina laughed and gently helped him sit up, and then she placed a gold tray in his lap.

"I am Melina, senior healer of Themyscira. I have nothing against men, for hatred accomplishes nothing, but serves only to devour the hater. Do you know why we wear these bracers? I was a woman of Diana's age when we lived peacefully in Greece thousands of years ago. Men came and invaded our community of women, raped many, myself among them, killed several and put us in chains. We wear our bracers to remind us of those chains. The Gods decreed that all who had fought so bravely for freedom could live out their lives on this island in peace. Diana's mother was made our ruler and she was the strongest of all of us. Fighting was all she did, she was a true warrior. While engaged in combat, she forgot she was a woman and became an Amazon. Once we settled here, she softened and longed for a child to love, but we had driven out all the men. In desperation she carved a child out of clay, appealed to the Gods, and thus brought the child to life. The gods granted her child gifts. Beauty from Aphrodite, wisdom and life from Athena, the strength of Hercules, and the speed of Hermes."

"Don't tell me. You're speaking about Diana? What you know as your history, we take as legend," Straker muttered, awed. "You know, as a kid the idea of Amazons fascinated me, but as I grew up I lost my sense of wonder. I don't know what to think now."

"So you are like Alexander in his cups, and think we are all fools?" Melina smiled.

"Did he drink here too? It figures. No, to be honest. I've seen Diana. I've seen Anaki transform. I trust my instincts. I came close to bleeding out, Melina. You saved my life. I'm grateful. Believe me, I am. I still need to help Alec. I need to see the Queen."

"The Queen will see you soon. Diana has declared with her mother's permission that you may have your pack and weapons back but not your bullets."

"She's that sure that I'm not trouble anymore? I'm not sure how to take that. My inferior frail men's ego you know." Straker smiled slightly. "I like you, Melina. You remind me of Alec a lot."

"Inferior? You? I think you play with me, I see it in your sea blue eyes, and they are mischievous. I doubt that you were anything but trouble from the moment you left your poor mother's womb! Eat, drink."

Straker chewed on a few bites, drank juice to wash it down then set down his fork.

"My mother would probably wholly agree with you. From a young age I was taking things apart to see how they worked and most of the time I didn't bother putting them back together again. I wasn't sure what food Amazons would thrive on, but this fish, juice and fruit are truly delicious. Thank you, Melina."

"Good. You are a willow branch with legs. Did they not feed you in man's world?" She laughed. Straker sighed.

*She's Alec's twin alright. Yet another damn nickname. Q Tip, Licorice stick. Now I'm a willow branch. Just great.*

"Sometimes I don't have the luxury of having a full meal, Melina. Besides, I have always been smaller than a lot of men. That fact made me tougher in other ways so I welcomed my fate after a while. You can't change genes. Would you help me stand up and change?"

"Of course, I am at your service. I will show you where you can relieve yourself and where you can bathe."

Straker sighed in relief. He had taken a drug to keep from relieving his bowels like most men on a mission and the drug very uncomfortably had worn off.

"Sounds like a plan."

## Chapter Eight: Total Exposure

Commander Ed Straker stood completely naked under a waterfall and busied himself with lathering his body with soap that smelled faintly of strawberries. Melina had given the soap to him. He then worked the soap through his platinum hair, concentrating on what he was doing. As he did so, he was being carefully watched by Melina.

*Plus at least twenty very amused Amazons who were enjoying every minute of it. Damn audience of giggling women. Oh, stop it, Straker. It feels great to finally get clean, admit it. Besides, all of these women were battle tested Amazons who could knock you into the stratosphere if they wanted to, including Melina. Melina at least warned me some of them had never seen a naked man before. Okay that I can understand. But they are exactly like the guys at my gym. What is it about nudity that turns men into juveniles comparing the size of their family jewels? I mean I'm adequate, I suppose. Mary never complained. Mary never did much of anything, actually. God forbid she utter the word penis. Listen to me. I didn't think I was still bitter, but obviously I am. Am I adequate? They seem to be appreciating me. Oh for Christ's sake finish up and stop being stupid. Heh, Alec would have loved this, in Shado's shower room after combat practice he always teased me that my genitals were the size of a pea. A pea is not exactly the vegetable I'd use to describe his. Alec, how I wish you were here. I miss your presence so much. I haven't forgotten you. Hurry up, Straker. You can't take much more of this crud. If truth be told, it is somewhat flattering even though the last woman that actually watched me bathe wasn't Mary, it was my mother and she was happy with how I turned out. How's that for reassuring your frail male ego?*

"Do I really need an audience?" he complained.

"Do you need any help washing your body, Straker? I am sure any of these women would volunteer to assist you." Melina laughed.

"And you accuse *me* of being mischievous? You're a pain in the ass like all the doctors I've known, Melina. I mean that respectfully of course," Straker told her after rinsing his hair to remove the soap. Melina laughed heartily.

"Perhaps he does not want any of us." One Amazon said. "Perhaps it is our sister Melina he desires. Would Ayris allow them to share a bed for a night? Perhaps she would join them?"

"Before I would do such a thing I would skin every Amazon alive starting with you, Drusilla," Ayris giggled. Straker glanced at her, drew his mouth into a thin mock line of irritation. Upon meeting her, he had been surprised by how much younger Ayris was than Melina.

*So very different from my world, where love has rules and these two women pledged to one another for life might be mocked for age and sexual preference. This society is so refreshing.*

"You've broken my heart, Ayris." Straker teased. "I dream only of Melina in my bed."

"You are lucky I do not break your heart and your head with my shield, Straker! Fortunately for you, Melina adopts you and tells me you have a great sense of humor. That is so unexpected in a man who now smells sweet like a woman."

Straker winced dramatically, drawing more laughter.

Anaki approached him and shyly offered him something.

"Don't think I don't know that Melina did that on purpose, bringing me a woman's soap. Besides, I like strawberries." Straker winked at Anaki.

"I have a confession to make. You will be cross with me." Anaki said. Straker was briskly rubbing his skin dry, ignoring the growing commotion from the women.

"What are you worried about, sweetheart?"

"You hear that? He calls her his sweetheart. Already his thoughts turn to a mere girl. He has forgotten me already." Melina laughed and the women echoed her mirth even louder.

"I ate everything in your knapsack the night before I met you. I had changed to a boar to understand their language better, and lost control for a little while. I did not know it belonged to you then." Anaki

explained.

Straker paused and looked at Anaki in shock and then chuckled.

"Anaki, I'm amazed you're still standing after eating that crud. I owe you for relieving me of having to eat it myself. You deserve a medal."

"Good. Ed, may I tell you something else?"

"Sure."

"Now that I have gotten to know you better, I am not so afraid of men."

