

"Not in strength are we inferior to men; the same our eyes, our limbs the same; one common light we see, one air we breathe; nor different is the food we eat. What then, denied to us, hath heaven on man bestowed?"

Queen Penthesilea of the Amazons

Prologue

Distant Past

The sound of marching feet thundered in the early morning air. Nick glanced behind her and watched as her sisters melted into the mist of the forest. She looked to her right, then left and nodded to the two women on either side. Ira, on her right was standing, with most of her weight on her uninjured leg; grinning up at her, she nodded back. Destra, the oldest of the three women stood at her left frowning ahead and nodding without turning, both her arthritic hands tightly wrapped around the hilt of a blade as battle scarred as her angry face. They would make the good fight here.

Nick, the leader of the trio, had also volunteered to remain behind and hold the bridge for as long as she could while her sisters retreated to the village to gather the old, the sick and the children, the last sad remnants of the still proud Amazon Nation. They would leave their homes and move far to the west, across the wide waters and off the edge of the world. Better the unknown and possibility of death than the assurance of slavery beneath the Roman heel.

As the sound of marching grew louder, Nick could feel the vibrations in her feet. Ahead of her a long column of Rome's elite guard approached. The Centurion in command was a familiar face, she had battled this man before; she recognized the missing eye and the long scar along the man's jaw. Her blade had taken that eye and left behind the dark red scar, it had been a strike of retribution and redemption. A strike she had given him years ago in gladiatorial combat, something she called the law of the blood and blade.

Unplanned, her thoughts took her backwards in time. She remembered their first meeting, when the traitorous Centurion had made an offering of peace between her people and the Roman outpost. She had been a part of the peace congregation that had left the security of their forest to attend the meeting. They arrived unarmed, except for their eating daggers and shields of rank, seemingly in a show of good faith but they had not trusted the Romans. An Amazon, with or without weapons, was still a formidable warrior - something the Romans chose to ignore. These women were something unheard of, they were highly trained and well educated, each a skilled fighter and most spoke Latin, Greek and Aramaic.

The Centurion claimed that he had come to discuss a new treaty, the Paix Romana he had called it; but the Roman had lied. While the Amazons appeared to have let down their guard during the peaceful dinner the Centurion signaled an attack. The Amazons were ready when the Romans began their assault on the congregation, they fought well but against over whelming odds.

In the middle of the battle Nick saw a vicious attack on the Queen's consort, she could have intervened and prevented the warrior's death but she had been tasked with a different mission, to save a single small Amazon, a messenger. She was successful. The messenger had been Ira, the fastest runner in the nation; she was to return to the tribe if the Romans proved false, to warn them of the deception.

Nick had also survived, she had been taken to Rome, caged like some exotic wild animal and taken to fight in the arena for the pleasure of the Emperor. She had not wanted to fight but had been forced over and over again to defend herself to the point of killing to survive.

After many months of fighting she remained undefeated and in her battles she fought with honor and courage, always offering her attacker an honorable death. Finally she won the heart of the people and was offered her freedom in one last fight. It was to be a challenge fight, by order of the Emperor, between herself and her captor and 'Master', this same man. For the first time she looked forward to the fight, she was eager to face him and had trained hard to prepare for the battle but he had been no challenge at all. The match was one sided and she had quickly unarmed the man. She had been disgusted with him as he cried in pain and begged for his life at her feet. She had spared the Centurion, taking only a small tribute for her fallen friends, leaving him with one eye and a scar to remind him of his betrayal. Now, it seemed the man had a faulty memory; after all, it had been he who had thrown his pride at her feet by begging for his life in the arena. Why would he wish to face her again, knowing that this time she would not spare him. Nick tightened her grip around her sword.

The Centurion had been stripped of his title and rank, but to her he would always be the Centurion. Abandoned by his Emperor, the military and even his family the Centurion had hired

a mercenary army to accompany him on the quest to redeem his honor. Now he was on the brink of accomplishing that mission, he smiled a lopsided smile, one half of his face frozen forever in a painful grimace. He had finally run the whore to ground and now he would kill her, a slow bloody death for this one. She stood on the far side of the ravine, he had only to cross the bridge to take her and once he had her, his army would find the remaining women and take them all back to face execution for defying Rome and he would once again find honor in the eye of the Emperor. But this woman would not be making the trip. This one would die here. Perhaps he would take her head back as a trophy to his emperor or maybe he would just put it on a pike at the head of his army. He sneered, signaling his men forward.

