

EXCERPT FROM...

AMASKAN'S BLOOD

The Boahim Series Book One

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The sleeping woman in his arms shifted, her heel connecting with his shin. The jagged scar to the right of her eye bunched together with worry lines. One of her hands flitted to the scar tissue along her throat, and she whimpered in rhythm to the twitching of the facial muscles around her eyes.

"Shhhhh," King Leon murmured, running his thumb down her jawline. Through the deep blue bed curtains, tiny hints of light streamed in from one of four windows which left most of the room dark in the early dawn.

Even with the lack of light, the scar running parallel to her jaw stood out in contrast to the others along her body. The puffy and angry line stretched the full width of her neck, from ear to ear. Ten years together, and still she never spoke of it, never talked of the wound that walked in and out of her nightmares.

She thought she'd kept her past from him, but a few paid informants gained a king whatever information he wished. That and the fact that she talked in her sleep. A smile lifted the corners of his thin lips as he stared at the woman wrapped beneath the heavy winter blankets.

He had never set out to find someone else after Catherine, but Ida—she was everything Catherine was not. Strength to a flaw, impertinence in her honesty, and a passion that burned long after the sun set.

His thumb froze at the shift in her breathing, and he peered down to find blue eyes staring up at him. Instead of their usual humor, the deep, blue pools were haunted by shadows, and the smile fell from his lips. "Your sleep was troubled," he whispered.

She sat up, pulling the blanket with her. Her shoulder twitched, and he reached out a wrinkled hand to touch it before he leaned forward where he could see her face. When a few tears decorated her cheeks, his hands tightened on her shoulders.

"What is it, Ida? What's bothering you so? Was it something in Sadai?"

"I begged you not to send me." The scar across her throat jumped when she spoke, and her voice resembled gravel.

"Since when has my sepier been afraid of anything?" The former captain of the royal guard didn't answer as another tear slid down a cheek more gaunt than it had been a few months before.

Has it only been four months since I sent her to her homeland? There was more bone beneath his fingers than he was accustomed to.

"Ida, love, I know you hate Sadai, but we all must make sacrifices for duty."

Her body stilled while long pale fingers gripped the bed sheets. "You know nothin'."

Leon didn't know what shocked him more, that she was angry with him or that she was afraid. "I know the healers in Sadai saved you—" He ignored her gasp and continued, "—and that you fled your homeland for Alexander. But you worked your way to the top of my army because you were fearless."

Unlike now.

Instead of pushing further, he waited and wrapped the blankets around them both as his arms encircled her waist. She gave in to her emotions, and Leon bit the inside of his cheek. In ten years as his mistress, he hadn't once seen her lose her composure, much less cry, and her weakness left knots in his gut.

"'Twas a mistake to return to Sadai," she whispered.

"I sent a woman I trust into that country, a tenacious spy who feared nothing, and she's returned to me broken. I was going to wait until the sun rose before asking for your report, but considering your tears, I have to ask. What happened? What brought you back early and afraid?"

Ida rose from the bed, her bare feet picking their way across clothing strewn haphazardly on the floor from a few hours before when she'd returned. Near midnight, she'd crept into his chambers, her return from Sadai just shy of a week early.

The look on her face had led him to ask no questions, but as she stood in the sprinkling of sunlight the morning brought, dread seeped into Leon's bones. Her fifty years did little to mar her body, but a decade of leading battles had left scars aplenty across her frame, and Leon frowned to see a fresh mark across her thigh, its scab already sloughing off and healing.

"I've failed you, Your Majesty." Her shoulders slumped forward before she faced him.

"Were you not successful then in finding the location of the Order of Amaska?"

Her lips trembled. "I—I was successful, Your Majesty."

King Leon sucked air through clenched teeth much too fast, and the ever-present congestion in his lungs leapt forth. Another coughing spasm whipped through him.

Stars danced before his eyes, and Ida's footsteps sounded nearby. Shortly after, she pressed the mug into his waiting hands. Some of the medicine sloshed out of the cup before it found his lips, and several swallows later, the spasm passed, leaving hope in its wake. "Where is the Order located?"

"Sire, there's more—"

"Where are they?"