"Men have changed over time. We have the capacity for violence, but not all of us allow it to overtake us, we fight only when necessary for the most part, although wars are still raging back where I come from, often unfair ones that claim innocent lives. Women too have changed in my world. Back when I was studying to be an officer, I trained under many women who were my superiors and my equals. I owe my life to the martial arts skills they introduced me to back when I was younger."

"I wish I could see your world."

"You know, you could always come back with me, Anaki," he said hopefully.

"No, Straker. The Queen would never allow it, I'm afraid," Melina said. "All right, all of you have chores to do, run along now."

"Anaki should be able to choose her own fate. She isn't one of you." Straker said angrily.

"I know, but she is young, she needs to grow. Perhaps one day she will follow her heart." Melina stroked Anaki's head fondly.

"It is all right, Ed. Oh! I almost forgot. I found your razor for you. That is what Diana told me it is called."

"Thanks!" Straker used the soap again to lather up. He shaved and rinsed his face.

"So that is what men do with a razor," Anaki said, fascinated. Straker smiled at her.

"That's right, Anaki." An all too familiar voice said.

Straker spun around.

"How long have you been here, Diana?" Straker said casually, hiding his discomfort at her presence.

"Long enough to know you bathe at the speed of a mollusk." Diana grinned.

"When you've had to take showers no more than five minutes long while an airman in boot camp, and attaining eagles on your shoulders means you can shower or bathe as quickly or as leisurely as you like, you hardly worry about being compared to a snail. Besides, would you say that to an Amazon?"

"Yes, if she were as slow as you are! Here, let me help you with that."

"I haven't needed assistance in drying myself since I was a baby," Straker shot back at her nervously.

*Think cool, Straker. Think cold shower. Think Antarctica for God's sake. Otherwise that woman will get a rise out of you, literally.*

Straker grinned to himself.

"A baby would be dry by now. You are not. Give me that towel," Diana demanded.

"I told you, I don't need assistance. Don't you have something better to do? Go polish your shield or something," he replied.

"You have a poor memory Straker."

"Ed. Now go ahead and tell me why you think-HEY!"

"You forget once again that you are my captive," she said, triumphant about stealing his towel. She began to rub his back vigorously.

"At least leave me some skin. OW!" Straker exclaimed.

"You are a weakling!" Diana said in delight.

"I've had enough of you."

Straker spun around, then used a sweep of his leg to knock her off balance. "I learned that defense move from a woman, by the way. An Israeli combat instructor. The first week she tried to teach me Krav Maga there wasn't any skin on my body that wasn't bruised. The second week she was the one with the bruises. I'm

a fast learner."

Diana swore, looked up at him, hiding her admiration for his skill.

"You are a dead man. You know that, don't you, Edward? Embarrassing me like that in front of my sisters."

"You're so insistent on getting the better of me that you fail to notice that I waited until your sisters were all gone, Melina, Ayris and Anaki among them. Besides, the only reason I managed to do it is because you didn't expect it. I accept that you are stronger than me and more than my equal."

"You are the most maddening, unpredictable male I have ever met. I suppose you won't help me up?"

"Oh, very funny, Diana. You need help, sure. That would allow you to pull me down in the mud, and after finally getting clean I have no intention of getting dir-YIII!"

Diana had seized him with her lasso and knocked him into the mud, laughing. She released him reluctantly.

Straker got up and sat calmly in a full lotus position as if he were a platinum haired Buddha statue. Diana studied him curiously.

"I've never seen a man sit that way before." Diana admitted. "Are you imitating a pretzel?" she smirked.

"Ah, so I do have an advantage you don't. I've studied yoga to improve martial arts. Have I told you I hate smirking Amazons recently?" Straker gathered up mud and threw it at her. She knocked it away effortlessly with her bracer. He looked at it thoughtfully. Diana scowled.

"Now what are you brooding about, Edward? I've never seen anyone brood as much as you do, either. "

"Melina explained to me why Amazons wear bracers. I'm sorry your sisters had to go through that at the hands of men like me. I was a prisoner like that for a while too, in chains. I only survived imprisonment because in my soul I remained free. Many of my fellow officers never made it; their only true freedom was in death. I didn't need bracers to remind me of what I'd been through; I had my shoulder scars to remind me. I was damn lucky to escape, even though I was so badly injured to the point the doctors didn't think I'd ever fly again. I proved them wrong."

*So you are a pilot like my love. I would tear any captor in pieces if he dared to chain you, Edward. You are more like an Amazon than you know.*

"Must you always be so serious? You think too much, that is your problem, you know. Here. Both of us will get clean. Acceptable?" Diana asked.

*He almost makes me forget my loss. Watch yourself Diana. Don't fall into Mother's trap.*

"Sounds good. Diana, I-"

"You what?" she said about to hand him the towel. She realized it was now muddy and grinned sheepishly.

Straker laughed at her.

*His smile sparkles like a jewel in Mother's gown. How can a man be beautiful? By Zeus! What must he be like in passion? Stop it, Diana. You think only from between the legs. He is your prisoner.*

"Nothing. Would you mind getting us fresh towels?"

"Will you try to escape if I do?" Diana asked.

"What am I supposed to do? Fly home? I left my wings in England."

"You are insufferable."

"So Alec tells me. I wouldn't want to disappoint him. Now hurry up, mollusk."

Diana rolled her eyes in temporary defeat, went off, came back and set down clean towels.

"What were you going to say to me earlier?"

"Nothing of any consequence," Straker lied and went under the waterfall again, emerged clean, got dry then dressed in the tunic Melina had given him. He put on his chest pack and strapped his knife to his leg.

"You lie, like all men," Diana told him and shrugged.

"It isn't that at all." Straker protested.

"Then tell me. We Amazons place great value in truth."

"You won't like it," Straker answered.

"Free your tongue. I fear nothing you might say."

"I haven't been with a woman for a long time. Alec, he has relationships that come and go. No one gets hurt. But that really isn't my style. The one time after my divorce that I finally opened up to a woman again ended in near disaster. She hated men too, called it a man's world the same way Amazons do. She tried to take advantage of me so that she could sell a tabloid story. I shut myself off after that. I lost myself in my work. I was going to say that—"

"You have been lonely."

He looked at her pensively.

"So have you," Straker responded.

"Love is deceit," Diana said firmly. "So is attraction."

"Yeah, it can be. Look, I'm sorry I brought it up, but you asked for the truth."

"Come, I have to get you ready for the Queen and we have spent enough time on mundane matters like these."

"You're right."

"Straker, actually I have matters to attend to. Can you get back to Melina yourself? Remember, she wanted to check your wound."

"No problem." Straker turned away, hurt but hiding it.

