

Chapter Eight

Deepening Friendship

Bonnie began her training with Asli while I continued to train with Baris. Much to the surprise of Asli, who was from what I could tell nearly equal to Baris in skill, Bonnie kept up in both combat training and in learning how to medically treat others with herbs and other medicines. Honestly, I had never taken Bonnie to like the natural sciences as much as I did.

Remembering back in those days when it was just the three of us Bonnie, Kasey and I it was me who the science whiz in our group though I was more environmentally inclined than I was medically inclined. True, I had a basic understanding of human anatomy and genetics but I was ore in tune to learning about the environment and different species. Bonnie and Kasey at least when we are at home never showed and inclinations or took any likings to the sciences. As a matter of fact, the sciences were their worst subject in school.

Nevertheless, I was proud that she was doing exceptionally well. I had no doubt that Bonnie could defend herself if it came to that. I hoped it would not come that, but I was also a realist and knew it was likely she would need to be able to do so. Each day that passed she got better and better and more confident which was a very good thing. Asli, who did not give compliments very often, even to Baris-her fiancée, complimented Bonnie.

Seeing Bonnie become successful made me happy. I have always wanted nothing more than for them to be successful just as I wanted to be successful. She was getting better there was no doubt, but she was not the only that improving. I was too getting better. At first, when I began my training with Baris I felt I was getting extremely lucky. I felt that my success was more luck based than it was based on my skills but after several days, and weeks I was beginning to feel

that I was truly was improving and that I was now getting to be more on equal footing with Baris and some of the other warriors who helped with the training. It was no longer luck I said to myself but it was now rather more skill and instinct based which was a good thing according to Baris. He also told me that having good instincts was vital to surviving out in the field. I also noticed that I hesitated less than I did when I first started the training which Baris said was a good thing. Another good thing that he commended me on was that I was becoming more and more patient which he again reminded me is a must for a warrior.

“My friends,” Baris said. “You have exceeded our expectations.”

“Even the girl,” Asli said as she entered the hut where Baris and I had been training. “He skills and knowledge in the medicines is exceptional.”

“I knew there was something special about these kids,” Baris said.

“Indeed,” Asli added.

“What about Princess Elmas? I thought she did not have long to live,” Bonnie asked.

“My young friends, even though the healers we have right now are not at the same level as Irmak was, they are doing enough to keep our princess alive. Right now she is in suspended animation. She is unconscious and unaware of anything. She does not know what is happening,” Baris said.

“You forget that another side effect of her being in suspended animation is that she is not aging either. When she does wake back up she will be the same age as she was when the elders had her put into suspended animation,” Asli said.

“Whoa,” I said. “That is cool. Finding a way to not grow old. I could use that myself.”

“Enough of the jokes,” Bonnie said, frowning as I knew it was again not time to be joking.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Kids, it is alright. Sometimes all we need is a good laugh. Perhaps young woman your friend did not mean anything by his statement,” Baris said.

“I don’t want him to disrespect your ruler,” Bonnie said.

“Nonsense,” Baris said.

“Knowing Princess Elmas if she had heard that she probably would have laughed herself,” Asli added.

“Young woman, you do need to lighten up just a little. Learn to have fun. To enjoy life. To appreciate what you have around you,” Baris said. “Humor is part of living. I know. I used to be the same way. All serious all the time. No time to ever feel anything but seriousness and do you know what?”

“What?” Bonnie asked.

“I nearly died of the stress of being like that. For many years I was alive, being like that, but I was not living. It was like I was a zombie with really one focus and that was to make sure I helped protect the village. Nothing else matter. Not growing old. Not finding a beautiful woman. Not the future. Nothing. And that is what will happen unless you learn to lighten up and learn to enjoy the things in life,” Baris said.

“I’m sorry,” Bonnie, said appearing a little sad.

“Don’t feel bad. We’re not here to hurt you. We want to help you. I find that truly living and appreciating things and the people in our lives help us keep our focus. It reminds me of why we do the things we do. Knowing why we do the things we do helps each of us become better at it. It helps give each of the motivation to succeed,” Baris said.

“Bonnie, my young friend I know I can look serious at times too but that is because I know what is important,” Asli said. “These jokes your friend made are nothing significant. If they were, we would have said something.”

“Sorry Alex,” Bonnie said.

“Don’t worry about it. You did what you thought was right and that is the important thing and besides we got more important things to worry about,” I said.

“And optimist you are indeed young Alex,” Baris said.

“Which is important to keep,” Asli added.

“Especially given where we must go very soon,” Baris said.

“To the temple,” I added.

“Yes, to the temple,” Baris began. “The heart of the jungle. Where the jungle people and Jungle Master originally hailed from. The temple was once a place where we would have all our sacred rituals. It was the place where the Queen Mother and her husband the King had once got married. It is also where Princess Elmas was christened.”

“The temple has vital importance to both the peoples-ours and the jungle people,” Asli said.

“But now the temple is cursed. We cannot even get close to it without attracting the Jungle Master and his people. They are weak in our village though they are still stronger than most of our people but out there in the jungle, where nature has its own laws, the jungle people are far stronger. You cannot see most of them which is how most of our people get killed,” Baris said.

“Well sir, Stealth does have its advantages. Being out there where they can easily blend it with the rest of the jungle would indeed make it harder for your soldiers,” I said.

“What would you suggest us do? The moment we enter the jungle we become targets ourselves,” Baris said.

“At the moment yes,” I replied. “But let’s think about this for a minute. The greatest advantage besides obvious strength that the jungle people have over the tribe right now is stealth. They blend into the environment. We do not. I mean look at us. It is true that we got leaves and grass that are covering our chest and butts, however other than that we are still greatly exposed. Bonnie and I are even more exposed than you are your people are. We go out into the forest right now and the jungle people will see me and her before they see you and when they do they will know we are not part of the village.”