"They're near the coast, near the town of Haif—"

He was two feet out of bed and halfway to the door before he remembered the need for clothing, and despite his bruised lungs, he quickly dug through his clothes chest. Leon seized the first clothes his fingers touched: an old pair of breeches a touch too loose at the waist, and an undershirt that bore a hole from a moth.

He didn't care what he looked like. After thirteen years, he had finally found the men who had massacred his family. His giddy footsteps carried him across the room where he rang for a page. When the boy appeared, his face flushed at the sight of Ida's nudity as she stood near the window. Leon grabbed the boy's sleeve, pulling his attention into line. "I need Captain Fenton brought to my sitting room immediately."

When the door shut behind the young page, Ida wrapped a robe around her and knelt before Leon, who gestured for her to rise. He haphazardly dug through a box of letters. "Once Michael arrives, you'll tell us both about their location. We have plans to make."

"There's more, and you must hear it alone."

When he faced her again, she still knelt on the stone floor, and her shoulder length hair spilled limply across her face. "What more is there? After thirteen years, I finally have the location of the bastards. Today is a good day, Ida. Today I will have my revenge."

"Will ya march across Sadai's borders to take it?"

"If necessary."

"You'd bring the wrath of the Boahim Senate down upon us? Would you rip this land apart again for 'nother pointless war?"

King Leon took her hands into his own as he knelt down beside her. "I thought you would understand this. Those bastards killed my wife. My daughter. What else would you have me do? The Boahim Senate has done nothing to stop the Amaskans. If they won't seek justice, then I will."

The knock at the door interrupted them and as Leon rose from his knees, Ida seized the edge of his shirt. "You think you've the whole of it, but ya must hear me out. Please. Send the good captain away 'til you've heard the truth."

King Leon sighed, and when the page knocked on the door a second time, he opened it a crack. "Tell Captain Fenton I'll be with him shortly."

"Speak. Tell me what has kept you tossing in your sleep."

At first, she didn't make a sound, choosing instead to stare at the carved pieces of wood inlaid in stone across his bedchamber floor, and he ground his teeth at the silence. When his lips smacked open, she said, "I never intended to hurt you. Know that I'd no idea what they planned, I swear to you, but I found—in Sadai—your daughter's alive. Iliana's alive."

This time when the air left him, he worried it would not return as his lungs froze in place. He sputtered twice before his vocal cords worked again. "You speak madness. She died by Amaskan hands."

"I believed it, too, Your Majesty, but I swear to you that I saw your daughter alive . . . and well. You sent me home to find those responsible for her death, but she's alive and traipsin' through the capital city of Aruna. It's her; I'd swear my life on it."

Leon gripped the handle on the door as he squeezed his eyes shut. "I sent her away for protection, and the Amaskans killed her outside the city walls. That's what Goefrin told me."

"Bastard's a traitor."

King Leon heaved her to her feet by her bare shoulders. Rough hands tilted her face to look at his, but even then, her eyes veered sideways as she refused to meet his gaze. "You speak in riddles. You tell me my daughter's alive, you tell me you have the location of my enemies, and that my most trusted advisor's a traitor. You will explain yourself and how you know this to be true."

"G-Goefrin's my uncle. Was sent here to get close to your father, to gain the royal family's trust, and then to give evidence to interested parties of your family's coup to overthrow the Boahim Senate." As the words spilled from her mouth, he could feel the wrinkles in his brow multiply.

Don't do that, Papa. The wrinkle monster will get you. Hearing Iliana's five-year-old voice in his mind left him weak, and he stepped sideways as his balance wavered. Three steps found him alongside the bed he'd shared with Ida minutes before, and he reached out to one of the four bedposts. His aim was true, but he stubbed his big toe on the chest at the foot of the bed. Leon cursed under his breath.

Ida massaged her throat as she spoke. "I grew up in a family that told me . . . things, things that'd make it easy for me to believe that my own actions were just and true. When the Little War of Three began, it—it was the perfect opportunity. Uncle Goefrin and my brother sent three of us here to Alesta."

King Leon dropped the letter in his hand.