\* \* \*

Diana shook the mud off of her and walked swiftly away out of the forest toward the temple area where her mother reigned. Melina leapt out of the bushes, startling her.

"I nearly took my sword to you Melina that was unwise."

"I hid myself so that I could hear what you and Ed were saying. You took your sword to him. He is still bleeding. I can always repair his body, but never his soul."

"You're speaking nonsense all of a sudden," Diana told her.

*I saw it in his eyes just a minute ago, this bleeding Melina speaks of. What manner of fool woman would break this man's heart? No. I am done with men. Mother is wrong. To love is to be weak. To love means being taken advantage of, as he said! I have no need of no one, I am an Amazon!*

"Do you still believe a man cannot feel crippling loss the same as a woman? Have you let the betrayal of your lover so change your heart that you cannot see when a good man speaks the truth? Straker is falling in love with you, Diana." Melina said gently. "I have seen the way he looks at you."

"First Mother, then you. I have no intention to nurse lovesickness. I have had my fill of mortal men."

"The Queen will let him go help Alexander. Are you saying you will not grieve when he is gone? That is not the Diana I know."

"Do you not understand that the love of my life died in my arms without knowing who I was? Why must you and mother torture me like this?"

"I saw you lust over his body while he slept. Do you deny it?"

"An entertainment to pass the time away, nothing more. He is pleasant to look at, but so are the sun, moon and sky."

"I saw how you looked at him. Don't pretend to be indifferent."

"Stop this, Melina. A healer cures wounds she does not make new ones."

"You are falling in love with him. I had a long talk with your Mother. Alexander told her much about that man. He will be lost without his friend. Do you think it was easy for Straker to tell you of his lost loves? It was a rare sharing. He does not trust easily. When he leaves here, he will have another scar on his soul. The loss of you. I told you I secretly watched the both of you play, and it was joyful. I saw the pain go from your eyes as you looked at him. Amazons place great value on truth, yet the greatest warrior of us all, the one they call Wonder Woman, repeatedly lies to herself."

"Melina, stop! Stop! I will *NOT* hear this!"

"Then you are well and truly lost, my Princess, but what saddens me more is so is he," Melina said, and walked away.

Diana buried her face in her hands.

*I must not go back; I cannot go back to the world of men. Even if this Straker is as distant and captivating as the stars. What a fool I am, she is right. I already mourn his loss, and I don't even truly know his soul. Melina can read minds as easily as she can heal them despite what she pretends, and this man has won her trust, even Ayrus is fond of him. Our Anaki is charmed by him and he treats her as delicately as if she were his own flesh and blood child. He is struck down mercilessly by Galatea and doesn't utter a cry out of pride. He sees through my intentions as if I were glass. Did Mother really bring him? Stop. Just stop. I must speak to Mother, and have him sent away for good as soon as possible. If a table is not set, one may not miss food. Enough of this nonsense. You are an Amazon!*

## Chapter Nine: Blood Thirst

Straker walked through the woods at a brisk pace, feeling more like himself.

*I can just imagine Alec's glee at seeing me in this. It doesn't even fit me properly. No tailor anywhere to be seen, either.*

Straker stopped, seeing a large snail munching a leaf on a nearby bush. He chuckled.

"Okay, the two of us. Right now. We'll see which one of us makes it to Melina first. You game?"

It looked at him, went back to having its lunch.

"Yeah. I could do with a chef's salad too. I just don't have time for it now." Straker stood up, started to walk, stopped.

"All right, I know when someone's following me. Show yourself." Straker turned around and his heart sank.

*Not now. I don't have time for her damn blood thirst.*

"You have lost your reason talking to a creature without a voice who does not hear your words. You are no man. You are no warrior."

"Galatea, isn't it? I remember you as the Amazon who poisons her sword. Tell me, what makes you that insecure about battle?" Straker asked casually.

Galatea curled her hands into fists.

*That's right, get enraged at me. You'll give me an advantage in the fight. The more over confident you feel the more mistakes you'll make. The quicker I goad you the better chance I have at taking you down, Amazon or no Amazon. You enjoyed my suffering before, but I disappointed you by not crying for mercy which you don't have and never will. That's the difference between us. You'd enjoy my suffering again. I will kill you but I won't enjoy yours.*

"You ask for your death. I will cut you into pieces. By the time Melina finds you it will be too late this time," she snarled.

"I'm armed this time, I've evened the odds," Straker said quietly. He tapped the knife in its sheath on his leg, his expression as deadly as its blade.

"You think you can defend yourself with a little knife, fool? I will crush your head. Like this."

Galatea laughed, stepped forward. She knocked the snail off the leaf, and crushed it beneath her boot heel. Straker didn't react.

"Oh, you're quite right to do that, Galatea. But I feel the need to ask, what kind of Amazon fears a snail? I'll answer my own question. A cowardly one."

Galatea drew her sword, ran at him blindly with an insane cry.

Straker waited, and then, light on the balls of his feet, moved aside. Galatea nearly lost her balance. He attacked as she struggled for footing, kicked the sword hilt out of her hand, and then slammed into the back of her neck with the edge of his palm using a karate blow. She fell. He picked up her sword, cut her throat and started to make his way to Melina's clinic.

It was then that Galatea flew at him and plunged a dagger into Straker's back and pulled it out again. Straker looked confused. He fell to his knees in an unbearable explosion of pain. He toppled over.

"Fool to think it would be easy to defeat me. I am an Amazon, immortal!"

*I'm finished? Not like this. I won't give her that satisfaction.*

With what little strength and consciousness he had remaining, he curled one hand into a fist, scratched desperately at his palm.

*I will also give you a drug to take with you that will painlessly but instantly kill you. It is easily concealed. You may not have free access to your Glock if things go horribly awry. That's what Jackson said.*

*Yes, a cream easily concealed inside fake skin he glued on my palm. Even Melina didn't detect it, and without constant sufficient force it wouldn't break open accidentally. There, that ought to do it. Just seconds now. Goodbye Alec forgive me for my failure. Mother, I'm not afraid. I'm coming ho-*

Straker's heart stopped.

## **Part Three: The Death Of Wonder**

## Chapter Ten: Deus Ex Machina

After placing Straker's body gently on the bed in the Queen's bedchamber in the palace, several Amazons stood there in full regalia, along with the Queen and Diana, and other Amazons waited in the halls. Incense was burned and wafted through the air. The area was resplendent with flowers and lit candles.

Diana looked at Straker. They'd dressed him in his flight suit and now they solemnly placed bouquets of flowers around his body. Several Amazons had responded to Straker's death by placing their swords and shields at the foot of the bed in their own tradition of honoring an Amazon who died a heroic death in battle.

