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The steady dim luminescence of the cavern was being equaled by the pre-sunrise haze ricocheting through the front cut-back entrance. I had really fallen into a light asleep. I was also now really looking at a geared-up 'Rachel's sister'. She was frozen in mid-reach for Aya and me, her eyes casting around my surroundings.

Oh, I had my Glock in my hand, pointed at her. Everyone had a weapon out and pointed at the Amazon except Charlotte, who seemed surprised by the crisis, and Aya, who was just rousing from her slumber.

"Good morning, Genève," Aya yawned. "Is it reveille already?"

"Yes," Genève (aka Rachel's younger sister) answered carefully.

"Can anyone tell me why I'm pointing my pistol at this woman, where the hell I am, and when this howling tornado is going to pass by?" Virginia groaned. That was the siren whisper of a cranium-cracking hangover.

My best guess was a cascading set of reflexes. Once one of our snoozing group's peripheral awareness picked up on Genève, the guns had come out, leading the rest to do the same. *Www.©(c)yvE(1)(w)0R(m).co.m*

"We rock," Pamela chortled. "Even the babe three-quarters toward some violent vomiting drew down and didn't engage."

On cue, Virginia gulped then held her breath. Her eyes started to bug out. Delilah tossed our tin bucket to Priya, who was closest to our suffering FBI gal. She steadied the bucket and helped pull back Virginia's hair as the dry heaves began. Poor Virginia had guzzled her booze before eating last night.

"Let's gopher breakfast," Delilah smirked. "Know what I mean?"

"Know what I mean?" Pamela winked. *(w)(w)w.No©E1(w)©r©.cOm*

"Nudge, nudge," I nudged a confused Miyako.

"Wink, wink," Delilah snorted.

"Follow me?" I giggled. Nothing like a Monty kick-start to make the morning worthwhile.

"Say no more," Pamela finished it off.

"The next one to speak above a whisper," Virginia rasped, "I'm going to put a bullet in." She punctuated that threat by waving her Glock about blindly while her face returned to the pail.

Pamela, Delilah (by silent consensus, she'd been sentenced to probationary renegade status) and I behaved, mainly because we liked to see the apprehension in those around us waiting for our abrupt lapse into irrational antics. The whole camp ate as one, which forced more than half of the 500 campers and 300 counselors to eat outside. That explained the dining hall's open setup.

Everyone was able to see everyone else. For Amazons, personal recognition was important. It had been a cornerstone of their society since the European Diaspora in the 8th century CE. No maps existed with the location of the freeholds, so Amazons would wander around the general area until a patrolling Amazon found them. It usually took less than one week.

The patrol would see at least one Amazon they recognized. With them would be younger, unknown Amazons. Five years down the road, it would be the younger ones recognizing each other... and on and on. It was not lost on me that I was made part of a social convention never before shared with a man, and it was done seamlessly.

It wasn't all love and kisses. I had my detractors, but so did Loraine. Europa had racked up even more, but she seemed to revel in the negative attention. Aya's situation was more confusing. She was in the pre-twelve crowd, yet had picked up four unofficial guardians. Zarana, Vaski and the rest of the quartet had thrown up a 'these tiny bitches are with us' vibe.

Being the smallest in their age group, they were protected by fourteen year olds. No pre-teen could match that. The counselors? They didn't care. Social bonding was the other half of the camp experience. You would make friends and enemies. It was natural. Promoting rivalries enhanced their competitive drives. This was not a 'now hug and make up' philosophy.

If you lost, the Amazon credo was 'try harder next time'. It also was 'eat fast because in fifteen minutes we are leaving, finished or not'. Virginia was shanghaied into working with Loraine's group. Her task was to do Q&A for the girls soon to be exposed to the larger world ... while the troop went through their regular routine. Our Fed was going to be aching by the time this day turned to night.

Delilah was given a choice - a post-twelve group, or hand to hand instruction. At the mention of the second option, she sprang up, grasp arms with the Amazon making the offer and gave her a shit-eating grin.

"You line them up and I'll knock them down," she chuckled.

Caprica wanted to give Pamela and Miyako the same choices as Delilah. Pamela 'suggested' that she'd like to 'go exploring' - just she and Miyako. The implication was that no matter what Caprica said, those two were going to do what they were going to do, aka the Lone Phaser and Photonto. They were stripping away my bodyguards and no one raised a stink about it.

(The Hunt)

For me, Rachel, Mona and Priya, it was javelina hunting time. Let's see. I had no outdoor hunting skills, unless you counted being 'twelve "Sam Adams" sheets to the wind, hammered and stalking a moose with a blunt, household tool' as experience. My first lesson was recognizing what javelina hoof prints looked like. Javelina basics came next.

They roamed in packs/herds depending on what level of aggression they were feeling that day. Whichever Amazon said they were 'small', must have often confused rhinos with Shetland ponies too. Class number three was making sure I could shoot a bow. Unless personally in danger, or saving another Amazon's life, unsilenced weapons fire was not allowed.