“So what is your plan Alex,” Asli said.

“In ecology I learned about predator prey relationships. We learned that in every system there are predators, those are the ones who prey on others, and there is obviously the prey. The predators are normally on the higher levels of the food chain however situations can change that can also change which group is the predator and which is the prey,” I said.

“I get it. We have to adapt,” Bonnie said.

“Very good Bonnie. Yes, we need to adapt. We need to be the ones to turn the tables on the jungle people. And to surprise them,” I said.

“Which means Baris we will have to change our strategy and likely our appearances as well,” Bonnie said.

“Change our appearances,” Baris asked.

“Do you have any paint?” I asked.

“Paint,” Asli asked.

“Yeah it is a liquid that is usually colorful and it certainly can help your people to blend in,” I began.

“You mean something like this,” Alis said as she showed me several bowls that had colored liquids in it.

“Yeah, that is what I am talking about,” I said.

“Or you are talking about boya,” Asli said.

“Boya,” Bonnie repeated.

“I have a feeling that is this village’s word for paint but yes,” I replied.

“Why did you not say?” Asli asked.

“What are we going to do with this boya or ‘paint’ as you called it?” Baris asked.

“We are going paint ourselves with it,” I said.

“Paint. You mean put it on us. Oh, no. No. No,” Baris said.

“You can either do that or you can watch your village die. Those jungle people know what you look like. They expect you to try to reach the temple,” I said. “The moment you go out there as you said you are sitting ducks. Changing your appearance will be something that they are expecting and plus it will help you blend in more to the jungle and help make this fight even fairer,” I said.

“Baris, our friend Alex has a good point,” Asli said.

“I don’t like it,” Baris said.

“Neither do we. Bonnie and I are not exactly thrilled that we too are go to have to put paint on ourselves,” I began.

“But we recognize the need to do so. Alex and I said we would help your village solve your problems and we mean it. And that means making sacrifices we don’t like,” Bonnie said.

“For us there are many things we don’t like,” I said.

“Such as,” Baris asked.

“Like being only covered by grass and leaves. For me and Bonnie, we feel naked wearing only this,” I began.

“It is true you were dressed differently when we found you which means you had different customs,” Asli said.

“But it does not matter. Whether Bonnie or I liked it, whether we were comfortable or not, whether we thought we were naked or almost naked, it did not matter. What matters Baris was our word. Like Bonnie said, we would help your village and we are going to stick with our word. Sometimes Baris, we must do things that are outside of our comfort zone. In order to save your village and your people I am willing to do what it takes,” I said.

“Even if that means you run into the forest butt naked,” Bonnie, jokingly said.

I laughed. It was good to see her joke and lighten up just a bit. I always had been somewhat of the joker in our group and was the one who perhaps took things the least seriously most of the time though I could do so when the situation called for it. Seeing and hearing Bonnie make a joke really helped ease the tension I felt in the room.

“I bet you would like to see that,” I shot back.

Bonnie frowned for a split second before laughing again. “You always have a comeback don’t you Alex or should I remind you that I am already taken.”

“Taken,” Asli said.

“What does she mean by that?” Baris asked.

“Oh, that means she has a boyfriend,” I replied.

“Boyfriend,” Asli said.

“Let’s just say that she is betrothed,” Alex said.

“Betrothed. How wonderful,” Asli added.

“Betrothed. I am not getting married,” Bonnie said. “Paul is only my boyfriend. Not my fiancée.”

“Oh sure,” I playfully teased her. “The way I saw you two smooching the last time you were together it looked more like you were a married couple than a dating one.”

“Married,” Asli said.

“Oh, don’t mind us Asli. We’re just playing. Bonnie is not really married,” I said.

“Honestly Alex, I don’t think Paul really wants to go that route. I don’t think he wants to be in a serious relationship,” Bonnie, said as tears fell down her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I did not mean to-,” I said as I tried comforting her.

“No, Alex. It is not you. You and Kasey are really the only friends I ever had. You, unlike Paul, have always been there to listen. Sometimes I feel that Paul is just using me and showing me off as a trophy girlfriend just to impress his friends,” Bonnie, said as tears kept going down her face.

“Listen to me,” I said as I lifted her chin and looked at her in the eyes. “You do not need that kind of boyfriend. Those type of men or boys as I would rather call them use girls until they get what they want and then afterwards they leave. I have seen many of these folks in my short life and it angers me when they do hurt those innocent girls. It just makes me want to go out and clock them when I see it.”

“Thanks. You are a real man,” Bonnie said as she kissed me on the cheek.

“I think someone likes you,” Asli said as Baris also whistled in approval.

“We’re just friends,” I said.

“Best friends,” Bonnie as we grabbed each other and wrapped our arms and hands around each other shoulders.

“Perhaps after all this is said and done, we can have dinner. A true romantic like dinner that you deserve,” I said.

“Yeah. I love too,” Bonnie said, happily.

“My friends, enjoy these moments as you can. I feel you won’t have many of these moments as your journey progresses. I am certain of it. Enjoy it for now but soon we will have to get back to work,” Baris said.

I nodded in agreement. Bonnie and I shared another kiss but this time it lasted longer, more than a second or two, and was much more meaningful. Although I had originally only loved Bonnie just like a sister, I had no doubt my feelings for her had changed and her feelings for me had changed too. I did not know how long it would last, as I knew we still had the real work ahead of us as Baris told us, but I intended to make every second, minute, hour and day count. Like Baris told us it is not our roles that define us but rather it is the people and the reasons we do what we do that truly define us. We only get one chance at life so we need to make the most of it. Now, I said to myself, I felt my life’s adventure was truly beginning.