*How handsome you look. Must I grieve yet again? You look as if you are merely sleeping, Straker. With your unconquerable spirit, how could the very Gods have claimed you? Be strong, Diana of Themyscira. That is what Straker would have told me. Avenge us both. By all the Gods, that is what I will do this very day. I must not let my sisters see me weep, no. That is not proper. My sisters did not mourn my love's death when he returned to me, Straker. Yet they weep for you now. I might have been the one who would restore your lost sense of wonder which you told Melina about, but I turned my back on you. May the Gods forgive me.*

Galatea was transfixed to a marble column, Diana's lasso of truth binding her in place. She looked haggard. She had confessed to everything under its power, gone over every detail. She remained defiant.

*Straker must have known he might die if he fought. Yet he did, without fear. When we heard from Galatea's mouth that Straker was challenging a snail to race before he was killed, Melina started laughing wildly, in a hysteria that turned to heartbroken sobbing. After that, she was an Amazon, with the instinct that allowed her to stalk and confront me. She was and always will be a warrior. She told us Straker had a poison concealed in his palm, one she wasn't familiar with, and it killed him before the shock and blood loss did. She was inconsolable; she said she might have saved him had it not been for that. He must have been determined to die by his own hand. He would deny Galatea her pleasure. Straker, you should have been born an Amazon.*

"I am Queen Hippolyta of Themyscira, supreme ruler of the Amazons. An injustice has been done to a friend of Alexander Freeman, he whose company I enjoyed so well. Straker's body will be returned and the injustice he risked his life to come here to correct will be corrected. I will make Alexander's grief light. I hereby decree that Galatea be sealed in our dungeon, and remain there for eternity."

"That is too good a punishment for her, your Majesty. I came to love Edward Straker as the son I never would give birth to. May he be with his beloved mother, whom I often saw in his thoughts. Straker was a gentle and wise man, a leader, a fighter, a man with heart, a true Commander, a male Amazon. The very stars above fade from grief and mourn his passing. My Queen, I ask that you allow me to invoke Zeus in worship with the plea to return Galatea to her mortal form, so I may slay her and make sure she may spend eternity in Hades."

"My dearest Melina, I have had the misfortune to know Zeus. He wouldn't care about the feelings of a woman, just about the size of her breasts and that her virginity remained intact. It was Athena who brought my precious daughter to life and comforted me so. If you entreat her, she may grant your wish." The Queen smiled.

"My sisters, will you join in my worship?" Melina shouted, raising her sword.

The Amazons raised their swords and cheered.

"We will invoke the good Athena in prayer after his funeral," Melina said sorrowfully. "Now is a time to mourn, not to hate."

"This man resurrected the Amazon in you," Diana said to Melina, who had moved away, and bent over Straker. She kissed him on the forehead.

"I will never forget you, sweet Ed."

"That side of my lover has never died to be resurrected, Princess." Ayris walked over and took a sobbing Melina into her arms.

"Believe me, I know this." Diana smiled. She walked over and faced a maddened Galatea.

"You are still one of us, immortal. Enjoy breathing while you still can."

"Do you expect me to ask for mercy? From you, the so called Wonder Woman? You abandoned us for an unworthy male who slept with another as soon as your back was turned. He grew ugly and feeble, as Straker would have if I had not killed him. Perhaps the great Wonder Woman should be grateful for that." Galatea sneered.

"Edward took his own life, you evil bitch! He did it to deny you pleasure! Silence your damned tongue or I will cut it out to silence it for you." Melina yelled uncharacteristically.

"You lie, old useless hag," Galatea shouted.

"Hold her." Diana ordered the Queen's personal guards.

As they did so, Diana removed the lasso from around Galatea and put it around Melina.

"Melina of Themyscira. You are compelled to tell the truth. What stopped Straker's heart?" Diana demanded.

"A poison concealed in artificial skin which was glued to his hand. One I sadly couldn't counteract because it was man made in a laboratory in man's world. Willingly, he pierced the skin so that he would choose his means of death, and deny Galatea her triumphant win over him. She stabbed him in the back like a coward!" Melina said so that all could hear.

"NO! NO!" Galatea screamed. "I am the greatest warrior, I am an Amazon, and he could not defy me!"

"Yet he did. Now join him and suffer for your guilt in Hades."

Melina took out her sword so fast that she had stabbed Galatea in the heart and withdrew the bloody blade before anyone could react. Galatea laughed through the pain, coughed. Blood dripped steadily from her mouth and soiled the gold and white fur carpet beneath her.

"Blind old wretched fool. I will not die as he found out too late. I stand immortal. I fear nothing."

"Do not be so sure of that, traitor," the healer exclaimed coldly.

Melina raised her sword again, and chopped off Galatea's head. The woman's empty eyes were frozen in shock. She was dead. The Amazons cheered.

"How like you, Melina. You have always been impatient." Diana chuckled.

"With the Queen's permission, I will go with Ayris and free Alexander. They will keep us there. There are several of my sisters skilled enough to take our place as senior healers, for I fear we may never return."

"Must you both leave us, Melina?" the Queen asked disturbed.

"Yes. As Ed slept, I saw the visions in his mind of the people he commanded. They will need to have us there before they release Alexander, they believe him insane. At least I will have a friend there. Alas, I cannot help Ed. It will cause Alexander great grief, for he looked up to his friend as a hero. But I will prove his story and I will bring Ed's body with me. We will drink to his loss together."

"No, Melina of Themyscira." An eerie voice said.

They all turned in absolute shock.

Anaki had stood up and faced them. Her body shimmered brightly in transformation.

The Queen fell to her knees and bowed before Anaki.

'You are Athena. We are honored," the Queen whispered.

Anaki's body now sparkled so brightly, most of the Amazons fell to their knees, covering their eyes. In Anaki's place stood a beautiful woman in a tunic of gold and purple, her hair arranged elaborately in a circle of jeweled braids. Diana saw that the Amazons, even the Queen, were afraid to look at Athena's radiance.

*Except for me.*

"We welcome you, Athena," Diana said.

"You do not fear me, Diana?" Athena chuckled.

"You do not fear **me**?" Diana grinned. "You gave me life."

"When you were born, all the Gods bestowed gifts upon you. I do not remember any of them giving you an impudent tongue." Athena laughed.

"That was Mother." Diana laughed with her.

"Daughter! How could you?"

"Hippolyta, silence! I did not give you leave to speak."

"Forgive me, great Athena."

"You are the only one besides me that actually can shut Mother up. For that alone you deserve worship. Why did you disguise yourself as a baby named Anaki which Melina rescued?"

"To test you all. To see who treated a female stranger with respect and love. Some of you did, but believed her strange for preferring the company of animals to the company of her adopted sisters. Did it not bother you that she could change herself into any form she wanted? Did it not trouble you that you didn't know where she was from? When Galatea crushed my snail body, that form died and I realized that the masquerade was at an end."