"—Our task was simple. While the King was busy with the enemy at his border, we'd take the child Uncle Goefrin arranged for us to 'protect.'"

"No."

The single word sent her blue eyes to drown in unshed tears. "I swear to you, Leon, I didn't know what they planned. No one said they were to kill 'er. I thought—"

"You thought what, exactly? You would kidnap my children and wife? My family? To do what exactly? Go for a walk in the woods? Who the hell are you to take part in such a—" This time when he shook her, the tears fled their prison and leapt across her cheeks. "That's what you are—you're Amaskan," he whispered. She winced when his fingers squeezed what little flesh clung to her bones, but she didn't look away. The quiet anger within left him breathless, yet he lifted her off her feet before he flung her to the floor with a snarl. "Who are you? What are you to crawl into my bed, into my heart. For ten years—"

The knock at the door startled them both. "Your Majesty?"

"Send the captain away," she hissed from where she'd fallen, her robe torn where she'd tripped over it.

"Why should I do anything you ask?"

"Because I'm the only one who knows where your daughter is."

He stared at the stranger before him, the jaguar who had slipped into his castle only to shred him with jagged claws as it toyed with his life. "I'll send him away, but only so he doesn't see the mess I've made when I'm done with you."

Her tears only made it worse. If she had acted like a cold-blooded killer, it would have been easier to kill her. *Damn her.* The wooden door shook as Michael resumed pounding on it. King Leon opened it enough to poke his balding head outside.

"Your Majesty, are you well? I heard shouting—"

"I'm fine. Give us a moment." Captain Fenton frowned, but nodded once before Leon shut the door.

"You have my attention for five minutes. Use it well, Ida. And leave nothing out—be truthful . . . if you're capable of it."

Ida nodded before wiping a few tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. "B-before I was captain of your guard, I was Amaskan. My brother's Malaki Abner, though few know his birth name as he hides in shadows, under many names and many labels. One you may know is Eli Bredych."

Leon clenched his jaw against the words he would speak. *She's brother to the Amaskan leader. She may have just bought herself more time.*

Her hand moved along her scar, and when she realized the action, Ida clenched her hand into a fist. "Goefrin had a deal with my brother, though not the deal you think. His job was to convince you that sendin' away your family was the best way to keep 'em safe. The Shadians paid the Amaskans to wipe out your line, and once you'd sent your family outside these walls, they were marked as kill on sight."

She swallowed hard. "I swear I didn't know my brother ordered Iliana killed. Not until we'd already seized her and had crossed into Sadai. He . . . he knew I'd have trouble with killin' a child. We all should've. That isn't justice, and it isn't what we..." Ida swallowed hard and closed her eyes a moment before continuing. "When the others told me what my coward brother

couldn't—that we were to kill the child, I refused. The others attacked me. They said I was a traitor to justice."

"Did you kill them?"

"Yes, though I had little choice if either of us was to live, and when I returned to my brother with your daughter alive, he . . . he punished me for my failure to complete the job."

"He slit your throat."

"Yes, and he took pleasure in the act. No one leaves the Amaskans, not alive anyway. He grabbed your daughter and tossed me dyin' in the woods. My own brother abandoned me. And the last thing I saw was his blade to Iliana's throat. I don't know how the healers found me, or how they managed to heal such a wound, but I knew I couldn't return home. I swear to you, when I set out for Alexander, I didn't come here with the intent to betray you, Leon—"

"Then what was your purpose?" He could feel the vein in his temple pulse as his eyes drifted to the four-poster bed in the corner. The sheets were still a jumble of blue fabric, and bile threatened to choke him at the rush of memories that flooded to the forefront of his mind.

She continued talking, her shoulders slumped forward toward her knees. "All I could think about was how my brother killed a child. I fled here to try and make things right, to make up for my role in this. I didn't know I would fall in love with you."

Despite the quaking in his belly, he held himself still as his fingers tried to carve half-moons into the wood of the bedpost. "Get up," he ordered, and she flinched before rising on trembling legs. "How is Iliana alive?"

"I don't know." Leon slapped her with the back of his hand and his ring left a bleeding scratch across her proud cheekbone. "Y-Your Majesty, I swear to you—"

"Your oaths mean nothing. You betrayed this kingdom. You betrayed me. Get dressed."