The bridge swayed gently in the morning breeze as if getting ready for the day's events. The movement changed to a steady vibration, flakes of dirt and bits of grass and tree bark sprang from the bridge as if alive, reacting to the thunder of marching feet. He reached the bridge first, his horse was anxious, its eyes rolling at the sight of the narrow wooden structure; it reared refusing to move any closer. The Centurion punched his mount in the neck to stop its antics, pulling up sharply on the reins causing the spooked animal to rear. Ignoring the beast, he surveyed the bridge. It was narrow and he could only send two or three men across at a time, but that should be enough considering that they faced only three women, two of which seemed to be in no shape to fight. He pulled on his horse's reins again smiling when the animal reared; signaling his second he gave his orders.

The second in command was a young and eager Lieutenant. This was his first campaign and he wanted so badly to impress the commander; he rode back to the Sergeant, ordering him to select three men from the unit for the honor of clearing the bridge. The three grinned in anticipation and with a loud roaring scream they charged the women. Their screams died abruptly as they fell, dead, from the bridge down into the deep ravine on either side. The three women remained, the swords in their hands were quickly wiped of blood as they stood waiting for the next charge.

Nick smiled at the Centurion and raised her hand to wave him forward. *Yes, today would be a good day of fighting.*

Deep in the forest, the tribe moved quickly on silent feet, even the youngest Amazon knew how to move silently through the forest. The queen had left four older warriors behind to guard the rear and to see to the three on the bridge. They would not meet the fate of the other Amazons that had died at the hands of the traitorous Romans. They would be gathered back into the arms of Athena. There was no time for a pyre but they would be buried deep in the Amazon forest with the honor due them as warriors. The four would see it done, if possible, and then rejoin the tribe for their march to the sea.

The day had been long and this last assault had been the worst, the men were more cautious. Nick felt her arms weakening; she knew that she had lost much of her strength with the blood that now caused her sandaled feet to slip. Ira and Desta had fallen already and Nick had pushed their bodies over the edge and into the ravine. No Roman would desecrate their remains. Artemis's wolves and birds would take her sisters to Athena. She swayed on unsteady feet as she fought the soldiers; if she could buy a few more minutes it could mean life to her tribe. She straightened again and raised her tired bloody sword once more, smiling at the men approaching, watching them pause in fear. The smile faded from her lips as she screamed out her warrior cry

and struck.

They found her body next to that of a very dead Roman Centurion, half of her beautiful sword had been broken off in his neck. She had been trampled into the dirt beside the bridge, her dark hair was filled with blood and urine, her beautiful face battered almost beyond recognition by the feet of hundreds of bitter soldiers. Her arms and legs broken and twisted at odd angles, the broken remainder of her heavy sword still clenched in her hand. Strange that the Romans had left the Centurion here as well, trampled by the feet of the soldiers he had commanded, left unburied. They pulled her into the brush and away from the battle site, following a hidden trail down the edge of the ravine to the river that twisted its way through the valley. They had already buried Ira and Destra deep in the hills. They had been grateful to find the bodies of the two warriors undamaged by the filth of feet and human waste. They knew that Nick had been responsible for that last gift. It had been easy, to bury them, they were small women and the four older warriors had been able to lift their bodies from the river's edge and carry them into the forest. Nick was very different, she was no small warrior; she had always been very tall, very dark and very deadly. So different from the other women of the tribe who, though dark skinned from the sun, were blond and slender women.

Nick had been a foundling discovered by the Arms Mistress long summers ago on the plains of their winter route south and adopted by the entire tribe. The golden skinned baby girl had screamed at them for attention and had only grown quiet when she had been wrapped in a soft hide and placed in a carry shield on the back of the Arms mistresses' horse. A foundling, alone in such a wild place must be a gift from Athena, they had all known she would be a mighty warrior but they had no idea how powerful she would be until later. As a youngster Nick had grown, taller and stronger than any of the other children her age. Faster than most grown warriors, she had learned the art of war quickly and had gained a position in the Warrior class as a leader. Well known for her quick mind and even quicker sword many young beautiful Amazons had vied for her attention, and though she was never lonely, Nick had never taken a mate.

This warrior had been the best of the tribe and her loss would be felt for a long, long time. The women had stripped her and gently washed the broken body, straightening the twisted arms and legs, cleaning the bronzed armor that she had brought back from her battles in the arena, and carefully redressed the dead warrior. That done, they began building an earthen dam to push back the water of the river. They quickly dug a deep pit in the thick black mud and lay the warrior in, over her face they placed her battered shield and beside her hand they lay both halves of her broken sword. With a quick prayer they filled in the hole and released the earthen dam, covering the body of the great warrior for all time.

Sadly the women left, without a backwards glance, no need to think of the lush forest or the warm days they had spent in their wild homes raising their families, growing strong and making love slowly to the sounds of the night creatures. Those days were over, it was a time of change and sadly, it seemed that change did not include the Amazons.