"Good and kind Athena, may I speak?" Melina asked.

"Do so only if you gaze directly at my face, Melina of Themyscira, will you dare that, Amazon?"

"I will, my Goddess, and more."

"Speak. Your voice is as welcome as your courage," Athena told her.

"A man lies dead unjustifiably. Will you return his life to him?"

"Take him to your clinic. I will revive him there. I will undo what has been done to Alexander, for I admire his spirit and recognize his brother Straker's courage."

"Straker resembles a God," Diana pointed out. "Is he one?"

"You have merely to look at him, Diana, to suspect it, but no. Straker always has seemed younger than his true age as if immortal." Athena laughed. "However, Straker always denies he is a God when Alexander, who knows his true soul, jokingly tells him that. It annoys him greatly. To think that Alexander mocked mythology while Straker was drawn to it. Of course he was drawn to it! He belongs among our heroes. Do not tell him he is a hero it would not please him. You have seen his body, Diana. Is it also God like? You lusted over it."

For the first time, Diana blushed.

Athena laughed.

"Go and worship me then make merry in my honor, I command it. I will take Straker home as I did his brother Alexander. Is there anything more you wish?"

"You called Alexander his brother. Is he?" Melina inquired.

"Only in the sense that all of you are sisters to one another. Why?"

"I was curious. I have a small crush on him, despite his inadequate appearance. I fear many more women would be deflowered if indeed Alexander was like our Gods too." Melina giggled like a woman half her age.

"Alexander acts worse than Zeus!" Athena exclaimed angrily, "but he means well, so I tolerate him."

"Small crush? You're just asking for me to dip your breastplate in poison ivy from man's world!" Ayrис laughed. Melina guffawed and hugged her.

"Athena, will you allow him to stay with us just a little longer?" Diana asked.

"He may stay as he likes, but he will be too eager to go, I am afraid. You tell him he bested Galatea, who is well and truly dead. For he did. He only did it with his life, not a sword, defiant to his final breath. To call him a God would not be much of an exaggeration, and he has the courage of an Amazon. Such a man deserves life. Farewell, all my sisters!"

All the Amazons cheered, waited until Athena disappeared. All gathered in her temple for worship, then they cheered again and danced and drank into the night. Diana did not join them, neither did Melina. Diana had carried Straker lovingly until both women reached the clinic.

\* \* \*

Diana put Straker into the bed reserved for the injured Amazons, and covered him with a blanket.

"He should be undressed, else he ask too many questions." Melina told her.

"You want Ayrис, and Alexander, now Straker?" Diana teased.

"A healer has her privileges, Princess," Melina responded with a grin. "You can help me undress him. May Athena grant that I only do this chore with the eye of a healer, not a woman!"

Diana laughed. They undressed the Commander and put aside his suit and belongings.

"Now we keep vigil until Athena returns him to us," Diana said, excited.

"Wait. Something is missing." Melina stepped into where she kept her apothecary for a few moments, and then returned with laurel leaves, which she shaped into an open crown using gold thread. Grinning, she placed it upon Straker's head.

"There, as befits a hero. Ed once regretted he had no crown such as this."

"You read his private thoughts? But I did not take him for a man who would want a crown," Diana remarked, puzzled.

"Part of complete healing involves knowing a patient's mind. So I was given telepathy as a gift from the Gods and I used it to heal. Besides, Ed was only making a humorous connection when he thought about such a crown. A real crown was placed on his head many years ago, one which he did not want, one which caused him to lose almost everything that was dear to him. A crown means great power to some. To others with a conscience and sensitivity, it is a great burden concealed under the great power. He took up the crown out of duty. It is a sad but glorious story from his past; I shall tell you all when he is gone."

Straker moaned, blinked, turned on his side and closed his eyes, and then he made an attempt to disappear under the blanket.

"Wake up, Edward. This is no time to sleep." Diana shook him.

"Oh, it's you." He muttered drowsily and then Straker turned white and shot straight up, clutching his back. "Oh my GOD! I died!"

"It is all right, Ed. You passed out from your wound. The Amazons found you and Melina helped you. You killed Galatea, she was an awful woman. My animal friends feared her. She killed many for no reason but cruelty. I am glad she is dead." Anaki said.

"Now I desperately need to see the Queen. I can't stay any longer. I need to get Alec out of that damn psychiatric ward."

"Settle down. I spoke to Mother. Mother had a word with Athena, and it seems you and Alexander are mortals she favors. She is the one who brought Alexander back home when his time here was done."

"Wait. You're telling me your mother spoke with a goddess and *she* brought Alec home?"

"Edward, you do know I am a demi-god, right?" Diana said, exasperated.

"Fine. So take me home, and come with me and prove to Gener-uh to my former superior that Alec isn't insane."

"Athena's will be done. Alexander will be all right and he will not remember what happened. All will be well. Don't your books call that Deus ex Machina?" Melina smiled. "Diana's lover used to bring me a lot of medical books from man's world in the rare times he visited us. He'd bring me other kinds of literature too. "Melina chuckled.

"Yes, that is what it's called. I'm afraid I was at least partially responsible for allowing screenwriters to get away with those kinds of film scripts. They were pretty dreadful movies too, but we made a profit at Harlington-Straker Studios from them. It's what the public seems to want; at least it used to be. These days, it's all dark stories with melancholy endings. In the rare occasions I watch films; I try to avoid that type of thing. There's enough misery in the world already. I stay with the classics. What? How did I get this?" Straker stared at the crown of laurel leaves which he'd removed.

"I made it; I thought it would look pretty on you, Ed," Melina lied.

"I'm flattered, but I prefer my helmet. Are you all certain everything will be all right?"

"Typical man. Doesn't believe a word a woman says," Diana complained. "Even if that woman is a goddess."

"I once thought my ex-wife Mary was a goddess. I can't begin to tell you how wrong I was about believing that," Straker told her, suddenly melancholy. "Melina did I-?"

"Take that awful poison hidden in your hand? Yes! I almost *lost* you because of it. Alexander did tell me you were the most headstrong person he'd ever met. What was that awful chemical?"

"I uh-don't actually know." Straker looked down, avoiding Melina's gaze like a small boy who had broken a cookie jar and had gotten caught with the goods.

"You what?" Diana put in, winking at Melina.

Straker looked up, shrugged.

"I don't know. Medicine isn't exactly my forte. It was a drug one of my doctors developed for me as a last resort."

"What kind of healer would allow a patient to have a drug that would kill him?" Melina asked, genuinely exasperated now.

"You said your forte wasn't medicine. I'm starting to think your forte is stupidity," Diana told him.