No one was sure how effective a tomahawk would be, so bows it was. Well, I could shoot a bow. Could I hit a javelina on the run? Let's say I was glad I was taking some power bars, jerky and fruit for lunch, and just leave it at that. Class four was horsemanship. I had ridden a horse a time or two... most likely two.

If you can make love on a beach, you can screw around in hay, unless you, or your partner, are allergic. I was shown how to approach my mare properly, make myself familiar to her, gently groom her and finally how to affix the blanket, tack and Asian saddle properly. When I finished my first attempt, my instructor punched me playfully. *Ww.VoerEl(w)or-m.com*

"And you said you didn't know horses," she grinned. Even my mare was shooting me a 'you rock, buddy'. Since a two hour time slot had taken thirty-two minutes, we got an early start. Rachel and Mona tried, and failed, to hide their worry for me. As part of the Freddy Kruger bonus plan, being an unnatural-born horseman saved me a truckload of thigh pain.

When we headed out, it was a pleasant 69F/20. 50. The resident climatologist predicted a high of 95F/35C and so little humidity that we were guaranteed desiccation if we stood still long enough. Dot Ishara must have put in a good word for me with Inara the Huntress. Javelinas were rare this far north (north of what, Priya wouldn't say), so we were fortunate to find an extended family unit of ten within three hours of searching.

It was definitely an unfortunate day to be a collared peccary (that's gringo for javelina). Our hunting party caught them crossing a broad shallow wash with little cover; the closest being a clump of disruptive Gamble Oaks (a big bush, not a tree). The previously established plan was to dismount quietly when we drew close, Mona would then hold the horses and the rest of our party would stalk them into the scrub.

Our targets couldn't stand still and hide every time they felt a predator was close by. They had to eat and gain as much water from the desert flora as they could. If they were spooked, the peccaries would freeze. Their ears would search about for any suspicious noises. If they heard nothing for a minute or two, the herd returned to rooting and eating.

When they stopped, we stopped, or so the instructions went. I saw the six adults and four javelina-ettes, considered the suggested speed of my prey, the distance they had to cross to make the impenetrable brush, and the speed my mare could achieve in that time, then leaned forward on my mount while squeezing my knees.

I did this for no reason I initially understood, but my mare, Peppermint, got the message loud and clear. She was of the traditional Amazon breed, similar to the Turkish Akhal-Teke, built for long travels over the steppe and semi-arid plateaus of Central Asia. My mount had raced across this landscape for seven years now, so she knew what shrubbery she could push through and which she had to dodge around. *Ww.W.N©VrLWorM.coM*

Of greater importance at the moment, she also knew the orders I was transmitting by body language alone far better than I did. She didn't leap forward and give my designated dinner fare a warning. Instead she picked up her pace incrementally, fixing our destination and plotting her best course. The reins found themselves wrapped around my saddle horn with plenty of leeway.

My bow was in my hand with an arrow notched before I could consciously replace intention with action. My archery tool of convenience was a heavy draw weight - sixty pounds - composite, recurve bow. It was old, lovingly maintained and probably dated back to the 1950's. I am a pretty big guy. The Amazon who had this bow crafted had to be damn scary... or even scarier.

It was beautiful in its simplicity - absent of any ornamentation. I shifted my body to the left, tapped Peppermint and she picked up her pace. The javelinas squealed when they realized their danger. The race was on and they were much too far from any sanctuary. I loosed my first arrow, but missed. The mare picked up the pace, homing in on the large male peccary I had selected. I began to panic. What the hell was I doing?

I could barely take a horse past a canter, hit anything accurately with a bow beyond twenty meters, and never attempted the two together. Yet here I was role-playing the exploits of my Magyar ancestors. Peppermint began losing direction. My thoughts were chaos. A sane man would have slowed his mount and let the others catch up. Our original plan could still work.

We could surround the thicket and flush them out. 'There is always a current flowing through the chaos', filtered through my confusion 'if you know what to look for'. I am an idiot. I am a madman. I let go. It all worked. I didn't feel my mount beneath me, I felt her hoofs pushing through the thin layer of sand to the rock beneath. One - two - three - four legs in motion. I didn't breath - we breathed.

There was virtually no wind. The javelina was about to break to the right, racing for my off-side. I knew and so did my mare. The second arrow wasn't lethal, but it would be fatal. My third arrow went from quiver to hand flawlessly. Equally flawless was Peppermint pulling aside the collared peccary. We both sensed the animal's preparation to dodge left.

I was tracking that fraction of a centimeter ahead when I loosed my bolt. He was dead before his snout plowed into the dirt two meters from safety. Peppermint's abrupt halt nearly tossed me off. She wasn't charging into the oaks no matter how hungry I was for pseudo-pig meat. As I turned in my saddle, searching for the next javelina, I had a fourth arrow notched.