Leon couldn't risk looking at her, couldn't risk seeing her clothe herself—an action he'd indulged in many mornings over the past decade. He forced his eyes to look upon her shadow as she gathered her clothing from the floor. It wasn't as simple as his love for her. His body knew what was before him and urged him forward, but his mind knew better. She was Amaskan—the deadliest of killers. One moment out of his sight, and she could kill him before he'd done more than blink.

While parts of him danced as he listened to her clothing brush against her supple skin, others winced at the thought of her blade in his guts. He caught a glimpse of bare shoulders as she pulled on an undershirt.

*Shoulders I kissed in the darkness of night. Breasts I—*he halted the thought with the biting of his tongue. His stomach roiled at the thought of touching her now, and her shadow moved to pull leather boots over her feet.

Ida Warhammer knelt before him for a second time. "Why did you return? You had to know doing so would mean your death."

"I-I couldn't let you continue to think on her as dead. When I saw her in the capital, wearing the Order's garb, I nearly ran my horse to ground to return—"

"Wait. Back up," he said as he waved a hand at her. "Why was my daughter wearing the garb of the Order?"

His sepiar's mouth twisted, and she tilted her head back to expose her scar to the light that streamed through the window. "If you wish to finish the job my brother began, I wouldn't blame you."

She didn't answer his question, nor did she have to. She was Amaskan. His daughter was Amaskan.

For a moment, he was sorely tempted, but here at last was the brave woman he loved. Awaiting her death by his hand. With legs almost too shaky to bear his weight, he stumbled over to where she knelt and touched the scar along her throat. He couldn't forgive her—not yet. If ever. But use her, he would.

"Does anyone in the Order know you were in Sadai?" he asked.

Ida opened her eyes in confusion. "I'm not sure. It's possible I was spotted, though I don't think they knew who I was. Why?"

"I have one last job for you."

"You would trust me enough to—"

Leon shook his head. "No, trust doesn't even begin to enter this picture. Now listen and listen well, Ida . . . if that's even your name. You're going to return to Sadai for me." He waited a moment for comprehension to sink in and when it did, her reaction was everything he'd hoped it would be.

He laughed as her eyes sought an escape, an honest laugh that shook him from the belly up, and he retrieved her sword from the chest beside him. When he handed it to her, she fumbled the blade. "Please, kill me if that's what you wish, but don't ask me to go before my brother again—"

King Leon pressed a finger to her lips. "You will go to Sadai and not return until you have my daughter with you. You will return her to me. And if you fail me in this, the Boahim Senate will be the least of your worries, as I will hunt you down like the traitor you are. Don't fail me."

"My brother won't release her. She's his best Amaskan."

Inside his chest, a piece of his heart wilted, and he struggled to remain standing as another coughing fit brewed. "Do whatever it takes."

She handed him another glass of the healer's brew. "I'm sorry, Leon," she whispered before disappearing through his bedroom door. Outside, Michael cleared his throat, but King Leon ignored him as his bravado shriveled up and died.

His daughter was alive.

The mug in his hand shook and sloshed liquid across his knees. He had no knowledge of when he'd found his seat, but he rested on the chest at the foot of his bed which still smelled of the soaps Ida used. Fingers curled around the mug's handle before he sent it skittering across the floor, the remaining tea leaving a trail across the rug.

"Your Majesty?"

His ears heard the words, but his brain ignored them. *My Iliana. Now alive. And now a killer.*

When the shakes began this time, he didn't stop them. He couldn't.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Raven Oak is the author of the epic fantasy novel, *Amaskan's Blood*, and the upcoming science fiction space opera, *The Silent Frontier*. She spent most of her K-12 education doodling stories and 500 page monstrosities that are forever locked away in a filing cabinet.

After twelve years as an English and computer teacher in Texas, she retired from education to pursue writing full-time. She lives in Seattle, WA with her husband and their three kitties, which enjoy lounging across the computer keyboard when writing deadlines approach. Raven is currently at work on the sequels to both *Amaskan's Blood* and *The Silent Frontier*.

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