*Damn her. Not the SAS treatment again!*

"Now look here, lady. I have two Ph.D.'s from my time studying at Boston University, Yale, and M.I.T. You don't get into those institutions if you're stupid."

"His frail male ego is shattered," Melina announced. "Alas."

Straker stared at her, and then he grinned.

"Okay. I get it. You're all pulling my leg. Fine. Have your fun."

"I haven't touched your leg, as cute and adorable as it is," Diana said, starting to pull off the blanket. Straker grabbed her hand, and then seized the blanket in both of his.

"Oh no, you don't. I never make the same mistake twice!" Straker exclaimed.

"Ed is right, you know. He makes mistakes ten times in a row but never twice." Melina giggled.

"Now you listen to me, Melina. One Alexander Freeman is worrisome enough. Two is a catastrophe waiting to happen. Especially when the second one is a woman." Straker smiled at her fondly.

"And to think he tried to convince us that he respected women." Diana sighed, arms crossed.

"Shut up, Diana," Straker commanded.

"You are *really* asking for it, Straker."

"When did I stop being Edward?"

"Oh, let me think. We women do think on occasion."

"Yeah, that fact always scared me half to death. Go on," Straker encouraged Diana, deadpan.

Diana noticed that Straker's vivid blue eyes, which seemed lit from within, were sparkling.

*Twin blue stars. That's what they look like. They blaze when he is angry. Now they tell me he's enjoying himself.*

"I remember now. You stopped being Edward when you opened your mouth. Besides, have you already forgotten I've seen more of you than just those skinny chicken legs of yours? Which leads me to ask; don't you ever finish a meal?"

Straker just crossed his arms, rolled his expressive eyes.

"I don't think he eats at all," Melina agreed.

"I give up. Melina, am I well enough to leave?"

"Yes, but we were hoping you might stay a little longer."

"I can't. Help me get ready, will you?"

Diana sighed.

## Epilogue: Intruder Alert

"Good night, Alexander. Carlin bagged the UFO, so I'm finally headed home. I'm beat."

"Did I actually hear you say you're leaving your office and going home? I knew if I stayed sober too long I'd start to have hallucinations. Say Ed, what's with the Alexander? You know I hate that name."

"I thought it was appropriate. After all, Alexander the Great conquered the world and you conquer half the starlets around here." Straker joked.

"You know I've often wondered if that vaporizer of yours over there would work on a human being. Let's say, hmm, a Shado Commander out of Boston?"

"Considering you're always saying I'm too thin, I'd probably fit in there." Straker smiled. "That reminds me, did you have dinner in the cafeteria?"

"No, why? You're planning to poison your second-in-command?" Alec teased him. Straker pretended to be hurt.

"Honestly Alec, has my cooking ever been that bad? No, I was going to suggest you have dinner at my place tonight, and you could sleep over. I make a killer breakfast, you know." The Commander joked.

Alec grinned widely at him.

"You sound pretty homicidal to me. It's always the over-educated skinny silver haired quiet ones from Boston that everybody trusts that do all the killing. Ed, I'm sorry. I have a date tonight. Maybe some other time?"

"Sure thing. Goodnight, Alec." Straker thumbed the door control button, hiding his disappointment.

"Get some sleep, Ed. You look haggard and you've been stuck in here for days. Make sure you eat; a Commander can't live on cold coffee forever. Goodnight, Ed." Alec left humming some Hans Zimmer tune Straker didn't recognize.

Straker dejectedly opened the door to his house, entered, and locked the door. He pulled off his cream Nehru jacket, and dropped it on the black leather couch. He then removed his shoulder holster and his Glock 17 and set them on the coffee table. Having done that, he entered his kitchen, and turned on his coffee maker. He fished through the pantry for coffee and brewing supplies then sighed.

*Nothing left. I meant to go shopping, I should have asked Miss Ealand to pick up a few items, but she already does too much for me. Damn, no instant either? Well, I can have something delivered tomorrow. I'm too tired to even think about driving into town right now. Tomorrow I'll have a lie in for a change.*

He headed into the bathroom, turned on the shower.

A half hour later, dressed in light blue pajamas and white turkish cotton robe, wearing black leather slippers he sat on the black couch having a cup of spice tea in which he'd put two sugar cubes along with a minute dollop of milk. On the coffee table in front of him were two shortbread cookies with strawberry filling.

*Not my first choice, but at least it tastes sweet and has a decent amount of caffeine. Dr. Jackson always found it strange that all that coffee I drink never gives me the jitters. I should have expected Alec would be unavailable tonight. After all, it's the weekend. I really ought to take time off tomorrow, maybe play a couple holes of golf. No, I'm not in the mood. I don't feel like sleeping either. Damn. Fine, I'll turn on the radio or something. I wonder who Alec is dating now? Even SID couldn't keep track of his love life.*

Straker munched on the cookies gratefully. He'd discovered he was starving.

*I just don't have the energy to even microwave leftovers tonight. Umm, these cookies taste good. It's been a long time since I've eaten a snack in place of dinner. What should I do tomorrow? Maybe I'll drive out to Herefordshire, and actually seduce that SAS officer's wife. What was his name now? God, I really am exhausted if I can't remember. Maybe I'm just getting old. Losing my touch.*

That thought disturbed him so much that he grabbed his trench coat out of his closet, and his keys, and went out the door, slamming it closed behind him.

He soon found himself on a road he didn't recognize, and turned on the Shado car's GPS system

manually, not in the mood to hear the car interrogate him. All the Shado cars had been upgraded and fitted with new voice activated computer systems. If he hadn't been so tired, he might have noticed that a tiny light on the dashboard was blinking its little head off.

*Christ, I'm sixteen miles from home in the middle of nowhere. I don't even remember driving here! Straker, what the hell is the matter with you? This is all General Henderson needs to have an excuse to bench me. Pull yourself together. Go home, go to bed. You haven't slept for days! Go home.*

Straker stared into space. A question plagued him, a question he had once asked Alec.

*What home?*

*Oh stop feeling sorry for yourself Straker. Drive home. Now. Before you're the next guest in that psychiatric ward.*

Straker finally got back to his house. It was nearly dawn. He picked up the phone, talked to the person on duty in command center. He explained that he wouldn't be in, that he was going to take the weekend off. After hearing a chorus of respectful yes sirs, Straker hung up. He flung himself in bed. He closed his eyes.

*Nothing. How charming. I have no idea how long I've gone without sleep, but I can't seem to get any rest. No problem, I have enough sedatives in the medicine cabinet to drug all the people in Boston. All right then. Sleep, here I come.*

He swallowed the tablets down and drank half a glass of water. He left the bathroom, curled up on the black sofa after retrieving his black and white fur throw from the bed for warmth. His double bed had too keenly reminded him he was alone so he'd avoided it. The strong sedatives worked almost instantly.

\* \* \*

"Diana, you're just the thing he needs. Last night I told him I was going on a date. He looked so miserable that I thought I better cancel it and call you the psychic way Melina showed me. I know you're supposed to be flying here in an invisible plane, but all that doesn't matter. Just get here as quick as you can."

"Alexander, I've come to stay as long as he needs me, if he'll let me. Even if he doesn't!"

Alec laughed.

"That's the spirit. Someone needs to look after Ed and he's too proud to admit he needs help. He's in a bad way. He hasn't slept for days. He'd apparently gotten lost last night. Thank heaven Miss Ealand told me to have his car GPS activated without him knowing it. I should have remembered he drives when he's upset."

"Alexander, thank you so much for telling me. I've missed him so much. You can go back to not believing in telepathy and Amazons now." Diana chuckled.

"Good! How long before you can get to his house?"

"I had some shopping to do but I'm getting in the taxi now so it shouldn't be long. I was so relieved I still had money from my Diana Prince days or I couldn't pay for anything once I landed in your world. I'll call you when I get there. The Queen and Melina and Ayris and Anaki send their love. Bye now."

\* \* \*

Diana paid the taxi driver, who tipped his hat to her beauty, wishing he wasn't happily married, and drove off. She went to the door and knocked.

There was no answer.

*If he's off on one of those long drives already I swear I'll kill him. Open the door, Edward!*

Nothing.

Diana lost her patience. She slipped a recently purchased handbag over her shoulder then she leapt Amazon style and broke through the door, leaving a wide hole in it and practically ripping it off its hinges. An alarm began to whine in dismay, and she located it and pulled out its wires in the same way she'd pull out an attacker's heart. At first she didn't see him. She tried all the doors, looking with distaste at most of the interior.

*No wonder he broods! Burning down this ugly house would undoubtedly lift his spirits. There he is. Sleeping. No. Not asleep. By the stars, he's bleeding! Good Athena, why did he not hear me damage his door? Is he damaged too?*

"EDWARD!" she screamed in the rousing tone of an Amazon battle cry.

Straker instinctively jumped up, grabbed his gun, aimed and shot her. He stared in horror at what he'd done.

Diana simply had crossed her wrists and deflected the bullets with her bracers.

Straker stared.

"I'm dreaming."

"No but you *are* bleeding! Why are you shooting at me? Don't tell me you too don't know who I am!"

"Are you really here Diana?" he asked wistfully. Straker reached out a hand to her.

She came up to him, took the Glock out of his hand and touched his lip gently.

"What is that you have on your mouth? It's not blood."

"Huh? Oh. Must be strawberry filling. I was eating the last of some cookies I found in my pantry. What the devil happened to my house alarm? No wait, never mind my alarm, what happened to my door? You didn't-what am I saying? Of course you did, you're an Amazon. Don't Amazons believe in using a door bell?"

"I knocked. You didn't answer. So I broke your door down. You didn't stir!"

"I'd taken two powerful sedatives. Oh I see you did break it down. That explains everything. You understand you're going to pay for my damaged door, right?"

"You do understand that Melina and I are thousands of years old, right?" she said copying his earlier tone.

"Don't play around with me. How did you get here, and locate my house?"

"I have a personal invisible jet; I flew here then set the controls for it to return automatically. Melina is a telepath; she was given that gift from the Gods. She found out about your Shado. It assists her in curing men like you and Amazons like me. Except I resist injury far better than the others. Edward, don't look so stricken at having the secrecy of your Shado breached. I've killed things from other worlds before. You are not the only one. Did we not return Alexander like we promised? Melina taught him how to contact me, he learned fairly fast because it involved you and your safety and peace of mind."

Straker drew his mouth into a troubled line and made a steeple of his fingers. He was silent for a long time. She waited.

*He too is fighting for his man's world as I had done under the title of Wonder Woman. Edward discovered our secret and we Amazons discovered his. Besides, Melina said Edward was substantially different than my dead lover. She said he would not be troubled by the possibility of my powers overshadowing his own. He would recognize my duty as I recognize his. We both are warriors. We both are Amazons. I love him.*

*Melina did say in passing that she had asked Athena to give Edward and Alexander immortality and Athena agreed. She suggested I not tell them that just yet. Edward would brood. Alexander would just drink and be fine the next day. I had to go and pick the handsome brooding one. Such is my fate.*

"All right, yes, yes, sounds like Alec playing father bear again. So what happens now?"

"I move in with you. You need someone to look after you."

"Diana, we've been over this already," he said reluctantly. "I manage quite well by myself."

*No, you don't. Straker thought. Diana's lonely too. Maybe she needs me.*

*No, he doesn't, Diana thought. I'm lonely too. I need him.*

"Back then I was as stubborn and as stupid as you. But after I saw your dead body laid out-

"You're going way too fast for me. What?"

"You remember being run through with a dagger?"

"That's not something you easily forget although I fortunately don't remember the pain. I was in shock."

"You died from the poison, remember? It was not the wound. It wasn't Melina who brought you back to life; she couldn't because it wasn't a poison she recognized. It was Athena."

"So that's what Melina meant by Deus ex Machina. My God."

"Shado isn't going to find out about me. I'll stay with you under an alias. Your Aegis security can secure

a new identity for me can't it?"

"You know about Aegis from Melina too?"

"Of course. Besides, Athena carried Aegis into battle."

"Our concept of doing something under someone's aegis means doing something under the protection of a powerful, knowledgeable, or benevolent source. I'd forgotten I'd named my Aegis security system from your mythology for that reason. We have an American aircraft carrier by that name, and a combat system among other things." Straker said, "The name is widely used."

"You look so exhausted. You need to sleep."

"Sleep? Uh, my front door is blasted wide open and my home security system is shot to hell. I'm praying you killed it before it sent a signal to Shado. I doubt it did, because Shado mobiles would be all over my front yard by now. They probably figured I turned it off. I better call it in to make sure. Give me a second, Diana."

"I will go make your bed for you. Hurry up."

"I can't sleep here. Not with that door the way it is. I don't know how I'm going to explain your mess when I call h.q. on the secure line. Besides, its morning. I'll get showered shaved and dressed then ring for a cab and find us somewhere to have breakfast." The Commander said.

"Hurry up, and clean your mouth for Athena's sake. You scared me. I thought you'd gotten hurt." Diana grinned.

"Stop nagging me, and I want to know how those fancy bracelets or bracers of yours work. Thank God or in your case Goddess they do."

\* \* \*

In the end Straker reported in that he had fallen asleep in his bronze Shado car, and smashed it into his door by accident. No, he was fine, the airbags had worked perfectly, he'd been lucky, but his front door hadn't. The front grille had absorbed the shock the way it was designed to, without a scratch. He had no idea why the computer system sensors hadn't warned him the car was approaching the door, and failed to automatically lock the brakes. Just teething problems with the new Predator systems, he agreed. No, he didn't need to come in for medical treatment; the only thing he'd suffered was embarrassment and a bruised ego. Yes, he was taking the weekend off. Yes, he'd been overtired and dehydrated, exhaustion had set in. Yes, he'd appreciate if the tech team could repair everything as soon as possible, including the home security system; he'd pulled out some wires when the high decibel alarm had gone off so he wouldn't go deaf. His password THORHMR to shut it off hadn't worked. Probably a bug. Yes, he'd call Colonel Freeman once he had time. The teams were headed out already? Great. Thank you, Goodbye.

*You had better believe I'm calling Alec. Melina taught him telepathy? He wasn't supposed to remember anything but he contacts Diana? Some date he was on, that sneaky Australian. Well, I've been laying out the plans for the Chrysalis project, based on my own initial above average scores and it looks like Alec may be my first recruit. History has a funny way of repeating.*

*Is she really here? Invisible jet aircraft? Now that I've got to see one day or not see, if what she's saying is true. Move in with me? That's going to take some adjustment, but it would be a positive thing for both of us. It can't help but improve my job performance, and now that I know Henderson is gunning for me I have to stay on my toes. I need every advantage I can get my hands on.*

"What are you brooding about now? You know, this place isn't good for you, it's ugly."

"Argue with me about it later, I've called a cab to pick us up. We'll have breakfast at a place I like and I'll find us a hotel. I'll show you England, we'll pick out a wardrobe for you while you're here. How does that sound?"

"I came to see you, not England," she replied, indignant. Straker didn't catch on.

"Darling I know-uh Diana sorry don't know where that darling came from."

"Darling? What are your true intentions, Edward? You see, just another man, manipulating a woman into sex with pretty words. Making all the decisions without asking me first."

*Darling. How wonderful it sounds. Mother was right.*

"What? Could you stop being an Amazon long enough to know I'm just being old fashioned? Who said anything about sex? Don't bring baser instincts into this friendship. I'm simply being a gentleman, it's how I was brought up. Some women would still appreciate it." The Commander added sullenly.

"Then go find them. I will go home."

*Friendship? No sex? I don't think so and neither does he. He just doesn't know it yet, or does he? Annoying male that I intend to possess. With his cooperation of course. Melina said I shouldn't be too much of an Amazon around him.*

"Diana, that's the taxicab honking come on let's go."

"More orders from the Colonel?" she shot him a look.

"My God, you still don't get me and I was beginning to think I had a chance to be happy with you. I feel a headache coming on. Please, Diana. Before my organization shows up to make repairs."

"Very well. But I make the decisions for us."

*Not on your life, Amazon. I stopped letting a woman decide matters for me the day I left home for college. Mother was crushed by my independence, but she got used to it. Mary soon learned I wouldn't change for her either. Break the bloody rule for once? Right, get court martialed and shot to please her. No thanks. God, what if Diana and I actually married? Talk about an intimidating mother in law. The Amazon Queen. Wait, in Diana's case the expression Godmother is literal. Athena? Athena! Run away while you still can, Straker!*

*But running away is not what's in your heart. And marriage is not her style. I can live with that, if she lets me. Could I win her heart? Win? Love isn't a competition. You sound like an inferior man in your man's world. Heh. Heh. Come to think of it, with an Amazon it is a competition!*

"Fine, fine." he lied and gulped. He smiled at her.

Diana laughed as they got into the taxi. Straker gave an address, and as the car sped off, he leaned against her.

"Why are you using me as a pillow? Oh I know, some women would appreciate it."

Straker closed his eyes.

*God, how I've missed this! To be able to lean on someone else for a change.*

"They would. I'm still tired." was all he said.

"You will grow your hair long for me." she said, stroking his silky platinum hair.

"Ha ha. No chance. When you cut all yours off, maybe."

"You do not like my hair?"

"I don't even like you. OW. Quit hitting me, you..you..you Amazon."

He grinned.

*If the driver only knew. Heh heh.*

"Weakling." she accused, enjoying his teasing.

*How warm and soft he feels against me. I would take him now but his society is different. And Melina said I must let him take the lead at times. He is not used to Amazons. All men are so frail! With the exception of this one, which I plan to win. I never fail in battle!*

"Weakling, huh?" Straker looked at her affectionately.

"With a forte for stupidity," she agreed, grinning.

"I can see this new relationship of mine isn't going to work out." He sighed.

"I will sacrifice my freedom and take care of you, little mollusk, otherwise you are a threat to your man's world."

"You exaggerate. I'm only a threat to Alec right now. He has a lot of explaining to do." he chuckled.

"He succeeded only because like he said, he owed you one."

"He owes me more than one."

Straker sat up, looked at her seriously.

*I love her. I love again. I can barely believe that it happened.*

"Now what is the matter? Must you be so glum?"

"Nothing of consequence." he chuckled.

"You will tell me. You must obey my every word. Remember my lasso bound around your naked body?"

Straker flushed and looked nervously at the driver.

Diana grinned at Straker.

"She jokes. Being with her is never dull, right, Darling? OW!"

She had squeezed his fingers.

"Here we are, Sir."

"Thanks, keep the change."

Straker and Diana got out. Diana blew the driver a kiss. Straker narrowed his eyes at her and took her hand firmly. She chuckled.

"I love only you, mollusk," Diana told him.

"I thought I heard you say love is deceit." Straker said tenderly.

"Even Amazons can change their mind."

"Some of them can change into a deer." Straker grinned. "Diana, if it means anything to you, you gave me back my sense of wonder, Wonder Woman." he chuckled.

She rolled her dark eyes at him.

"You never really lost it, my precious. What kind of breakfast do they serve here, Edward?" she asked as they approached the cafe, hand in hand. "I am famished."

"Protein bars. You'll love them. OW my hand! Cut that out, Amazon!."

"Crazy Yanks," the taxicab driver muttered in distaste, and sped away.

THE END

(Or is it?)

Notes: We based my Diana on a combination of the Gal Godot version and the excellent animated version wiki/Wonder\_Woman\_(2009\_film). As much as I liked Lynda Carter's version, she didn't suit my plot. Some lines were taken directly from Batman vs Superman and the upcoming movie. You can guess who Alec brought to the island. Straker describes his combat instructor, her job may sound familiar. ;) I did an abbreviated version of the mythology involved. This is simply our interpretation of Diana, for those who are her lifelong fans, I mean no disrespect. I also think removing Diana as honorary ambassador for women by the United Nations was asinine. I bet Diana and Straker would agree .ED & AMELIA

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**W3 Validator**